Captains of Souls

By

Edgar Wallace

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BOOK THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

BERYL MERVILLE wrote:

"Dear Ronnie, We are back again from Italy, arriving this afternoon. Daddy thought you would be there to meet us, and I was so disappointed to find nobody but Mr. Steppe. Oh yes! I know that he is a most important person, and his importance was supported by his new car, such an impressive treasure, with a collapsible writing-table and cigar-lighter and library—actually a library in a cunning little locker under one of the seats. I just glanced at them. I am a little afraid of Mr. Steppe, yet he was kindness itself, and that bull voice of his, bellowing orders to porters, and chauffeurs, and railway policemen was comforting in a way. Daddy is a little plaintive on such occasions.

I thought he was looking unusually striking; Steppe I mean. People certainly do look at him, with his black, pointed beard and his bristling black eyebrows. You like him, don't you? Perhaps I should, too, only—he is very magnetic, a commanding person, he frightens me, I repeat. And I have met another man; I don't think you know him, he said he had never met you. Daddy knows him

rather well, and so does Mr. Steppe. Such a queer man, Ronnie! He arrived after daddy had gone to his club, to collect some correspondence. The maid came, and told me there was a strange man in the hall who said Dr. Merville had sent for him; so I went down to see him. He made the queerest impression on me. You will be amused, but not flattered, when I confess that the moment I saw him, I thought of you! I had a sort of warm impulse toward him. I felt as though I were meeting you, as I wanted you to be. That sounds feeble, and lame, but employing my limited vocabulary to the best of my poor ability, I am striving to reduce my mad impression to words.

How mad it was, you'll understand. For, Ronnie, he was a stoutish man of middle-age—no more like you than I am like Mr. Steppe! Yet when I saw this shabbily-dressed person—the knees of his trousers shone, and the laces of his untidy boots were dragging—I just gasped. He sat squarely in one of the hall chairs, a big rough hand on each knee, and he was staring in an absent-minded way at the wall. He didn't even see me when I stood almost opposite to him. But his head, Ronnie! It was the head of a conqueror, one of those heroes of antiquity. You see their busts in the museums and wonder who they are. A broad eagle face, strangely dark, and on top a shock of grey-white hair brushed back into a mane. He had the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen in a man, and when they turned in my direction, and he got up from his chair, not awkwardly as I expected, but with the ease of an Augustus, there was within them so much loving kindness that I felt I could have cried. And please, Ronnie, do not tell me that I am neurotic and over-tired. I was just mad—nothing worse than that. I'm mad still, for I cannot get him out of my mind.

His name is Ambrose Sault, and he is associated with daddy and Mr. Steppe, though I think that he is really attached to that horrid Greek person to whom daddy introduced me—Moropulos. What sort of work he does for Moropulos I have not discovered. There is always a great deal of mystery about Mr. Moropulos, and Mr. Steppe's business schemes. Sometimes I am very uncomfortable—which is a very mild way of describing my feelings—about daddy... and things. Ronnie, you have some kind of business dealings with father. What is it all about? I should so like to discover. It is to do with companies and corporations, isn't it? I know Mr. Steppe is a great financier, but I don't quite know how financiers work. I suppose I ought not to be curious, but it worries me—no, bothers is a better word, sometimes.

Come and see me soon, Ronnie. I promise you I won't... you know. I've never forgiven myself for hurting you so. It was such a horrid story... I blame myself for listening, and hate myself for telling you. But the girl's brother was so earnest, and so terribly upset, and the girl herself was so wickedly circumstantial. You have forgiven me? It was my first experience of

blackmailers, and I ought to have known you better and liked you better than to believe that you would be such a brute... and she was such a common girl, too..."

She stopped writing and looked round. "Come in." The maid was straightening her face as she entered. "That gentleman, miss, Mr. Sault, has called."

Beryl tapped her lips with the feathered pen holder. "Did you tell him that the doctor was out?"

"Yes, miss. He asked if you were in. I told him I'd go and see." Something about the visitor had amused the girl, for the corners of her lips twitched.

"Why are you laughing, Dean?" Beryl's manner was unusually cold and her grave eyes reproving. For no reason that she could assign, she felt called upon to defend this man, against the ridicule which she perceived in the maid's attitude.

"Oh, miss, he was so strange! He said: 'Perhaps she will see me'. 'Do you mean Miss Merville?' says I. 'Merville!' he says in a queer way, 'of course, Beryl Merville', and then he said something to himself. It sounded like 'how pitiful'. I don't think he is quite all there, miss."

"Show him up, please," said Beryl quietly. She recognized the futility of argument. Dean and her type found in the contemplation of harmless lunacy a subject for merriment... and Dean was the best maid she had had for years. She sat waiting for the man, uncertain... Why did she want to see him? She was not really curious by nature, and the crude manners of the class to which he belonged usually rubbed her raw. The foulness of their speech, the ugliness of their ideals and their lives; the gibberish—almost an unknown language to her—of the cockney man and woman, all these things grated. Perhaps she was neurotic after all; Ronnie was quite sure of his judgement in most matters affecting her.

Ambrose Sault, standing in the doorway, hat in hand, saw her bite her lower lip reflectively. She looked round with a start of surprise, and, seeing him, got up. He was a coloured man! She had not realized this before, and she was unaccountably hurt; just coloured, and yet his eyes were grey!

"I hope I haven't disturbed you, mademoiselle," he said. His voice was very soft and very sweet. Mademoiselle? A Creole... a Madagascan... an Octoroon? From one of the French foreign territories perhaps. He spoke English without an accent, but the 'mademoiselle' had come so naturally to his lips.

"You are French, Mr. Sault... your name, of course..." She smiled at him

questioningly and wondered why she troubled to ask questions at all.

"No, mademoiselle." He shook his great head, and the mask of a face did not relax. "I am from Barbadoes, but I have lived in Port de France, that is, in Martinique, for many years. I was also in Noumea, in New Caledonia, that is also French." There was an awkward silence here. Yet he was not embarrassed and displayed no incertitude of his position. Her dilemma came from the fact that she judged men by her experience and acquaintance with them, and the empirical method fails before the unusual... Ambrose Sault was that.

"My father will be home very soon, Mr. Sault. Won't you please sit down?"

As he chose a chair with some deliberation it occurred to her that she would find a difficulty in explaining to the fastidious Dr. Merville why she had invited this man to await him in the drawing-room. Strangely enough, she herself felt the capacity of entertaining and being entertained by the visitor, and she had no such spasm of dismay as had come to her, when other, and more presentable visitors, had settled themselves for a lengthy call. This fact puzzled her. Ambrose Sault was... an artisan perhaps, a messenger, more likely. The shabbiness of his raiment and the carelessness of his attire suggested some menial position. One waistcoat button had been fastened into the wrong buttonhole; the result was a little grotesque. "Have you been working very long with my father?" she asked.

"No... not a very long time," he said. "Moropulos and Steppe know him better than I." He checked himself. She knew that he would not talk any more about his associates, and the enigma which their companionship presented would remain unsolved, so far as he could give a solution. 'Moropulos'—'Steppe'? He spoke as an equal. Even Ronnie was deferential to Mr. Steppe, and was in awe of him. Her father made no attempt to hide his nervousness in the presence of that formidable person. Yet this man could dispense with the title. It was not bravado on his part, the conscious impertinence of an underling desirous of asserting his equality. Obviously he thought of Mr. Steppe as "Steppe'. What would he call her father? No occasion arose, but she was certain he would have been 'Merville' and no more.

Sault's eyes were settled on her, absorbing her; yet his gaze lacked offence, being without hostility, or notable admiration. She had a ridiculous sensibility of praise. So he might have looked upon Naples from the sea, or upon the fields of narcissi above Les Avants, or the breathtaking loveliness of the hills of Monticattini in the blue afterlight of sunset. She could not meet his eyes... yet was without discomfort. The praise of his conspection was not human. She laughed, artificially, she thought, and reached out for a book that lay on the table. "We have just returned from Italy," she said. "Do you know Italy at all,

Mr. Sault?"

"I do not know Italy," he said, and took the book she held to him. "That is rather a wonderful account of Lombardy and its history," she said. "Perhaps you would like to read it?" He turned the leaves idly and smiled at her. She had never seen a man smile so sweetly.

"I cannot read," he said simply. She did not understand his meaning for a while, thinking that his eyesight was failing.

"Perhaps you would care to take it home."

He shook his head and the book came back to her. "I cannot read," he said, without shame, "or write—at least I cannot write words. Figures, yes, figures are easy; somebody told me—he was a Professor of English, I think, at one of the Universities—that it was astonishing that I could work out mathematical problems and employ all the signs and symbols of trigonometry and algebra without being able to write. I wish I could read. When I pass a bookshop I feel like an armless man who is starving within hands' reach of salvation. I know a great deal, and I pay a man to read to me—Livy and Prescott and Green and, of course, Bacon—I know them all. Writing does not worry me... I have no friends."

If he had spoken apologetically, if he had displayed the least aggression, she might have classified and held him in a place. But he spoke of his shortcomings as he might have spoken of his grey hair: as a phenomenon beyond his ordering.

She was thunderstruck; possibly he was so used to shocking people from this cause that he did not appear to observe the effect he had produced.

He was so completely content with this, the first contact with his dream—woman, that he was almost incapable of receiving any other impression. Her hair was fairer than he had thought, her nose thinner, and the moulding of her delicate face was more spiritual. The lips redder and fuller, the rounded chin less firm. And her eyes... He wished she would turn her head so that he could be sure of their colour. They were big, set wide apart, there was depth in them and a something upon which he yearned. The figure of her he knew by heart. Straight and tall, and most gracious. A patrician; he thought of her as that. And Oriental. He had pictured her as a great lady at Constantine's court; he set her upon the marble terrace of a decent villa on the hills above Chrysopolis; a woman of an illustrious order.

She could never suspect that he thought of her at all as a distinct personality. She could not guess that he knew her as well as his own right hand; that, day

after day, he had waited in the Row, a shabby and inconspicuous figure amongst the smart loungers; waited for the benison of her presence. She had not seen him in Devon in the spring... he had been there. Living on the rain-soaked grass of Tapper Downs to watch her walking with her father; sitting amidst gorse on the steep slope of the cliff, she was unconscious of his guardianship, reading in her chair on the smooth beach.

"How curious, I nearly said 'sad'. But you do not feel very sad about it, Mr. Sault, do you?"

Amused, he shook his head. "It would be irritating," he said, "if I were sorry for myself. But I am never that. Half the unhappiness of life comes from the vanity of self-pity. It is the mother of all bitterness. Do you realize that? You cannot feel bitter without feeling sorry for yourself."

She nodded. "You miss a great deal—but you know that. Poetry? I suppose you have that read to you?"

Ambrose Sault laughed softly. "Yes—poetry."

"Out of the dark which covers me,

Black as a pit from Pole to Pole,

I thank whatever gods there be,

For my unconquerable soul."

"That poem and Theocrite, and only two lines of Theocrite are the beginning and the end of my poetical leanings. I attend lectures, of course. Lectures on English, on architecture, music, history—especially history—oh, a hundred subjects. And mathematics. You can get those in the extension classes, only, unfortunately, I cannot qualify for admission to the classes themselves."

"Have you never tried to—to..."

"Read and write? Yes. My room is packed with little books and big books. A-b, ab; c-a-t, cat; and copy-books. But I just can't. I can write the letters of the alphabet, a few of them that are necessary for mathematical calculations, very well; but I cannot go any further. I seem to slip into a fog, a sort of impenetrable wall of thick mist, that confuses and baffles me. I know that c-a-t is 'cat', but when I see 'cat' written it is a meaningless combination of straight and curved lines. It is sheerly physical—the doctors have a word for it... I cannot remember what it is for the moment, I just can't read..."

Dr. Merville came in at that moment, a thin, colourless man, myopic, irritable,

chronically worried. He entered the drawing—room hurriedly. Beryl thought he must have run upstairs. His frowning, dissatisfied glance was toward Sault; the girl he ignored. "Hello, Sault—had no idea you were here. Will you come into my study?" He was breathless, and Beryl knew by the signs that he was angry about something. It occurred to her instantly that he was annoyed with her for entertaining the untidy visitor. The study was next door to the drawing —room, and he walked out with a beckoning jerk of his chin.

"I am glad to have met you, mademoiselle." Ambrose Sault was not to be hurried. Returning to the open doorway, Dr. Merville, clucking his impatience, witnessed the leisurely leave-taking. The study door had scarcely closed on the visitor before it opened again and her father returned. "Why the deuce did you ask that fellow up, Beryl? He could have very well waited in the servants' hall —or in the breakfast-room, or anywhere. Suppose—somebody had called!"

"I thought he was a friend of Mr. Steppe's," she said calmly. "You know such extraordinary people. What is he?"

"Who, Sault? Well, he is..." Dr. Merville was not immediately prepared to define the position of his visitor. "In a sense, he is an employee of Moropulos —picked him up in his travels. He is an anarchist."

She stared. "A what?"

"Well, not exactly an anarchist... communist... anyway, he has quaint views on —things. Believes in the equality of the human race. An extraordinary fellow, a dreamer, got a crazy idea of raising a million to found a college, that's what he calls it, The Mother College... can't stop now, darling, but please don't make a fuss of him. He is just a little difficult as it is. I will tell you about him some day."

He bustled out of the room and the study door closed with a thud. Beryl Merville considered Ambrose Sault for a very long time before she turned to her writing-table where the unfinished letter to Ronald Morelle invited a conclusion.

CHAPTER II

"WELL, Sault, why have you come? Anything wrong?"

Beryl would have thought Dr. Merville's manner strangely mild and

conciliatory after his show of antagonism toward the visitor.

Sault had seated himself on the edge of a low chesterfield under the curtained window. "Moropulos is worried about some people who called at his bureau today. They came to ask him about a letter that had been sent to him from South Africa by the assistant manager of the Brakfontein Diamond Mine."

Merville was standing by the library-table, in the centre of the room. The hand that played with the leaves of a magazine was trembling ever so slightly. "What has happened... how did they know... who were they?" he demanded shakily.

"I think it was the managing director—the American gentleman. He was very angry. They discovered that the manager had been receiving money from London soon after he made his report. Moropulos told me that the shares had dropped thirty points since yesterday morning. Mr. Divverly said that Moropulos and his gang—those were the words, I think—had bribed the manager to keep back the report that the mine was played out. I suppose he did. I know very little about stocks and shares."

Dr. Merville was biting his knuckles, a weak and vacillating man; Sault had no doubts as to this, and it hurt him every time he realized that this invertebrate creature was Beryl Merville's father. How and why had he come into the strange confederation?

"I can do nothing." The doctor was fretful, his voice jerky; he fixed and removed his pince-nez and fixed them again. "Nothing! I do not know why these people make inquiries. There was nothing dishonest in selling stock which you know will fall... it is a part of the process of speculation, isn't it, Sault? All the big houses work on secret information received or bought. If—if Moropulos or Steppe care to buy information, that is nobody's affair..."

"There may be an inquiry on the Stock Exchange," said Sault calmly. "Moropulos asked me to tell you that. The Johannesburg committee have taken up the matter and have called for information. You see, the manager has confessed."

"Confessed!" gasped the doctor, and went white.

"So Mr. Divverly says. He had told the directors that Moropulos had the information a month before the directors."

The doctor sat down heavily on the nearest chair. "I don't see—that it affects us," he protested feebly; "there is no offence in getting a tip about a failing property, is there, Sault?"

"I don't know. Moropulos says it is conspiracy. They can prove it if..."

"If?"

"If they find the letters which the manager wrote. Moropulos has them in his desk."

Merville sprang up. "Then they must be destroyed!" he cried violently. "It is madness to keep them... I had no idea—of course he must burn them. Go back and tell him to do this, Sault."

Ambrose Sault put his hand into the fold of his shabby jacket and brought out a bundle of documents. "They are here," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Moropulos says that you must keep them. They may get a warrant to search his house."

"Keep them—I?" Merville almost screamed. "Moropulos is a fool—burn them!"

Sault shook his head. "Steppe says 'no'. They may be useful later. You must keep them, doctor. It is Steppe's wish. To—morrow I will start working on the safe."

Dr. Merville took the papers from the outstretched hand and looked round helplessly. There was a steel box on his desk. He took out his key, looked again and more dubiously at the packet of letters, and dropped them into the box. "What is this safe, Sault? I know that you are a devilish clever fellow with your hands, and Moropulos mentioned something about a safe. You are not making it?"

Sault nodded, and there was a gleam in his fine eyes. "But why? Moropulos has a safe and Steppe must possess dozens. Why not buy another, if he must have a special place for these wretched things?"

"You cannot buy the safe that I shall make," said the dark man quietly. "It has taken me a year to invent the dial... eh? Yes. Combination. They are easy, but not this one. A word will open it, any other word, any other combination of letters, and there will be nothing to find."

The doctor frowned. "You mean if any other person—the police, for example—try to open the safe, the contents are destroyed?" Sault nodded. "How?"

The visitor, his business at an end, rose. "That is simple, a twist of the hand, unless the combination is true, releases a quart of acid, any of the corrosive acids will serve."

Merville bent his head in thought. Presently he saw a flaw in the invention. "Suppose they don't touch the lock?" he asked. "Suppose they burn out the side of the safe—it can be done, I believe—what then?"

Ambrose Sault gave that soft laugh of his. "The sides will be hollow, and filled, from the inside of the safe, with water pumped in at a pressure. Cut through the safe, and the water escapes and releases a plunger that brings about the same result—the contents of the safe are destroyed."

"You are a strange creature—the strangest I have met. I don't understand you," Merville shook his head. "I hope you will hurry with that safe." As Sault was at the door he asked: "Where did Moropulos find you, Sault?"

The man turned. "He found me in the sea," he said. "Moropulos was trading in those days. He had a sloop—pearl smuggling, I think. I thought he had told you. I never make any secret about it."

"In the sea—for heaven's sake, what do you mean? Where?"

"Ten miles off the Isle of Pines. I got away from Noumea in a boat. Noumea is the capital of New Caledonia. I and three Canaques—they were under sentence for cannibalism. We ran into a cyclone and swamped, just as we were trying to make the sloop which was standing in to the lee of the island. Moropulos took me on board and the natives; when he found that I was a convict—"

"A convict... a French convict!"

Sault was leaning easily, his cheek against the hand that gripped the edge of the open door. He nodded. "I thought he had told you. Of course he would have taken me back to Noumea for the reward, only he had a cargo on board which he did not want the French to see. I found afterwards that when we called at the Loyalty Island he tried to sell me back, but couldn't get a price." He smiled broadly as at a very pleasant recollection. "Moropulos would sell me now," he said, "only I am useful."

"But why... why were you imprisoned?" asked Merville, awe-stricken at the tremendous revelation.

"I killed a man," said Sault. "Good night, doctor."

CHAPTER III

IT was a Monday morning and a bank holiday. A few regular habitues of the park, to whom the word 'holiday' had no especial significance, had overlooked the fact and took their cantering exercise a little self-consciously under admiring eyes of the people who seldom saw people riding on horseback for the pleasure of it. The day was fine and warm, the hawthorn trees were thickly frosted with their cerise and white blossoms; stiff crocuses flamed in every bed, and the banners of the daffodils fluttered in the light breeze that blew half-heartedly across the wide green spaces. On every path the holiday-makers struggled, small mothers laden with large babies; shop-boys in garments secretly modelled on the supermen they served; girls from the stores in their bargain-price finery; young men with and without hats, the waitresses of closed tea-shops, and here and there a pompous member of the bourgeoisie conscious of his superiority to the crowd with which, in his condescension, he mingled.

There is one shady place which faces Park Lane—a stretch of wooded lawn where garden-chairs are set six deep. Behind this phalanx there is an irregular fringe of seats, usually in couples, and greatly in request during the darker hours. In the early morning, before the energies of the promenaders are exhausted, the spot is deserted. But two young people occupied chairs this morning. There was nothing in the appearance of the girl that would have made the companionship seem incongruous. In her tailored costume, the unobtrusive hat and the simplicity of the toilette, she might as well have been the youngest daughter of a duke, or a work-girl with a judgement in dress. Her clothes would not be 'priced' by the most expert of woman critics, and even stockings and shoes, the last hope of the appraiser, would have baffled.

No two glandes would have been required to put the man in his class. If he was a thought dandified, it was the dandification of a gentleman. He looked what he was, a man of leisure; the type which is to be found in the Guards, or the smartest regiment of cavalry. Yet Ronald Morelle was no soldier. He had served during the war, but had seen none of its devastations. He hated the violence of battle and despised the vulgarity of a noisy patriotism. His knowledge of Italian had secured him a quasi-diplomatic appointment, nominally at Italian headquarters, actually in Rome. He had used every influence that could be employed, pulled every string that could be pulled, to keep him from the disorder of the front line, and fortune had favoured him to an extraordinary extent. On the very day he received instructions to report to the regiment with which he had trained, the armistice was signed... he saw the last line of trenches which the British had prepared, but never occupied, south of Amiens, saw them from the train that carried him home, and thought that they looked beastly uncomfortable.

The girl by his side would not be alone in thinking him good-looking. He was that rarity, a perfectly-featured man. His skin was faultless; his straight nose, his deep-set brown eyes, his irreproachable mouth, were excellent. The hypercritical might cavil at the almost feminine chin. A small brown moustache was probably responsible for the illusion that he favoured the profession of arms. Evie Colebrook thought he was the most beautiful man in the world, and when he smiled, as he was smiling now, she dared not look at him. He was talking about looks, and she was deliciously flattered. "How ridiculous you are, Mr. Morelle," she protested. "I suppose you have said that to thousands and thousands of girls?"

"Not quite so many, Evie," he answered. "To be exact, I can't remember having been so shamelessly complimentary to any girl before. You need not call me 'Mr. Morelle' unless you wish to—my friends call me 'Ronnie',"

She played with the handkerchief on her lap. "It seems so familiar. Honestly, Ronnie, aren't you rather... what is the word? The book you lent me... a play?"

"A philanderer?" suggested the other. "My dear child, how silly you are. Of course I'm not. Very few people have impressed me as you have. It must have been Fate that took me into Burts—I never go into shops, but Francois—that's my man—"

"I know him," she nodded, 'he often comes in. I used to wonder who he was."

"He was out and I wanted... I forget what it was I wanted, even forget whether I bought it. I must have done, otherwise I should not have found myself staring over a pay-desk at the most lovely girl in all the world."

She laughed, a gurgling laugh of sheer happiness, and looked at him swiftly before she dropped her eyes again. "I like to hear that," she said softly. "It is so wonderful... that you like me, I mean. Because I'm nothing, really. And you, you're a... well, gentleman. I know you hate the word, but you are. Miles and miles above me. Why, I live in a miserable little house in a horrible neighbourhood... full of thieves and terrible creatures who drink. And my mother does odd jobs for people. And I'm not very well educated... really. I can read and write, but I'm not half so clever as Christina, that is my sister. She's an invalid and reads all day, and all night too, if I'd let her."

He was watching her as she spoke. The play of colour in her pretty face, the rise and fall of her narrow chest, the curve of chin and the velvet smoothness of her throat... he marked them all with the eye of the gourmet who watches lambs frisking in the pasture and sees not the poetry and beauty of young life, but a likeable dish that will one day mature. "If you were a beggar- maid and I were a prince..." he began.

"I'm not much better, am I?" she asked ruefully, "and you are a prince, to me, Ronnie..." She was thinking.

"Yes?"

"How can anything come right for us? I don't want to think about it, and I try ever so hard to keep it out of my thoughts, I'm so happy... meeting you... and loving you... and tomorrow never comes, but—"

"You mean how will this dear friendship end?" She nodded. "How would you like it to end?"

Evie Colebrook poked the ferrule of her sunshade into the grass and turned up a tuft of clover. "There is only one way it can ever end—happily," she said in a low voice, "and that is well, you know, Ronnie."

He laughed. "With you in a beautiful white dress and a beautiful white veil and a wreath of orange blossom round your glorious hair, and a priest in a surplice reading from a book; and people watching you as you go down the aisle and saying—well, you know what they say. I think a wedding is the most uninteresting function which Society affects."

She said nothing, but continued prodding at the turf. "It can be done quietly," she said at last.

Leaning toward her, he slipped his hand under her arm. "Evie, is love nothing?" he asked earnestly, "isn't it the biggest thing? Which is the best, a wedding between two people who half hate one another, but are marrying because one wants money and the other a swagger wife, or an everlasting love-union between a man and a woman who are bound with bonds that cannot break?"

She sighed, the quick, double sigh of one half convinced. "You make me feel that I'm common and... and brainless, and, anyway, I don't want to talk about it. Ronnie, I suppose you're awfully busy this morning?" She looked wistfully at the big Rolls that was drawn up by the side of the road.

"I am rather," he said, "I wish I weren't. I'd love to drive you somewhere—anywhere so long as you were by my side, little fairy. When shall I see you again?"

"On Sunday?" she asked, as they strolled toward the car.

"Why not come up to the flat to tea on Saturday afternoon?" he suggested, but she shook her head.

"I'd rather not, Ronnie—do you mind? I... well, I don't want to somehow. Am I an awful pig?"

He smiled down on her. "Of course not... oh, damn!" A girl on a horse had just cantered past. She saw him and lifted her whip to acknowledge his raised hat.

"Who is that?" Evie was more than curious.

"A girl I know," he said suavely. "The daughter of my doctor, and rather a gossip."

"You're ashamed of being seen with me."

"Rubbish!" he laughed. "I am so proud of you that I wish she had stopped, confound her!" He took her hand and smiled into her eyes. "Good-bye, beloved," he breathed.

Evie Colebrook watched the car until it had turned out of sight. It was following the gossiping girl, but she did not care. She went home walking on air. At the corner of the Row, the big car drew abreast of the rider. "Why on earth are you riding on Bank Holiday, Beryl—the park is full of louts, and there aren't half a dozen people in the Row!"

Beryl Merville looked at him quizzically. "And why on earth are you in the park, Ronnie; and who was your beautiful little friend?"

He frowned. "Friend... ? Oh, you mean the girl I was speaking to? Would you call her beautiful?... yes, I suppose she is pretty, but quite a kid. Her father is an old friend of mine—colonel—I forget his name, he is something at the War Office. I have an idea they live near the park. I saw her walking, and stopped the car to talk to her. Frankly, I was so bored that I almost fell on her neck. I wasn't with her for five minutes."

Beryl nodded and dismissed the matter from her mind. She was more interested in another subject.

"Yes, dear, I had your letter. I'm an awful brute not to have come over and seen you. But the fact is, I have been working hard. Don't sneer, Beryl. I really have. Sturgeon, the editor of the Post Herald, has discovered in me a latent genius for writing. It is rather fun... apparently I have a flair for that kind of work."

"But, Ronnie, this is great news! Stop your car by the corner and find a man to hold my horse... there is an awful lot I want to talk to you about." He parked his car, and, helping her dismount, handed the reins to an idle groom. A watchful attendant drew near. "You will have to pay for the seats, Ronnie, I

have no money."

"Happily I have two tickets," he said, and realized his mistake before he drew them from his pocket.

"I thought you hadn't been with your colonel's daughter more than five minutes?" she challenged, and laughed. "I sometimes think that you'd rather lie than eat!"

"My dear Beryl." Mr. Morelle's tone revealed both shock and injury. "Did I say that I didn't sit with her? I couldn't be so uncivil as to expect her to stand. The fact is, that she hinted that she would like me to drive her round the park, and I had no wish to."

"Never mind your guilty secret," she said gaily, "tell me all about your new job. Poor Ronnie, so they have made you work at last! I feared this."

Ronnie smiled good-naturedly. "It is amusing," he said. "I was always rather keen on that kind of work, even when I was at Oxford. Sturgeon saw some verses of mine in one of the quarterlies, and asked me if I would care to describe a motor-car race... the Gordon Bennett Cup. I took it on and he seemed immensely pleased with the account I wrote. I feel that I am doing some poor devil out of a job, but—"

"But it doesn't keep you awake at nights," she finished. "But how lovely, Ronald. You will be able to describe Mr. Steppe's trial... everybody says that one of these days he will be tried..."

Ronald Morelle was not amused. She saw a frown gather on his forehead and remembered that he and Mr. Steppe had some association. "Of course I'm joking, Ronnie. How awfully touchy you are! Mr. Steppe is quite nice, and people invariably say unpleasant things about a successful man."

"Steppe..." he paused. There was a nervousness in his manner and in his tone which he could not disguise. "Steppe is quite a good fellow. A little rough, but he was trained in a rough school. He is very nearly the cleverest financier in this country or any other." He would have changed the conversation had she not interpolated a question. "I do not know him... Sault you said? No, I've never met him. He does odd jobs for Moropulos. A half-caste, isn't he? What a nerve the fellow had to come to the house! Why didn't you kick him out?"

"It is obvious that you haven't seen him or you wouldn't ask such a question," she replied, her eyes twinkling.

"I don't know what he does," Ronnie went on. "Steppe has a good opinion of him. That is all I know. He has three decorations for something he did in the

war. He was in the Field Ambulance and brought in a lot of people from No-Man's-Land. He is quite old, isn't he?" She nodded. "Moropulos isn't anything to boast about. Steppe likes him, though." Apparently the cachet of Mr. Steppe satisfied Ronnie in all things. "He's a Greek... you've met him? A sleek devil. They say that he's afraid of Sault, except when he is drunk."

"Ronnie!"

"A fact. Moropulos drinks like a fish. Absinthe and all sorts of stuff. Steppe told me. That is why this nigger fellow Sault is useful. Sault is the only man who can handle him. He's as strong as an ox. There isn't a smarter devil than Moropulos. He has the brain of a Cabinet Minister, and is as close as an oyster. But when the fit is on him he'd stand up in the street and talk himself into gaol. And others... not Steppe, of course," he added hastily, "Steppe has nothing to be afraid of, only... well, Moropulos might say things that would look bad."

"And is that all?" she asked, with an odd sense of disappointment. "Doesn't Mr. Sault do anything else but act as an sort of keeper?"

Ronnie, already weary of the subject, yawned behind his hand. "Awfully sorry, but I was up late last night. Sault? Oh yes, I believe he does odd jobs. He is rather an ugly brute, isn't he?"

She did not answer this. Her interest in the man puzzled her. He appealed in a strange fashion to something within her that was very wholesome. She was glad, very glad, about his war decorations. That he should have done fine things... she liked to forget Ronnie's war services. "I wish I had decided to ride this morning," complained Ronnie. "I never dreamt you would be out on a day like this. Why I came into the park at all I really do not know. I didn't realize it was a bank holiday and that all these dreadful people would be unchained for the day. How is the doctor—well?" She nodded. "He looked a little peaked when I saw him last. Look, Beryl... Steppe!" A car, headed for Marble Arch, had swerved across the road in response to the signal of its occupant. It pulled up behind Ronald's machine, and Mr. Steppe, with his queer sideways smile, alighted, waving a white-gloved hand. "Oh, dear," said Beryl plaintively, "why did I get off that horse? I could have pretended that I had not recognized him."

"My dear girl!" Ronald was genuinely distressed, and it came to Beryl in the nature of an unpleasant discovery that he was so completely in awe of the financier, that his manner, his attitude, the very tone of his voice, changed at the sight of him. And Steppe seemed to expect this homage, took it as his right, dismissed and obliterated Ronnie from participation with a jerk of his head intended as an acknowledgement of his greeting and as an excusal of his presence. Beryl could not help realizing his unimportance in the millionaire's

scheme of life.

The photographs of Jan Steppe, which have from time to time appeared in the public press, at once flatter and disparage him. The lens has depicted faithfully the short black beard, the thick black eyebrows, the broad nose and the thick bull-neck of him. They missed his immense vitality, the aura of power which enveloped him, his dominant and forceful ego. His voice was thick and deep, sometimes in moments of excitement, guttural, for his grandfather had been a Transvaal boer, a byworner who had become, successively, farmer and mine-owner. Jan Cornelius Steppe, the first, had spoken no English, his son, Commandant Steppe, an enlightened and scholarly man, spoke it well. He had been killed at Tugela Drift in the war, whilst Jan the third was in England at a preparation school.

"Huh! Beryl! Very good luck, huh? I shall miss my train, but it is worth while. Riding? God! I wish I wasn't so fat and lazy. Motor-cars are the ruin of us. My grandfather rode twenty miles a day and my father was never off a horse. Huh!"

Beryl often asked her father why Mr. Steppe grunted at the end of his every question. But it was not a grunt. It was a throaty growl cut short, a terrifying mannerism of his, meaningless but menacing. She used to wonder whether the impression of ruthless ferocity which he gave was not more than half due to this peculiarity. He towered above her, a mountain of a man, broad of shoulder and long of arm. There was something simian about him, something that was almost obscene. He was fond of describing himself as fat, but this was an exaggeration. He had bulk, he was in the truest sense gross, but she would not have described him as fat.

"Sit down," he commanded, "I haven't seen you since Friday. The doctor came in yesterday morning. Nerves, huh? What's the matter with him?"

Beryl laughed. "Father receives a great deal of misplaced sympathy. He is really very well. He has been jumpy ever since I can remember."

Steppe nodded. He was sitting by her side in the chair vacated by Ronnie, and Ronnie was standing. "Sit down, Ronnie." She pointed to a chair at the other side of her. "N—no thank you, Beryl," he said hastily, for all the world like a schoolboy asked to sit in the presence of his master.

"Sit down," growled Steppe, and, to the girl's amazement, Ronnie sat. It was the only notice Jan Steppe took of his presence throughout the interview, and Ronnie neither showed resentment nor made the slightest attempt to intrude into the conversation that followed. Presently Steppe looked at his watch. "I can catch that train," he said, and got up. "You're coming to dinner with me

next week—I'll fix the date with the doctor." She said she would be delighted. Something of the mastership extended to her. "You saw Sault?" He turned back after he had taken her hand. "Queer fellow, huh? Big man, huh?"

"I thought he was... interesting," she admitted.

"Yes... interesting. A man." He glowered at Ronald Morelle. "Interesting," he repeated, and went away with that. Her fascinated gaze followed him as he strode toward the car. "Paddington... get me there, damn you," she heard him say; and when the car had gone...

"Dynamic," she said, with a sigh. "He is like a power-house. When I shake hands with him I feel as though I'm going to get a bad burn! You were very silent, Ronnie."

"Yes"—absently. "Old Steppe is rather a shocker, isn't he? How did he know you had seen Sault?"

"Father told him, I suppose. Ronnie, are you afraid of Mr. Steppe?"

He coloured. "Afraid? How stupid you are, Beryl! Why should I be afraid of him? He's... well, I do business with him. I am a director of a company or two; he put me into them. One has to—how shall I put it? One has to be polite to these people. I'll go along now, Beryl... lot of work to do."

He was uncomfortable and she did not pursue the subject. The knowledge brought a little ache to her heart—that Ronnie was afraid of Jan Steppe! She would have given her soul to respect Ronald Morelle as she respected the swarthy grey-haired man whom even Steppe respected.

CHAPTER IV

"CHILDREN," said Mrs. Colebrook, peering into the saucepan that bubbled and splashed and steamed on the kitchen fire, "are a great responsibility... especially in this neighbourhood where, as you might say, there is nothing but raffle." Sometime in her youth, it is probable that Mrs. Colebrook had to choose between 'rabble' and 'riff-raff' and had found a compromise. "That man Starker who lives up the street, number 39 I think it is... no maybe it's 37—it is the house before the sweep's. Well, I did think he was all right; geraniums in his window, too, and canaries. A very homely man, wouldn't say boo to a goose. He got nine months this morning."

Ambrose Sault, sitting in a wooden chair which was wedged tightly between the kitchen table and the dresser, drummed his fingers absently upon the polished cloth table-cover and nodded. His dark sallow face wore an expression of strained interest. "Evie... well, I'm worried about Evie. She sits and broods—there's no other word for it—by the hour, and she used to be such a bright, cheerful girl. I wonder sometimes if it is through her working at the drug-stores. Being attached to medicines in a manner of speaking, you're bound to hear awful stories... people's insides and all that sort of thing. It is depressing for a young girl. Christina says she talks in her sleep and moans and tosses about. It can't be over a young man, or she'd bring him home. I asked her the other day—I think a girl's best friend is her mother—and all I got was, 'Oh, shut up, mother'. In my young days I wouldn't have dared to speak to my mother like that, but girls have changed. They want to go to business, cashiering and typewriting and such nonsense. I went out to service when I was sixteen and was first parlourmaid before I was twenty. But talk to these girls about going into domestic service and they laugh at you."

A silence followed which Sault felt it was his duty to break. "I suppose they do. Life is very hard on women, even the most favoured of women. I hardly blame them for getting whatever happiness they can."

"Happiness!" scoffed Mrs. Colebrook, shifting the saucepan to the hob, "it all depends on what you call 'happiness.' I don't see much happiness in standing in a draughty shop taking money all day and adding up figures and stamping bills! Besides, look at the temptation. She meets all kinds of people..."

"I think I'll go upstairs to my room, Mrs. Colebrook. I want to do a little work."

"You're a worker," said Mrs. Colebrook admiringly. "I'll call you when supper is ready."

"May I walk in to see Christina?"

He asked permission in the same words every night and received the same answer. "Of course you can; you need never ask, Mr. Sault. She'll be glad to see you."

At the head of the narrow stairway Sault knocked on a door and a cheerful voice bade him come in. It was a small room containing two beds. That which was nearest the window was occupied by a girl whose pallor was made more strangely apparent by a mop of bright red hair. Over her head, and hooked to the wall, was a kerosene lamp of unusual design and brilliance. She had been reading and one white hand lay over the open page of a book by her side. Sault looked up at the lamp, touched the button that controlled the light and peered

into the flame. "Working all right?"

"Fine," she said enthusiastically. "You're a brick, Ambrose, to make it. I had no idea you could do anything like that. Mother won't touch it, she thinks it will explode."

"It can't explode," he said, shaking his head. "These vapour gas lamps are safe, unless you fool with them. Have it put outside the door in the morning and I'll fill it. Well, where have you been today, Christina?"

She showed her small white teeth in a smile. "To Etruria," she said solemnly. "It is the country that was old when Rome was young. I went on an exploring expedition. We left Croydon Aerodrome by aeroplane and stayed overnight in Paris. My fiance is a French marquess, and we stayed at his place in the Avenue Kleber. The next morning we went by special train to Rome. I visited the Coliseum by car and saw the temples and the ruins. I spent another day at the Vatican and St. Peters and saw the Pope. Then we went on to Volsinii and Tarquinii and I found a wonderful old tomb full of glorious Etruscan ware. Plates and amphoras and vases. They must have been worth millions. There we met a magician. He lived in an old ruined house on the side of the hill. He had a flock of goats and gave us milk. It was magic milk for suddenly we found ourselves in the midst of an enormous marble city full of beautiful men and women in togas and wonderful robes. The streets were filled with rich chariots drawn by little horses. The chariots shone like gold and were covered with figures of lions and hunters and trees and scrolls... wonderful! And the gardens! They were beautiful. Flowers of every kind, heliotrope, and roses, and big white trumpet lilies, and the marble houses were covered with wisteria... oh, dear!"

"Etruria?" repeated Sault thoughtfully. "Older than Rome? Of course, there must have been people before the Romans, the sort of ancient Britons of Rome..."

Her eyes, fixed on his, were gleaming with merriment. "Of course. I told you about the marvellous trip I had to China? When I was the lovely concubine of Yang-Kuei-Fee? And how the eunuchs strangled me? That was long after Rome, but China was two thousand years old then."

"I remember," he said soberly, "you went to China once before then..."

His glance fell on the pages of the book, and he picked it up, turning its meaningless leaves. "It is all about Etruria," she said. "Evie borrowed it from the store. They have a circulating library at the store. Have you seen Evie?"

He shook his head. "Not for weeks," he said. "I am usually in my room when

she comes home." Christina Colebrook, invalid and visionary, puckered her smooth brows into a frown. She had emerged from her world of dreams and make- belief and was facing the ugliness of life that eddied about her bed. "Evie is changed quite a lot," she said. "She is quieter and dresses more carefully. Not in the way you would notice. She always had good taste, but especially in the way of underclothes. All girls adore swagger underclothes. They live in dread that one day they will be knocked down by a motor-bus and taken in hospital wearing a shabby camisole! But Evie... she's collecting all sorts of things. You might think she was getting together a trousseau. Has she ever spoken to you about anybody called 'Ronnie'?"

"No—she never speaks to me." said Ambrose.

"You know nobody called 'Ronnie'?" He signified his ignorance. At the moment he did not associate the name.

"She talks in her sleep." Christina went on slowly, "and she's spoken that name lots of times. I haven't told mother; what would be the good with her heart as it is? 'Ronnie' is the man who is worrying her. I think she is in love with him or what she thinks is love. And he is somebody in a good station of life because once she called out in the middle of the night. 'Ronnie. take me in your car."

Sault was silent. This was the first time Christina had ever spoken to him about the girl.

"There is only one thing that can happen," said she wisely, "and that would break mother's heart. Mother has very narrow views. The people of our class have. I should feel that way myself if I hadn't seen the world," she patted the book by her side. "Perhaps mother's view is right. She is respectable and the old Roman Emperor Constantine, when he classified the nobility, made the 'respectable' much superior to the 'honourable'."

"What do you mean... about Evie?"

"I mean that she'll come to me one night and tell me that she is in trouble. And then I shall have to get mother into a philosophical mood and try to make her see that it is better for a child to be illegitimate than not to be born at all."

"Good gracious!" said Ambrose, startled. "But it may be... just a friendship."

"Rats!" said Christina contemptuously. "Friendships between attractive shop-girls and well-to-do young men! I've heard about 'em—platonic. Have you ever heard of Archianassa? She was Plato's mistress. He didn't even practice the kind of love that is named after him. Evie is a good girl and has really fine principles. I shock her awfully at times; I wish I didn't. I don't mean I wish I

didn't say things that make her shocked, but that she wouldn't be shocked at all. You have to have a funny kink in your mind before you take offence at the woman and man facts. If you blush easily, you fall easily. I wish to God Evie wasn't so pretty. And she's a dear, too, Ambrose. She has great schemes for getting me away to a country where my peculiar ailment will dissolve under uninterrupted sunlight. Poor darling. It would be better if she thought more of her own dangerous sickness..."

"Ronald Morelle," said Ambrose suddenly, "but it wouldn't be he."

"Who is Ronald Morelle?"

"He is the only Ronald I know. I don't even know him. He's a friend of a... a friend of mine."

"Rich—where does he live?"

"In Knightsbridge somewhere."

Christina whistled. "Glory be! Evie's shop is in Knightsbridge!"

At eleven o'clock that night Evie Colebrook came into the room, and, as she stooped over the bed to kiss her sister, Christina saw something. "You've been crying, Evie."

Evie turned away quickly and began to unfasten her skirt. "I... I twisted my ankle... slipped off the sidewalk... I was a baby to cry!"

Christina watched her as she undressed rapidly. "You haven't said your prayers, Evie."

"Damn my prayers!" There was a little choke at the end. "Put out the light, Christina, I'm awfully tired."

Christina reached up for the dangling chain that Ambrose Sault had fixed to the lamp, but she did not immediately pull it. "Mr. Sault was talking about people he knew tonight," she said carelessly. "Have you ever heard of a man called Ronald Morelle?"

There was no answer, then..."Good night, Christina." Christina pulled the chain and the light went out.

CHAPTER V

BERYL MERVILLE told herself, at least once a day, that the average girl did not give two thoughts about the source of her father's income. In her case, there was less reason why she should trouble her head. Dr. Merville had retired from practice four years before. In his time, he was what is loosely described as 'a fashionable physician' and certainly was regarded as one of the first authorities of cardiac diseases in the country. His practice, as a consultant, was an extensive one, and his fees were exceptionally high, even for a fashionable physician. When he retired he was indubitably a rich man. He sold his house in Devonshire Street and bought a more pretentious home in Park Place, but...

The zest for speculation, repressed during the time he was following his profession, had occupied the hours of leisure which retirement brought to him. An active man, well under sixty, the emptiness of his days after he had turned over his work filled him with dismay. He had broken violently from the routine of twenty-five years and found time the heaviest of the burdens he had ever carried. He tried to find interests and failed. He was under an agreement to the doctor who had purchased his practice not to return to his profession, or he would have been back in Devonshire Street a month after he had left. He bought a few thoroughbreds and sent them to a trainer, but he had no love for the Turf, and although he won a few respectable stakes, he quitted the game at the end of the first season.

Then he tried the stock market, made a few thousands in oil and grew more interested. A rubber speculation hurt him, but not so much that his enthusiasm was damped or his bank balance was seriously affected. He followed this loss with what might have been a disastrous investment in South African Mines. Then, at a nerve-wracking moment, came Steppe, who held up the market and let out Merville, bruised and shaken, but not ruinously so. Here might have ended the speculative career of Dr. Merville, had he not been under an obligation to the South African. Within a month of their meeting, the doctor's name appeared on the prospectus of one of Steppe's companies—a mild and unromantic Cold Storage flotation which was a success in every sense.

Merville had many friends in Society; people who might look askance at the name of Jan Steppe, and be disturbed by the recollection of certain other companies which that gentleman had floated, accepted Dr. Merville's directorship as evidence of the company's stability and financial soundness. The issue was over-subscribed and paid a dividend from the first year.

This object lesson was not lost upon the big man. He followed the promotion with another. The East Rand Consolidated Deep was floated for three- quarters

of a million. Applications came in for two millions. Dr. Merville was chairman of the board. Even Jan Steppe was surprised. Large as was the circle of Merville's acquaintances, neither his personal popularity nor his standing as a financial authority could account for this overwhelming success. Merville himself discounted his own influence, not realizing that in the twenty-five years of professional life he had built up a national reputation. His name had been a household word since his treatment of a foreign royalty whose case had been regarded by native physicians as hopeless. This may not have been a complete explanation; probably the fact that the stock in the Cold Storage Company stood at a premium had something to do with the rush for Consolidated Deeps.

The new company did not pay dividends, but long before the first was due, Mr. Steppe had launched two others. On paper Dr. Merville made a fortune; actually, he acquired heavy liabilities, not the least of which was his heavy participation in a private flotation which Mr. Steppe, with unconscious humour, labelled 'The Investment Salvage Syndicate'. It was a stock-holding company and in the main it held such stock as a general public declined to purchase.

There are rules of behaviour which normal people do not transgress. A gentleman does not search the overcoat pockets of his fellow club-men, and confiscate such valuables as he may find; nor does he steal into the houses of people he does not know and remove their silver. A corporation man has a less rigid code. Dr. Merville found himself consciously assisting in the manipulation of a stock, a manipulation which could only be intended to deprive stockholders of their legitimate rights. There was one unpleasant moment of doubt and shame when Merville sought to disentangle his individuality from this corporative existence. He tried to think singly, applying the tests which had governed his life... he found it easier to divide his responsibility. Somehow he felt less venal when only a fourteenth of the blame attached to him. This fraction represented his holding in Consolidated Deeps.

Wealth is an effective narcotic. Rich and fearless men can find a melancholy pleasure in the contemplation of their past sins. But poverty and the danger of poverty acts as a microphone through the medium of which the still small voice of conscience is a savage roar. Beryl thought he was unusually nervous when she went to find him in his study. He started at the sound of her voice. "Ready... yes, dear. What time did Steppe say?"

"Eight o'clock. We have plenty of time, father—the car isn't here yet. Do you know whether Ronnie will be there?"

Dr. Merville was looking abstractedly at her; his mind, she knew, was very far

away. "Ronnie? I don't know. John Maxton will be there. I saw him today. Steppe admires him and John is clever; he will be a judge one of these days. Yes... a judge." The little grimace he made was involuntary.

"One would think you expected to meet him in his official capacity," she laughed.

"Absurd, of course... as to Ronnie? How do you feel about him, Beryl?"

The maid tapped at the door to say the car had arrived. Beryl answered: "Do you mean—? I don't quite know what you do mean."

"About the scandal. Do you remember a man who came to see you—why he should have come to you, I don't know—with a story about his sister?"

"East was the name. Yes, Ronnie told me all about it. The man is a blackmailer and his sister was not much better. Ronnie had shown a kindness to the girl, he met her at some... some mission or other. Ronnie does queer things like that... and he gave her some money to go on a holiday. That was all."

"Humph... ready?"

"But, daddy, don't you believe Ronnie?" She was desperately anxious to consolidate her own faith.

"I don't know. Ronnie is a queer fellow." He was ready to go, his overcoat was over his arm, and yet he lingered. She guessed he would say something more about Ronald Morelle and was stiffening to defend him, but she was mistaken. "Beryl, you are twenty-two and very beautiful. I may be biased, but I hardly think I am. I have seen many lovely women in my life and you could hold your own with any of them. Do you ever think of getting married?"

She tried hard to control herself, but the colour in her face deepened and faded. "I haven't thought much about it," she said. "There are two parties to a marriage, daddy."

"Are you fond of anybody? I mean are you, in your heart... committed to any man?"

A pause, then: "No."

"I'm glad," said her father, relieved. "Very glad... you must look for something in a man which fellows like Ronnie Morelle can never give to a woman... power, fortune, mental strength and stability... come along."

She followed him to the car, dumb with astonishment, but not at that moment apprehensive. She knew that he had been talking of Jan Steppe.

CHAPTER VI

MR. STEPPE had a house in Berkeley Square which he rented from its lordly owner. Beryl had dined there before, and it had been a baffling experience, for in no respect did the personality of the tenant find an opportunity of expressing itself. The furnishings and colour-schemes of the landlord had been left as they had been found, and, since the atmosphere of the place was late Victorian, Mr. Steppe was unconformable to his surroundings. Beryl thought of him as a sultan amidst samplers. Sir John Maxton was talking to him when they were announced. One of the greatest advocates at the bar, Maxton was tall, slender, aesthetic. His gentle manner had led many a confident witness into trouble. He had a reputation at the Bar as a just and merciless man; a master of the art of cross-examination. "The doctor told me you were likely to be here," he said, when she had escaped from Steppe's thunderous civilities. "I hoped Ronnie would have come—have you seen him lately?"

"Only for a few minutes on Monday. I met him in the park. I didn't know you were a friend of his, Sir John?" Maxton's lips curled. Beryl wondered if he was trying to smile, or whether that twitch indicated something uncomplimentary to Ronnie. "I'm more than a friend—and less. I was one of the executors of his father's will. Old Bennett Morelle was my first client and I suppose I stand in loco parentis to Ronnie by virtue of my executorship. I have not seen him for quite a year. Somebody told me that he was scribbling! He always had a bent that way—it is a thousand pities he didn't take the law seriously—an occupation would have kept him out of mischief."

"Has Ronnie been called to the Bar?" she asked in astonishment."

Maxton nodded. "Just before the war, but he has never practised. I hope that his newspaper connection will keep him busy."

"But Ronnie works very hard," she asserted stoutly. "He has his company work, he is a director of several, and chairman of one, I believe."

Maxton looked at her with the faintest shade of amusement in his eyes. "Of course," he said dryly, "that is an occupation." He lowered his voice. "Do you mind if I am ill-bred and ask if you have known our host very long?"

"A few years."

He nodded. Beryl, glancing across at her father and Steppe, saw that the doctor

was talking earnestly. She caught Steppe's gaze and looked back to Sir John. "I have been fighting a case for him. Rather a hopeless proposition, but we won. The jury was wrong, I think, in giving us a verdict. I can say this because the other side have entered an appeal which is certain to succeed."

Jan Steppe must have heard the last sentence. "Huh? Succeed? Yes, perhaps... it doesn't matter very much. I had a verdict, a disqualified winner is still a moral winner, huh, doctor? You used to be a racing man; what do you think?" Dinner was announced whilst the doctor was disclaiming any knowledge of the Turf or its laws. The dinner was exquisite in its selection and brevity. Mr. Steppe had one special course which none of the others shared. He invited them and showed no regret when they refused. A footman brought a silver dish piled high with steaming mealie cobs. He took them in his hands and gnawed at the hot corn. It was probably the only way that mealies could be eaten, she told herself... no more inelegant an exhibition than the sword-swallowing manoeuvre which followed the serving of asparagus.

"Sault?" Mr. Steppe was wiping his fingers on his serviette. "You asked me once before, Beryl... where was it? In the park. No, I haven't seen him. I very seldom do. Strange man, huh?"

The butler had attended more frequently to Dr. Merville's wineglass than to any other of the guests. His gloom had disappeared and he was more like the cheerful man Beryl remembered. "Sault is a danger and a menace to Society," he said. Steppe's brows lowered but he did not interrupt. "At the same time, he can exercise one of the most beneficent forces that Nature has ever given into the care of a human being."

"You pique my curiosity," said Maxton, interested. "Is he psychic or clairvoyant?... from your tone one would imagine that he had some supernatural power."

"He has," nodded Merville. "I discovered it some time ago. He lodges with a woman named Colebrook in a very poor part of the town. Mrs. Colebrook suffers from an unusual form of heart disease. She had a seizure one night and Sault came for me. You will remember, dear, when I was called out in the middle of the night... a year ago. The moment I examined the woman, who was unconscious and in my opinion in extremis, I knew that nothing could be done. I applied the remedies which I had brought with me, and which I had thought, from his description of the seizure, would be necessary, but with no effect. Sault was terribly upset. The woman had two daughters, one bedridden. His grief at the thought that she would die without her daughter seeing her was tragic. I think he was going upstairs to bring the girl down, when I said casually that if I could lend the patient strength to live for another hour, she

would probably recover. What followed, seems to me even now as part of a fantastic dream."

Beryl's elbow was on the table, her chin in her palm, and she was absorbed. Maxton lay back, his arm hanging over the back of his chair, weighing every word; Steppe, his hands clasped on the table, his head bent, sceptical. "Sault bent down and took the inert hands of the woman in his... just held them. Remember this, that she was the colour of this serviette, her lips grey. I wondered what he was doing... I don't know now. Only her face went gradually pink and her eyes opened."

"How long after he took her hands?" asked Maxton.

"Less than a minute, I should think. As I say, she opened her eyes and looked round, and then she nodded very slowly. "What do you think of that, Dr. Merville?' she said."

"She knew you, of course?"

"She had never seen me in her life. I learnt that afterwards. Sault dropped her hands and stood up. He was looking ghastly. Not a vestige of colour. I said to him: "Sault, what is the matter?' and he answered in a cockney whine, that was 'h'-less and ungrammatical—Sault never makes an error in that respect—'It's me 'eart, sir, I get them attacks at times—haneurism'."

"Sault?" Steppe's face was puckered into a grimace of incredulity.

"Go on, please, father!" urged the girl.

"What came after was even more curious. Mrs. Colebrook got up quite unaided, sat down in a chair before the fire and fell fast asleep. Sault sat down too. I gave him some brandy and he seemed to recover. But he did not speak again, not even to answer my questions. He sat bolt upright in a wooden chair by the side of the kitchen table—all this happened in the kitchen. He didn't move for a long time, and then his hands began to stray along the table. There was a big work-basket at the other side and presently his hands reached it and he drew it toward him. I watched him. He took out some garment, I think it was a nightdress belonging to one of the girls. It was unfinished and the needle was sticking into it... he began to sew!"

"Good God!" cried Maxton. "Do you suggest that on the touching of hands the two identities changed?"

"I suggest that—I assert that," said the doctor quietly, and drank his wine.

"Rubbish!" growled Steppe. "What did Sault say about it?"

"I will tell you. Exactly an hour after this extraordinary transference had been made, I saw Mrs. Colebrook going pale. She opened her eyes and looked at me in a puzzled way, then at the daughter, a pretty child who had been present all the time. 'I always 'ave these attacks, sir', she said, 'a haneurism the doctors call it'."

"And Sault?"

"He was himself again, but distressingly tired and wan."

"Did he explain?"

The doctor shook his head. "He didn't understand or remember much. The next day out of curiosity I called at the house and asked if he could sew. He was amused. He said that he had never used a needle in his life, his hands were too big."

Beryl sat back with a sigh. "It doesn't seem—human," she said. The doctor had opened his mouth to reply when there was a crash in the hall outside and the sound of a high aggressive voice. Another second and the door was thrown violently open and a man lurched in. He was hatless and his frock coat was covered with the coffee-coloured stains of wet mud. His cravat was awry and the ends hung loose over his unbuttoned waistcoat. A stray lock of black hair hung over his narrow forehead. He strode into the centre of the room, and with legs apart, one hand on his hip and the other caressing his long brown beard, he surveyed the company with a sardonic smile.

"Hail, thieves and brother bandits!" he said thickly. He spoke with a slight lisp. "Hail, head devil and chief of the tribe! Hail, Helen—"

Steppe was on his feet, his head thrust forward, his shoulders bent. Maxton saw him and started. There was something feline in that crouching attitude. "You drunken fool! How dare you come here, huh?"

Mr. Moropulos snapped his fingers contemptuously. "I come, because I have the right," he said, with drunken gravity; "who will deny the Prime Minister the right of calling upon the King?" He bowed and nearly lost his balance, recovering by the aid of a chair-back.

"Go to my study, Moropulos, I will come out with you," Steppe had gained control of himself, but the big frame was trembling with pent rage. "Study—bah! Here is my study! Hail, doctor, man of obnoxious draughts; hail, stranger, whoever you are... where's the immaculate Ronnie? Flower of English chivalry and warrior of a million flights—huh?" He bellowed his imitation of Steppe's grunt and chuckled with laughter. "Now, listen, confederates, I have

done with you all. I am going to live honest. Why? I will tell you..."

"Moropulos!" Beryl turned quickly toward the door. She knew before she saw the stolid figure that it was Sault.

Moropulos turned too. "Ah! The Faithful Ambrose... do you want me, Sault?" His tone was mild; he seemed to wilt under the steady gaze of the man in the doorway. Ambrose Sault beckoned and the drunken intruder shuffled out, shamefaced, fearful.

"Quite an interesting evening," said Sir John Maxton, as he closed the car door on the Mervilles that night.

CHAPTER VII

Two days later Sir John Maxton made an unexpected call upon the doctor, and it occurred to him that he might also have made an unwelcome appearance, for he interrupted a tete-a-tete. "I thought I should find the doctor in. Well, Ronnie, how are you after all these years?"

Ronnie was relieved to see him—that was the impression which the lawyer received. And Beryl, although she was her sweet, equable self, would gladly have excused his presence. Maxton had an idea that he had surprised them in the midst of a quarrel. The girl was flushed and her eyes were unusually bright. Ronnie's countenance was clouded with gloom. Sir John was sensitive to atmosphere. "No, I really won't stay. I wanted to have a chat with the doctor about the extraordinary story he told us the other night. I was dining with the Lord Chief and some other judges last night, and without mentioning names, of course, I repeated the story. They were remarkably interested. Barham says that he had heard of such a case..."

"What is all this about?" asked Ronnie curiously. "You didn't tell me anything, Beryl. Who, what, and where is the 'case'?"

"Mr. Sault," she said shortly.

"Oh, Sault! He is an extraordinary fellow... I must meet him. They say that he cannot read or write."

"Is that a fact?" Sir John Maxton looked at the girl. "Yes... I believe so. Ronnie, on the contrary, is in the way of becoming a famous writer, Sir John."

"So I hear." He wondered why she had so deliberately and so abruptly brought the conversation into another channel.

Ronald Morelle, for his part, was not inclined to let the subject drift. "It is quaint how that coon intrigues you all," he said; "Oh yes, he is coloured. You haven't seen him, John, or you wouldn't ask that question."

"I have seen him; it did not appear to me that he was coloured—he has a striking face."

"At any rate, he seems to have struck you and Beryl all of a heap," said Ronnie, smiling. "Really, I must meet him. Are you going, Sir John?" Maxton was taking his farewell of the girl. "Because if you are, I'll walk a little way with you. 'Bye, Beryl."

"Good-bye, Ronnie," she said quietly.

Once in the street Maxton asked: "What is the matter with you and Beryl?"

"Nothing... Beryl is just a little grandmotherly. She went to the theatre last night with some people and she spotted me in a box."

"I see," said Sir John dryly; "and of course you were not alone in the box."

"Why on earth should I be?" demanded the other. "Beryl is really unreasonable. She swore that my friend was a girl she had seen me with in the park."

"And who was it... is that a discreet question?"

"No, it isn't," said Ronnie instantly. "I don't think one ought to chuck names about... it is most dishonourable and caddish. The lady was a very great friend of mine."

"Then I probably know her," said Sir John, wilfully dense. "I know most of the people in your set, and I cannot imagine that you would be scoundrel enough to escort the kind of girl you couldn't introduce to me or Beryl or any other of your friends."

"I give you my word of honour"—Ronnie was earnest—"that the lady was not only presentable, but is known personally to you. The fact is that she had a row with her fiance, a man I know very well, a Coldstreamer, and I was doing no more than trying to reconcile them... bring them together, you understand? She was dreadfully depressed and I got a box at the theatre with the idea of cheering her up. My efforts," he added virtuously, "were successful. Beryl said that it was a girl—the daughter of a dear friend of mine, she had seen me

talking with in the park."

"What dear friend of yours was this?"

"I don't think you've met him," parried Ronnie.

"Did she have trouble with her fiance too?" asked Sir John innocently. "Really, Ronnie, you are coming out strong as a disinterested friend of distressed beauty! If I may employ the imagery and language of an American burglar whom I recently defended, Sir Galahad has nothing on you!"

"You don't believe me, John," said Ronnie, injured.

"Of course I cannot believe you. I am not a child. You had some girl with you, some 'pick up', innocent or guilty, God knows. I will assume her innocence. The sophisticated have no appeal for you. There was a girl named East—a chorus girl, if I remember rightly—"

"If you're going to talk about that disgraceful attempt to blackmail me, I'm finished," said Ronnie, resigned.

"Why didn't you charge her and her brother with blackmail? They came to me..."

"Good lord, did they? I'll break that infernal blackguard's neck!"

"When will you meet him?" Ronnie did not answer. "They came to me and I knew that the story was true. The brother, of course, is a blackmailer. He is levying blackmail now and you are paying him... don't argue, Ronnie, of course you are paying him. You said just now that you would break his neck, which meant to me that you see him frequently... when he comes to draw his blood- money. If it was a case of blackmail, why did you not prosecute? The mere threat of the prosecution would have been sufficient to have sent him to ground—it struck me that the girl was acting under the coercion of her brother, and I do not think you would have had any trouble from her. Ronnie, you are rotten."

He said this as he stopped at the corner of Park Lane and Piccadilly, and Ronnie smiled nervously. "Oh, come now, John, that is rather a strong expression."

"Rotten," repeated the lawyer. He screwed a monocle in his eye and surveyed his companion dispassionately. "Chorus-girls... shop-girls... the mechanics of joy who serve Madame Ritti... that made you jump, eh? I know quite a lot about you. They are your life. And God gave you splendid gifts and the love of the sweetest, dearest girl in this land."

"Who is this?" asked the young man slowly.

"Beryl. You do not need to be told that. Search the ranks of your light women for her beauty, Ronnie."

A girl passed them, a wisp of a girl on the border-line of womanhood. She carried a little bag and was hurrying home from the store where she was employed. Even as he listened to the admonition of his companion, Ronnie caught her eyes and smiled into them... she paused and looked round once... he was still watching her. "I am afraid I must leave you, John, I've a lot of work to do, and you are quite mistaken as to my character... and Beryl."

He left the lawyer abruptly and walked toward the gates of the park where the girl had stopped, ostensibly to tie a shoelace. Sir John saw her pass leisurely into the park; a few seconds later Ronnie had followed. His time was his own, for Evie Colebrook was working that evening, the annual stocktaking was in progress, as she had told him when they were at the theatre on the previous night. "Rotten!" repeated Maxton, and stalked gloomily to his club.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. RONALD MORELLE'S flat was on the third floor of a block that faced busy Knightsbridge. His library was a large and airy room at the back and from the open casements commanded an uninterrupted view of the park. It was a pleasant room with its rows of bookshelves and its chintzes. The silver fireplace and the rich Persian rugs which covered the parquet were the only suggestions of luxury. There were one or two pictures which Francois had an order to remove when certain visitors were expected. The rest were decent reproductions with the exception of a large oil-painting above the mantelpiece. It was a St. Anthony and was attributed to Titiano Vecellio. The austere saint loomed darkly from a sombre background and was represented as an effeminate youth. The veining of the neck and shoulders was characteristically Titian, so too was the inclination of a marble column which showed faintly in the picture. Titiano's inability to draw a true vertical line is well known, and upon this column, more than upon other evidence, the experts accepted the picture as an early example of the fortunate painter's work.

Ronnie was indifferent as to the authenticity of the picture. The dawning carnality on Anthony's lean face, the misty shape of the temptress... Titian or his disciple had reduced to visibility the doubt, the gloating and the very

thoughts of the saint. A black oak table stood in the centre of the room and a deep Medici writing-chair was placed opposite the black blotting-pad. It pleased Ronnie to imitate those ministers of state who employed this colour to thwart curious-minded servants who, with the aid of a mirror, might discover the gist of outward correspondence. It was nearing midnight when the sound of Ronnie's key in the lock sent his sleepy servant into the lobby. Ronnie stood in the hall tenderly stripping his gloves.

"Has anybody been?"

"No, m'sieur."

"Letters?"

"Only one, m'sieur. An account." He opened the library door and Ronnie walked in. He switched on the light of his desk lamp and sat down. "I have not been out all the evening, Francois."

"No, m'sieur."

"I came home after dinner and I have not left this room, do you understand?"

"Perfectly, m'sieur."

"Have we any iodine... look for it, damn you, don't gape!"

Francois hurried out to inspect the contents of the bathroom locker, where were stored such first-aid remedies as were kept in the flat. Ronnie looked at his hand and pulled back the cuff of his coat; three ugly red scratches ran from the wrist to the base of the middle fingers. His lips pursed angrily. "Little beast," he said. "Well?"

"There is a bottle... would m'sieur like a bandage?"

"It is not necessary... have you a cat in the flat?... no, well, get one tomorrow. You need not keep it permanently. I don't think there will be any trouble. Bring me a hand-mirror from my dressing-table—hurry!"

He lifted the shade from the table lamp and, in the mirror, examined his face carefully. His right cheek was red, he imagined finger-marks, but the fine skin had not been torn. "I have had a quarrel with a lady, Francois. A common girl... I do not think she will make any further trouble, but if she does... she does not know me, anyway." Ronald's love-making had ended unpleasantly, and he had left the dark aisles of the park in a hurry, before the scream of a frightened girl had brought the police to the spot.

"I was expecting m'sieur to telephone me saying that I might go home," said

Francois. He lodged in Kensington, and sometimes it was convenient for Ronnie that he should go home early. Two women came in the morning to clean the flat and he usually arrived in time to carry in his master's breakfast from the restaurant attached to the building.

"No, I didn't telephone. Take this glass back and bring me the evening newspapers. That is all. You can clear out."

When the front door closed upon his valet, Ronnie got up and, walking to the window, pulled aside the curtains. The casement was open and he sat down on the padded window-seat, looking out into the darkness. He was not thinking of his night's adventure, being something of a philosopher. The sordidness and the vulgarity of it would not distress him in any circumstances. He was thinking of Beryl and what John Maxton had said. He knew that she liked him, but he had made no special effort to foster her affection or to evolve from their relationship one more intimate. By his code, she was taboo; love-making with Beryl could only lead to marriage, and matrimony was outside of his precarious plans. It pleased him to ponder upon Beryl... perhaps she was in love with him. He had not considered the possibility before. That women only differed by the hats they wore was a working rule of his; but it was strange that the influence he exercised was common to girls so widely separated by birth, education and taste as Beryl was from Evie Colebrook... and others.

Self-disparagement was the last weakness to be expected in Ronald Morelle, and yet it was true to say that he had restricted his hunting for so long to one variety of game, that he doubted his ability to follow another. His father had been an enthusiastic hawker, one of the remaining few who followed the sport of kings, and Ronnie invariably thought of his adventuring in terms of falconry. He was a hawk, enseamed, a hawk that swung on its rigid sails, waiting on until the quarry was sprung... sometimes the quarry was not without talons to rend and tear at the embarrassed falcon... he felt the wounds on his hand gingerly. But a trained hawk respects the domestic fowl, even the folk of the dovecot may coo at peace whilst he waits on in the sky.

Beryl?... She was certainly lovely. Her figure was delectable. And her mouth, red and full... a Rossetti woman should not have such lips. Was it Rossetti who painted those delicately-featured women? He got up and found a big portfolio filled with prints. Yes, it was Rossetti, but Beryl's figure was incomparably more delicious than any woman's that the painter had drawn. He came back to the window, staring out into the night, until, in the grey of dawn; the outlines of trees emerged from the void. Then he went to bed and to sleep.

He did not move for five hours, and then he woke with a horrible sense of desolation. He blinked round the room and at that instant the clock of a church

began to strike... the quarters sounded... a pause..."Toll... toll... toll... toll... toll... toll... toll... toll... toll." Nine o'clock! "No... no... Christ... no!"

Francois, an early arrival, heard his voice and rushed in. "M'sieur!" he gasped. Ronald Morelle was sitting on his bed, sobbing into his hands. "A nightmare, Francois... a nightmare... get out, blast you!" But he had had no nightmare, could recall nothing of dreams, though he strove all day, his head throbbing. Only he knew that to hear nine o'clock striking had seemed very dreadful.

CHAPTER IX

"I SAW your friend Ronald Morelle today," said Moropulos, sending a writhing ring of smoke to the ceiling. Sprawling on a big morris chair, his slippered feet resting on the edge of a fender, he watched the circle break against the ceiling. A pair of stained grey flannel trousers, a silk shirt and a velvet coat that had once been a vivid green; these and an immense green silk cravat, the colour of which showed through his beard, constituted his usual morning neglige. Ambrose Sault, busy with the body of an unfinished safe, which in the rough had come from the maker's hands that morning, released the pressure of his acetylene lamp and removed his goggles before he replied. He was working in shirt and trousers, and his sleeves were rolled up, displaying the rope-like muscles of his arm. He looked across to his indolent companion and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Mr. Ronald Morelle is neither a friend nor an acquaintance, Moropulos. I don't think I have ever seen him. I have heard of him."

"You haven't missed much by not knowing him," said Moropulos, 'but he's a good-looking fellow." He flicked the ash of his cigarette on to the tiled hearth. "Steppe is still annoyed with me." Sault smiled to himself. "You think he is justified? Perhaps. I was terribly drunk, but I was happy. Some day, my dear brother, I shall get so drunk that even you will not hold me. I move toward my apotheosis of intoxication certainly and surely. Then I will be irresistible and I shall have no fear of those brute arms of yours." He sucked at the cigarette without speaking for a long time.

Sault went back to his work. "I have often wondered!" said Moropulos at last.

"What?"

"Whether it would have been better if I had followed the advice of my head

man that morning I pulled you aboard the sloop. You remember Bob the Kanaka boy? He wanted to knock you on the head and drop you overboard; you were too dangerous, he said. If a Government boat had picked us up and you had been found on board as well as certain other illicit properties, I should have had a double charge against me. I said 'no' because I was sorry for you."

"Because you were afraid of me," said Sault calmly, "I knew you were afraid when I looked into your eyes. Why do you speak of the islands now... we haven't talked about the Pacific since I left the boat."

"I've been thinking about you," confessed Moropulos, with a quick, sly glance at the man. "Do you realize how—not 'curious'... what is the word?"

"Incurious!" suggested Sault, and Moropulos looked at him with reluctant admiration. "You are an extraordinary hombre, Sault. Merville says you have the vocabulaire... that is English or something like it... of an educated man. But to return... do you realize how incurious I am? For example, I have never once asked you, in all our years of knowing one another, why you killed that man."

"Which man?"

Moropulos laughed softly. "Butcher! Have you killed so many? I refer to the victim for whose destruction the French Government sent you to New Caledonia."

Sault stood leaning his back against the table, his eyes fixed on the floor. "He was a bad man," he said simply. "I tried to find another way of... stopping him, but he was clever and he had powerful friends, who were Government officials. So I killed him. He hired two men to wait for me one night. I was staying at a little hotel on the Plassy Road. They tried to beat me because I had reported this man. Then I knew that the only thing I could do was to kill him. I should do it again."

Moropulos surveyed him from under his lowered brows. "You were lucky to escape 'the widow', my friend," he said, but Ambrose shook his head.

"Nobody was executed in those days; capital punishment had not been abolished, but the Senate refused to vote the executioner his salary. It had the same effect. I was lucky to go to New Caledonia. Cayenne is worse."

"How long did you serve?"

"Eight years and seven months," was the reply.

Moropulos made a little grimace. "I would sooner die," he said, and lit another

cigarette. Deep in thought he smoked until Ambrose made a move to pick up his Crooke's glasses. "Don't work. I hate to see you—and hate worse to hear you. What do you think of Morelle?"

"I don't know him; I have heard about him. He is not a good man."

"What is a good man?" Moropulos demanded contemptuously. "He is a lover of ladies, who isn't? He is a cur too... Steppe walks on him. He is scared of Steppe, but then everybody is, except you and I." Ambrose smiled. "Well, perhaps I am... he is such a gorilla. But you are not."

"Why should I be? I am stronger than he."

Moropulos looked at the man's bare arms. "Yes... I suppose it comes down to that. The basis of all fear is physical. When will the safe be finished?"

"In a week. I am assembling the lock at home. I shall make it work to five letters. The only word I can spell. I shouldn't have known that but I heard a man spell it once... on the ship that brought me home. He was a steerage passenger and he used to take his little child on the deck when it was fine, and the little one used to read scripture stories to him. When she came to a hard word he spelt it. I heard one word and never forgot it."

"I'll be glad when the thing is finished," the Greek meditated. "We have a whole lot of papers that we never want to see the light of day, Steppe and I. We could destroy them but they may be useful—correspondence that it isn't safe to keep and it isn't wise to burn. You are an ingenious devil!"

In the Paddington directory, against "Moropulos, 49 Junction Terrace', were the words, 'mining engineer'. It was a courtesy status, for he had neither mined nor engineered. Probably the people of Junction Terrace were too occupied with their own strenuous affairs to read the directory. They knew him as one who at regular periods was brought home in the middle of the night singing noisily in a strange language. Cicero's oration was Greek to Cassius; the melodious gibberish of Mr. Moropulos was Greek to Junction Terrace, though they were not aware of the fact.

No. 49 was a gaunt, damp house with a mottled face, for the stucco had peeled in patches and had never been renewed. Moropulos bought it at a bargain price and made no contingency allowance for dilapidations. The windows of the upper floors were dingy and unwashed. The owner argued that as he did not occupy the rooms above it would be wicked waste of money to clean the windows. Similarly he dispensed with carpets in the hall and on the stairs. His weekends he spent in more pleasing surroundings, for he had a cottage on the borders of Hantshire where he kept hens and grew cabbage-roses and on

Sundays loafed in his garden, generally in his pyjamas, to the scandal of the neighbourhood. He had a whimsical turn of mind and named his cottage 'The Pantheon', and supported this conceit by decorating his arcadian groves with plaster reproductions of the great figures of mythology, such figures as Phidias and Polycletus and Praxiteles chiselled. He added to this a wooden pronaos which the local builder misguidedly surmised was intended for the entrance to a new cinema. When they discovered that the erection had no other purpose than to remind Moropulos of departed Hellenic splendours, the grief of the villagers was pathetic. Here he was kept, reluctantly, tidy. He owned a small American car which supplied him with the transportation he required, and made his country home accessible. It was Friday, the day he usually left town, but he had lingered on, hoping to see some tangible progress in the construction of the safe. "You never seem to get any further," he complained. "You have been fiddling with that noisy lamp for two hours and, so far as I can see, you've done nothing. How long will it be before anything happens?" and then before Sault could reply he went on: "Why don't you come to my little Athens, Sault? You prefer to stay in town. And you are a man of brains! Have you got a girl here, eh?"

"No."

"Gee! What a time that fellow Ronnie must have! But they will catch him some day... a mad father or a lunatic fiance, and ping! There will be Ronnie Morelle's brains on the floor, and the advocates pleading the unwritten law!"

"You seem to know a lot about him."

Moropulos ran his fingers through his beard and grinned at the ceiling. "Yes... I can't know too much. We shall have trouble with him. Steppe laughs at the idea. He has him bound to his heel... is that the expression, no? Well, he has him like that! But how can you bind a liar or chain an eel? His very cowardice is a danger."

"What have you to be afraid of?" asked Sault. "So far as I can make out, you are carrying on an honest business. It must be, or the doctor wouldn't be in it." His tone was sharp and challenging. Moropulos had sufficient nous not to accept that kind of challenge. "I can understand that you have papers that you wish to keep, in such a way that nobody but yourselves can get at them. All businesses have their secrets."

"Quite so," agreed the Greek, and yawned. "Ronnie will pay," he said, "but I am anxious that I should not be asked to contribute to the bill. I have had a great deal of amusement from watching him. The other night I was in the park. I go there because he goes. I know the paths he uses. And there came with him

a most pretty young lady. She did not know him."

"You guessed that?"

"I know, because later, when she complained, she did not know his name. Ronnie!" he mused. "Now I tell you what 1 will undertake to do. I will make a list, accurate and precise, of all his love affairs. It will be well to know these, because there may come a day when it will be good to flourish a weapon in this young man's face. Such men marry rich women." Sault was working and only muttered his reply. He was not then interested in Ronnie Morelle.

CHAPTER X

HE stayed on in the house long after Moropulos had dragged himself to his room and had dressed for the journey. So absorbed was he in his task that the Greek left without his noticing. At seven o'clock he finished, put away his tools in a cupboard, threw a cloth over the safe, and went out, locking the door behind him. Both Steppe and Moropulos had urged him to live in the house, but though he had few predilections that were not amenable to the necessities of his friends, Sault was firm on this point. He preferred the liberty which his lodgings gave him. Possibly he foresaw the difficulties which might arise if he lived entirely with the Greek.

Moropulos had a vicious and an uncertain tongue; was tetchy on some points, grotesquely so on the question of Greek decadence, although he had lived so long away from his native country that English was almost his mother tongue. Sault could be tactful, but he had a passion for truth, and the two qualities are often incompatible. A bus carried him to the end of the street where he lodged, and he stopped at a store on the corner and bought a box of biscuits for Christina. She was secretary and reader to him, and he repaid her services with a library subscription and such delicacies as she asked him to get for her. The subscription was a godsend to the girl, and augmented, as it was, by an occasional volume which Evie was allowed to bring from the store library by virtue of her employment, her days were brightened and her dreams took a wider range than ever.

The driving force of learning is imagination. By imagination was Christina educated. Evie sometimes said that she did not understand one half of the words that Christina used. To Mrs. Colebrook her daughter was an insoluble enigma. She associated education with brain-fever and ideas above your

station, and whilst she was secretly proud of the invalid's learning, she regarded Christina's spinal trouble as being partly responsible for the abnormality. Mrs. Colebrook believed in dreams and premonitions, and the sinister significance of broken picture-wires. It was part of her creed that people who are not long for this world possess supernatural accomplishments. Therefore she eyed Christina's books askance, and looked upon the extra library subscription as being a wild flight in the face of providence. She expressed that view privately to Ambrose Sault.

"You have come at a propitious moment, Sault Effendi," said Christina solemnly as he came in. "I have just been taking my last look at the silvery Bosphorous. My husband, taking offence at a kiss I threw to the handsome young Sultan as he rose beneath my latticed window, has decreed that tonight I am to be tied in a sack and thrown into the dark waters!"

"Good gracious!" said Ambrose. "You have been in trouble today, Christina."

"Not very much. The journey was a lovely one. We went by way of Bergen—and thank you ever so much for that old Bradshaw you got for me. It was just the thing I wanted."

"Mr. Moropulos kindly gave it to me... yes... Bergen?"

"And then to Petrograd... the Tsars there, poor people... and then to Odessa, and down the Black Sea in... oh, I don't know. It was a silly journey today, Ambrose... I wasn't in the heart for a holiday."

"Is your back any worse?"

She shook her head. "No... it seems better. I nearly let myself dream about getting well. Do you think that other idea is possible? We can borrow a spinal carriage from the Institute, but mother hasn't much time, and besides, I couldn't get down those narrow stairs without a lot of help. Yes... yes, yes, I know it is possible now. But the chariot, dear Ambrose?"

"I've got it!" He chuckled at her astonishment. "It will come tomorrow. It is rather like a motor-car, for I have to find a garage for it. In this tiny house there is no room. But I got it... no, it didn't cost me a great deal. Dr. Merville told me where I could get one cheap. I put new tyres on and the springs are grand. Christina, you will be... don't cry, Christina, please... you make me feel terrible!"

His agitation had the effect of calming her. "There must be something in this room that makes people weep," she gulped. "Ambrose... Evie is just worrying me to death."

"What is wrong?"

She shook her red head helplessly. "I don't know. She is changed... she is old. She's such a kid, too... such a kid! If that man hurts her"—the knuckles of her clenched hand showed bone-white through the skin—"I'll ask you to do what you did for mother, Ambrose, give me strength for an hour..." her voice sank to a husky whisper, "and I'll kill him... kill him..."

Sault sat locking and unlocking his fingers, his eyes vacant. "She will not be hurt. I wish I was sure it was Ronald Morelle... Steppe has only to lift his finger..."

They heard the sound of Mrs. Colebrook's heavy feet on the stairs and Christina wondered why she was coming up. She had never interrupted their little talks before. "Somebody to see you, Christina, and I'm sure it is too kind of you, miss, and please thank the doctor. I'll never be grateful enough for what he did..."

Ambrose Sault got up slowly to his feet as Beryl came into the room. "I wonder if you really mind my coming—I am Beryl Merville."

"It is very good of you, Miss Merville," said Christina primly. She was ready to dislike her visitor; she hated the unknown people who called upon her, especially the people who brought jelly and fruit and last year's magazines. Their touching faith in the virtues of calves-foot and fruit as a panacea for human ills, their automatic cheerfulness and mechanical good humour, drove her wild. The church and its women had given up Christina ever since she had asked, in answer to the inevitable question: "Yes, there are some things I want; I'd like a box of perfumed cigarettes, some marron glace, and a good English translation of Liaisons Dangereux." She loathed marron glace, and scented tobacco was an abomination. Her chief regret was that the shocked inquirer had never heard of Liaisons Dangereux. Christina only knew of its existence from a reference in a literary weekly which came her way.

Beryl sensed the hidden antagonism and the cause. "I really haven't come in a district visitor spirit," she said, "and I'm not frightfully sorry for you and I haven't brought you oranges—"

"Grapes," corrected Christina. "They give you appendicitis—mother read that on the back page of Health Hints. Sit down, Miss Merville. This is Mr. Sault."

She nodded to Ambrose. "Mr. Sault and I are old acquaintances," she said. She did not look at him. "I have to explain why I came at all. I know that you are not particularly enthusiastic about stray visitors—nobody is. But my father was talking about you at lunch today. He has never seen you, but Mr. Sault has

spoken about you and, of course, he does know your mother. And father said: 'Why don't you go along and see her, Beryl?' I said, 'She would probably be very annoyed—but I'll take her that new long wordy novel that is so popular. I'm sure she'll hate it as much as I'."

"If it is Let the World Go, I'm certain I shall," said Christina promptly, "but I'd love to read it. Let us sneer together." Beryl laughed and produced the book. It seemed an appropriate moment for Ambrose to retire, and he went out of the room quietly; he thought that neither of the girls saw him go, but he was mistaken. Christina Colebrook was sensitive to his every movement, and Beryl had really come to the house to see him.

On her way home she tried to arraign herself before the bar of intelligence, but it was not until she was alone in her room that night that she set forth the stark facts of her folly. She loved Ronald Morelle, loved him with an intensity which frightened her; loved him, although be was, according to all standards by which men arc judged, despicable. He was a coward, a liar, a slave to his baser appetites. She had no doubt in her mind, when she faced the truth, that the stories which had been told of him were true. The East girl... the pretty parlourmaid who had begun an action against him... And yet there was something infinitely pathetic about Ronnie Morelle, something that made her heart go out to him. Or was that a case of self-deception, too? Was it not the beautiful animal she loved, the sleek, lithe tiger... alive, and vital, and remorseless?

To all that was brain and spirit in her, he was loathsome. There were periods when she hated him and was bitterly contemptuous of herself. And in these periods came the soft voice of Ambrose Sault, whispering, insinuating... That was lunacy, too. He was old enough to be her father; was an illiterate workman, an ex-convict, a murderer; when her father had told her he had killed a man, she was neither shocked nor surprised. She had guessed, from his brief reference to New Caledonia, that he had lived on that island under duress. He must have been convicted of some great crime; she could not imagine him in any mean or petty role. A coarse-handed workman, shabby of attire... it was madness to dream and dream of him as she did. And dreams, so Freud had said, were the expressions of wishes unfulfilled.

What did she wish? She was prepared to answer the question frankly if any answer could be framed. But she had no ultimate wish. Her dreams of Ambrose Sault were unfinishable. Their ends ran into unfathomable darkness. "I wonder if he is very fond of that red-haired girl?" she asked her mirror. Contemplating such a possibility she experienced a pang of jealousy and hated herself for it.

Jan Steppe came back from Paris on the eve of her birthday. He called at the house the next morning, before she was down, and interviewed Dr. Merville; when Beryl went in to breakfast, two little packages lay on her plate. The first was a diamond shawl pin. "You are a dear, daddy!" She went round the table and kissed him. "It is beautiful and I wanted one badly." She hurried back to her place. Perhaps Ronnie had remembered... She picked up the card that was enclosed and read it. "Mr. Steppe?"

Her father shot a quick glance at her. "Yes... bought it in Paris. He came in person to present it, but left when he found that you were not down... rather pretty."

This was an inadequate description of the beautiful plaque that flashed and glittered from its velvet bed. "It is lovely," she said, but without warmth. "Ought I accept... it is a very expensive present!"

"Why not? Steppe is a good friend of ours; besides, he likes you," said the doctor, not looking up from his plate; "he would be terribly hurt if you didn't take it... in fact, you cannot very well refuse."

She ran through her letters. There was a note from Ronnie, an invitation to a first night. He said nothing about her birthday. "Oh, by the way, some flowers came. I told Dean to put them in your room. I have been puzzling my head to remember when I told him the date of your birthday. I suppose I must have done so, and, of course, he has the most colossal memory."

"Who, father?"

"Sault. He must have got up very early and gone to the market to get them. Very decent of him."

She went out of the room with an excuse and found her maid in the pantry. She had filled a big bowl with the roses. There were so many that only room for half of them had been found. "The others I will put in the doctor's room, miss," said the maid.

"Put them all in my room, everyone of them," demanded Beryl. She selected three and fastened them in her belt before she went back to the breakfast-room. The doctor laughed. "I've never seen you wearing flowers before—Sault would be awfully pleased." This she knew. That was why she wore them.

CHAPTER XI

EVIE COLEBROOK came home at an unusually early hour, and the girl on the bed looked up in surprise. "I heard mother talking to somebody, but I had no idea it was you, Evie. What is the matter—has your swain another engagement?"

"My swain, as you call him, is working tonight," said Evie, "and it is so hot that I thought I would come home and get into my pyjamas."

"Mother has been talking about your eccentric tastes, with particular reference to pyjamas," said Christina. "She thinks that pyjamas are indelicate. In her young days girls weren't supposed to have legs."

"Father wore pyjamas."

"Father also drank. Mother thinks that the pyjamas had something to do with it. She also thinks that book-reading was a contributory cause."

"What terrible jaw-breaking words you use, Christina! Father did read a lot, didn't he?"

"Father was a student. He studied, amongst other things, racehorses. Do you know who father was?" Evie stared at her expectantly. "He was a carpenter, wasn't he?"

"He was the youngest son of the youngest son of a lord. Take that look off your face, Evie; there is no possibility of our being the rightful heiresses of the old Hall. But it is true; he had a coat of arms."

"Then why did he marry mother?"

"Why do people marry anybody?" demanded Christina. "Why did grandfather marry grandmother? Besides, why shouldn't he have married mother? He was only a cabinet-maker when he met her. She has told me so. And his father was a parson, and his mother the Honourable Mrs. Colebrook, the daughter of Lord Faushelm. There is blue blood in your veins, Evie."

"But really, Christina"—Evie's voice was eager and her eyes bright—"you are not fooling; is it true? It makes such an awful difference—"

Christina groaned. "My God, what have I said?" she asked dramatically.

"But really, Christina?"

"You are related so distantly to nobility that you can hardly see it without a telescope," said Christina. "I thought you knew, Mother used always to be

talking about it at one time. My dear, what difference does it make?" Evie was silent. "A man doesn't love a girl any more because she has a fifth cousin in the House of Lords; be doesn't love her any less because her mother takes in laundry, and if her lowly origin stands in the way of his marriage, and he finds that really she is the great granddaughter of a princess, he cannot obliterate her intermediate relations."

"What is 'intermediate'?"

"Well, mother and father, and the parson who got into trouble through drinking, and his wife who ran away with a groom."

Evie drew a long sigh. "Where is your swain?" she asked. "I don't like that word 'swain', it sounds so much like 'swine'."

"I hope you will never see the resemblance any clearer,'" said Christina. "My swain is working too. I shouldn't take off that petticoat if I were you, Evie; he may come in and you can see your knickers through that dressing- gown."

"Christina!"

"I hate mentioning knickers to a pure-minded girl," said Christina, fanning herself with a paper, "but sisters have no secrets from one another. Ambrose—if that is who you mean—is very busy these days."

"Do you call him Ambrose to his face?" asked Evie curiously, and her sister snorted.

"Would you call Julius Cesar 'Bill' or 'Juley' to his face; of course not. But I can't think of him as Ambrose Sault Esquire, can I?"

"I don't understand him," said Evie. "He seems so dull and quiet."

"I'll get him to jazz with you the next time you're home early," said Christina sardonically.

"Don't be silly. Naturally he isn't very lively being so old."

"Old! He is lively enough to carry me downstairs as though I were a pillow and wheel me for hours at a time in that glorious chariot he got for me! And he is old enough—but what is the good of talking to you, Evie?" Presently her irritation passed and she laughed. "Tell me the news of the great world, Evie; what startling happenings have there been in Knightsbridge?"

"I can tell you something about Mr. Sault you don't know," Evie was piqued into saying; "he has been in prison."

Christina turned on her side with a wince of pain. "Say that again."

"He has been in prison." A long pause.

"I hoped he had," Christina said at last. "I believe in imprisonment as an essential part of a man's education—who told you?"

"I'm not going to say."

"Ronald Morelle... aha!" She pointed an accusing finger at the dumbfounded Evie. "I know your guilty secret! The 'Ronnie' you babble about in your sleep is Ronnie Morelle!"

"Wh—what makes you... it isn't true... it is a damned lie!..."

"Don't be profane, Evie. That is the worst of druggists' shops, you pick up such awful language. Mother says that you can't work amongst pills without getting ideas in your head."

"I never talk in my sleep... and I don't know Ronnie Morelle... who is he?" Evie's ignorance was badly assumed. Christina became very thoughtful. She lay with her hand under her cheek, her grey eyes searching her sister's face. "Would Ronnie be impressed by your distant relationship with nobility?" she asked quietly. "Would it make such an awful difference if he knew about the coat of arms in father's Bible? I don't think it would. If it did, he isn't worth worrying about. What is he?"

"Didn't Mr. Sault tell you?" asked Evie hotly. "He seems to spend his time gossiping about people who are a million times better than him—"

"Than he," murmured Christina, her eyes closed.

"He is a nasty scandal-mongering old man! I hate him!"

"He didn't say that Ronnie had been in prison." Christina's voice was gentle. "All that he said was that the only 'Ronnie' he knew was Ronald Morelle. He did not even describe him or give him a character."

"How absurd, Christina! As if old Sault could give Mr. Morelle a character'! One is a gentleman and the other is an old fossil!"

"Old age is honourable," said Christina tolerantly—"the arrogance of you babies!"

"You're half in love with him!"

"Wholly," nodded Christina. "I love his mind and soul. I am incapable of any

other kind of love. I never want a man to draw my flaming head to his shoulder and whisper that, until he met me, the world was a desert and food didn't taste good. It is because Ambrose Sault never paws me or holds my hand or kisses me on the brow in the manner of a father who hopes to be something closer, that I love him. And I shall love him through Eternity. When I am dead and he is dead. And I want nothing more than this. If he were to die tomorrow, I should not grieve, because his flesh means nothing to me. The thing he gives me is everlasting. That is where I am better off than you, Evie. You have nothing but what you give yourself. You think he gives you these wonderful memories which keep you awake at nights. You think it is his love for you that thrills you. It isn't that, Evie. Your love is the love of the martyr who finds an ecstatic joy in his suffering." Groping towards understanding, Evie seized this illustration. "God loves the martyr... it isn't one-sided," she quavered, and Christina nodded.

"That is true, or it may be true. Does your god love you?"

"It is blasphemous to... to talk of Ronnie as God."

"God with a small 'g'."

"It is blasphemous, anyhow. Ronnie does love me. He hasn't silly and conventional ideas about... about love as most people have. He is much broader- minded, but he does love me. I know it. A girl knows when a man loves her."

"That is one of the things she doesn't know," interrupted Christina. "She knows when he wants her, but she doesn't know how continuously he will want her. How unconventional, too? And broad-minded? the broad-minded are usually people who take a generous view of their own short-comings. Is he one of those unconventional souls who think that marriage is a barbarous ceremony?"

"Who told you that?" Evie was breathless from surprise.

"It isn't an unique view... broad-minded men often try to get narrow- minded girls to see that standpoint."

"You're cynical... I hate cynical people," said Evie, throwing herself on her bed, "and you have all your ideas of life out of books, and the rotten people who come in her, moaning about their troubles. You can't believe writers, not some writers... there are some, of course, that give just a true picture of life... not in books, but in articles in the newspapers. They just seem to know what people are thinking and feeling, and express themselves wonderfully."

"Ah—so Ronnie writes for the newspapers, does he?" Evie's indignant retort was checked by a knock on the door. "That is Mr. Sault... can he come in?"

"I suppose so," answered Evie grudgingly. She got off the bed and tied her dressing-gown more tightly. "I don't really show my legs through this kimono, do I, Christina?"

"Not unless you want to... come in!"

Ambrose Sault looked tired. "Just looked in before I went to my room," he said. "Good evening, Evie."

"Good evening, Mr. Sault." Evie's dressing-gown was wrapped so tightly as to give her a mummified appearance.

"I saw the osteopath today and I've arranged for him to come and talk to you tomorrow," said Ambrose, sitting on the edge of the bed at the inviting gesture of Christina's hand.

"I will parley with him," she nodded. "I don't believe that he will make a scrap of difference. I've seen all sorts of doctors and specialists. Mother has a list of them—she is very proud of it."

"I'm only hoping that this man may do you some good," said Ambrose, rubbing his chin meditatively. "I have seen some wonderful cures... in America. Even Dr. Merville believes in them. He says that if you build a skyscraper and the steel frame isn't true, you cannot expect the doors to shut or the windows to open. I'm sorry I am so late, but the osteopath was dining out, and I had to wait until he came back. He hurt his ankle too, and that took time. I had to give him a rubbing. He is the best man in London. Dr. Duncan More."

She did not take her eyes from his face. Evie noticed this and discounted Christina's earlier assertion. "Will it cost a lot of money?" asked Christina.

"Not much, in fact very little. The first examination is free. He doesn't really examine you, you know. He will just feel your back, through your clothes. I asked him that, because I know how you dislike examinations. And if he doesn't think that you can be treated, and that there is no chance of making you better, he won't bother you any more."

"I don't believe in these quack doctors," said Evie decidedly. "They promise you all sorts of cures and they only take your money. We have a lot of those kind of remedies at the store, but Mr. Donker, the manager, says that they are all fakes... don't tell me that an osteopath isn't a medicine. I know that. He's a sort of doctor, but I'll bet you he doesn't do any good."

"Cheer up, Job!" said Christina. "Faith is something. I suppose you mean well, but if I took any notice of you I'd give up the struggle now."

"I don't want to depress you, you're very unkind, Christina! But I don't think you ought to be too hopeful. It would be such an awful—what's the word?—come-down for you."

"Reaction," said Sault and Christina together, and they laughed.

Sault went soon after, and Evie felt that a dignified protest was called for. "There is no reason why you should make me look a fool before Sault," she said, hurt. "Nobody would be happier than I should be if you got well. You know that. I'm not so sure that Mr. Sault is sincere—"

"What?" Christina leant up on her arm and her eyes were blazing, "You can say that he is old and ugly if you like, and shabby, and... anything. But don't dare to say that, Evie... don't dare to say he isn't sincere!"

Evie lay awake for a long time that night. Christina was certainly a strange girl... and when she said she did not love Sault, she was not speaking the truth. That was just how she had felt, when Christina had hinted that Ronnie was not sincere. Only she had been too much of a lady to lose her temper. About old Sault, too! What did he do for a living? She must ask Christina.

CHAPTER XII

MR. JAN STEPPE sat astride of a chair, his elbows on the back rest, his saturnine face clouded with doubt. "It certainly looks like a very ordinary safe to me, Sault. Do you mean to say that an expert could not get inside without disturbing the apparatus, huh?"

"Impossible," replied Sault. "I have filled the top chamber with water and I have tried at least a thousand combinations, and every time I put the combination wrong the safe has been flooded." He twisted the dials on the face of the unpretentious repository until he brought five letters, one under the other, in line with an arrow engraved on the safe door. He was a long time doing this and Steppe and the Greek watched him. "Now!" said Sault. He turned the handle and the door swung open. The contents were two or three old newspapers, and they were intact. "What is the codeword?" Steppe peered forward. "Huh—why did you choose that word, Sault?"

"It is one of the very few words I can spell. Besides which, each letter is different."

"It is not an inappropriate word," said Moropulos, amused, "and one easy to remember. I intend pasting a notice on the safe. Steppe, explaining frankly that unless the codeword is used, and if any other combination of letters is tried, indeed, if the handle is turned, whilst the dial is set at any other word than the codeword, the contents of the safe are destroyed. This may act as a deterrent to promiscuous burglars."

Steppe fingered his stubbly beard. "That will be telling people that we have something in the safe that we want to keep hidden, huh?" he said dubiously; 'a fool idea!"

"Everybody has something in his safe that he wants to keep hidden." said the other coolly. "Now let me try... shut the door, Sault, that is right." Steppe got out of the chair to spin the dials. "Now we will suppose that I am some unauthorised person trying to find a way of opening the safe. So !" He turned the handle. "Open it." Sault worked at the dials and presently the door swung open. The newspapers were saturated and an inch of water at the bottom of the safe splashed out and into a bathtub that Sault had put ready. "How about cutting into the safe? Suppose I am a burglar, huh? I burn out the lock or the side, and don't touch the combination?"

"I have left a hole in one side of the safe," said Sault, and pointed to a rubber plug that had been rammed into a small aperture. With a pair of pincers he pulled this out and a stream of water spurted forth and was mostly caught in the can he held. "That has the same effect," he explained, 'the water is pumped at a pressure into the hollow walls of the safe. The door is also hollow. When the water runs out, a float drops and releases the contents of the upper chamber. In the case of the door, the float operates the same spring that floods the safe when the handle is turned."

Steppe scratched his head. "Perfect," he said. "You have experimented with the acid."

Sault nodded. "Both with sulphuric and hydrochloric," he said; "I think hydrochloric is the better."

Steppe turned to the Greek. "You had better keep it here," he said, and then: "Will it be ready today? I want to get those Brakpan letters out of the way. I needn't tell you, Sault. that the code-word must be known only to us three, huh? I don't mind your knowing... but you, Moropulos! You have got to cut out absinthe... d'ye hear? Cut it out—right out!"

His growl became a roar that shook the room, and Moropulos quailed. "It is cut out," he said sulkily. "I am confining my boozing to the 'Pantheon'... I've got to have some amusement."

"You have it, if all I hear is true," said Steppe grimly. "Give Sault a hundred, Moropulos. It is worth it. What do you do with your money, Sault? You don't spend it on fine clothes, huh?"

"He goes about doing good," said Moropulos, with a good-natured sneer. "I met him in Kensington Gardens the other day, wheeling an interesting invalid. Who was she, Sault?"

"My landlady's daughter," replied the other shortly.

"No business of yours, anyhow," growled Steppe. "You've met Miss Merville, huh? Nice lady?"

"Yes, a very nice lady," said Sault steadily. He pushed back his long grey hair from his forehead.

"Pretty, huh?"

Sault nodded, and was glad when his employer had departed.

"Steppe is gone on that girl," said Moropulos, 'he'd have brained you if you had said she wasn't pretty."

"He wouldn't have brained me," said Sault quietly.

"I suppose he wouldn't. Even Steppe would have thought twice about lifting his hand to you. He's a brute though, I saw him smash a man in the face once for calling him a liar... at a director's meeting. It was an hour before the poor devil knew what had happened. Yes, she is pretty. I see her riding some mornings, a young Diana... delicious. I'd give a lot to be in Steppe's shoes."

"Why?"

Moropulos rolled a cigarette with extraordinary rapidity and lit it. "Why? Well, if he wants her, he'll have her. Steppe is that kind. I don't suppose the doctor would have much to say in the matter. Or she either."

Sault picked up an iron bar from the tables. It was one of four that he had brought for the purpose of strengthening the safe, and it was nearly an inch in diameter. "I think she would have something to say," he said, weighing the bar on the palms of his hands. And then, to the Greek's amazement, he bent the steel into a V. He used no apparent effort, the bar just changed its shape in his hands as though it had been made of lead.

"Why did you do that?" he gasped.

"I don't know," said Ambrose Sault, and, with a jerk, brought the steel almost straight.

"Phew!" Moropulos took the bar from his hand. "I shouldn't like to annoy you seriously," he said. He did not speak of Beryl again.

CHAPTER XIII

EVIE COLEBROOK had found a note awaiting her at the store on the morning of the day she came home early. It consisted of a few words scrawled on a plain card and had neither address nor signature:

'Dearest Girl,—I shall not be able to see you tonight. I have a long article to write and shall probably be working through the night, when your dear and precious eyes are closed in sleep. Your Lover.'

She had the card under her pillow when she slept.

"Are you sure you aren't too busy?" said Beryl when she came down, a radiant figure, to the waiting Ronnie. "Now that you have taken up a literary career, I picture you as being rushed every hour of the day."

"Sarcasm is wasted on me," Ronnie displayed his beautiful teeth. "Unflattering though it be, I admit to a slump in my literary stock. I have had no commissions for a week."

"And I'm not taking you away from any of those beautiful friends of yours?"

"Beryl!" he muttered reproachfully. "You know that I have no friends... if by friends you mean girl friends."

"It is my mad jealousy which makes me ask these questions," she said quizzically. "Come along, Ronnie, we will be late."

What the play was about Beryl never quite remembered. Ronnie, sitting in the shade of the curtains, was more interested in his companion. It was strange that he had known her ever since she was a child and he was a schoolboy, and yet had never received a true impression of her beauty. He watched her through the first act, the tilt of her chin, the quick smile. "Beryl, you ought to be painted," he said in the first interval. "I mean by a portrait painter. You look

so perfectly splendid that I couldn't take my eyes off you." The colour came slowly, and in the dim light of the box a man who had not been looking for this evidence of her pleasure would have seen nothing.

"That is a little less subtle than the usual brand of flattery you practise, isn't it, Ronnie? Or is your artlessness really an art that conceals art?"

"I'm not flattering you... I simply speak as I feel. I never realized your loveliness until tonight." She straightened up and laughed. "You think I'm crude... I suppose I am. You do not say that I am keeping my hand in, though you probably think so. I admit I have had all sorts of flirtations, in fact I have been rather a blackguard in that way, and of course I've said nice things to girls... buttered them, and played to their vanity. But if I were trying to make love to you, I should be a little more subtle, as you say. I should imply my compliments. It is just because my... my spasm is unpremeditated that I find myself at a loss for words. There is no sense in my making love to you, anyway, supposing that you would allow me. I can't marry... I simply won't marry until I have enough money, and I haven't nearly enough. If in four years' time the money doesn't come... well then, I'll risk being a pauper, but the girl will have to know."

She said nothing. Here was an unexpected side to his character. He had some plan of life and a code of sorts. If she had been better acquainted with that life of his, which she so far suspected, she would have grown alert when Ronnie unmasked his way of retreat. She was surprised at his virtuous reluctance to make a woman share his comparative poverty—she should have been suspicious when he fixed a time limit to his bachelorhood. It was not like Ronnie to plan so far in advance, that she knew. It might have occurred to her that he was definitely excusing the postponement of marriage. As it was, she was seeing him in a more favourable light. Ronnie desired that she should. His instinct in these matters was uncannily accurate. "It was worth coming out with you, if only to hear your views on matrimony," was all the comment she made. "I don't know..." he looked gloomily into the auditorium, "in many ways I have been regretting it. That doesn't sound gallant, but I am not in a mood for nice speeches... you think I am? I did not mean to be nice when I said that you were lovely, any more than I wish to be nice to Titian when I praise his pictures. Beryl, I've been fond of you for years. I suppose I've been in love with you, though I've never wanted to be. That is the truth. I've recognized just how unfair it would be to chain a woman like you to a rake—I'm not sparing myself—like me. God knows whether I could be constant. In my heart I know that if I had you there could be no other woman in the world for me... an intimate knowledge of my own character makes me sceptical."

Beryl was spared the necessity for replying. The curtain went up on the second

act just then. She knew he was looking at her, and turned in her chair to hide her face. Her heart was beating tumultuously. She was trembling. She was a fool... a fool. He meant nothing... he was a liar; lied as readily as other men spoke the truth. That frankness of his was assumed... he was acting. Versed in the weaknesses of women, he had chosen the only approach that would storm her citadel. She told herself these truths, her reason battling in a last desperate stand against his attack. And yet... why should he not be sincere? For the first time he had admitted the unpleasant charges which hitherto he had denied. He surely could not expect to make her love him more by the confession of his infidelities? If he had followed up his talk, had made any attempt to carry on the conversation from the point where he left it, she would have been invincible.

But he did not. When the curtain went down again, he was more cheerful and was seemingly interested in the people he recognized in the stalls. He asked her if she would mind if he left her. He wanted to smoke and to meet some men he knew. She assented and was disappointed. They had a long wait between these two acts, and as he had returned to the box after a shorter interval than she had expected, there was plenty of time, had he so wished, to have resumed his conversation. He showed no such desire, and it was she who began it. "You puzzle me, Ronnie. I can't see... if you loved me, how you could do some of the things you have done. You won't be so commonplace as to tell me that you wanted to keep me out of your mind and that that form of amusement helped you to forget me."

"No," he admitted, "but, Beryl dear, need we discuss it? I don't know why I spoke to you as I did, I felt like it."

"But I am going to discuss it," she insisted. "I want my mind set in order. It is overthrown for the moment. What prevented you from keeping me as a friend all this time... a real close friend, if you loved me? Oh, Ronnie, I do want to be fair to you even at the risk of being shameless, as I am now. Why could you not have asked me, even if it meant waiting?"

He looked down at the floor. "I have some sense of decency left," he said in a low voice. And then the curtain went up. Beryl looked at her programme. The play had four acts; there was another interval. He did not leave her this time; nor did he wait for her to begin.

"I'm going to be straight with you, Beryl," he said. "I want you—I adore you. But I cannot commit you to an engagement which may adversely affect your father and incidentally myself. I am being brutally selfish and mercenary, but I am going to say what I think. You'll be amused and perhaps horrified when I tell you that Steppe is very keen on you."

She was neither amused nor horrified; but, on the other hand, if Ronnie Morelle realized that in his invention he had accidentally hit upon the truth he would not have been amused, and most certainly terror would have struck him dumb. If Beryl had only said what she was of a mind to say, that she had learnt from her father that Steppe was in love with her, she might have silenced him. But she said nothing. Ronnie's explanation seemed natural... knowing Ronnie.

"I'd sooner see you dead than married to him," he said vehemently, "but none of us can say that now. We are in a very tight place. Steppe could ruin your father with a gesture... he could very seriously inconvenience me." Here he was very much in earnest, and the girl, with a cold feeling at her heart, knew he spoke the truth. "But that time will pass. We shall weather the storm which is shrieking round our ears... you don't read the financial papers... you're wise. You see what might happen, Beryl?"

Beryl nodded. She was ridiculously happy.

"A great play, don't you think so, Miss Merville?" It was Sir John Maxton who had pushed through the crowd in the vestibule.

"Splendid," she said.

"Ronnie, did you like it?"

"I never heard a word," said Ronnie, and somehow that statement was so consonant with his new honesty that it confirmed her in a faith which was as novel.

The car carried them through the crowded Circus and into the quietude of Piccadilly. "Oh, Ronnie... I am so happy!..." His arm slipped round her and his lips pressed fiercely against her red mouth.

"Why can't you sleep?" asked the drowsy Christina, as the girl lit her candle for the second time.

"I don't know... I'm having such beastly dreams," said Evie fretfully.

BOOK THE SECOND

CHAPTER XIV

THE step of Ambrose Sault was light and there was a buoyancy in his mien when he came into Mrs. Colebrook's kitchen, surprising that good lady with so unusual an appearance at an hour of the day when she was taking her afternoon Siesta. "Lord, how you startled me!" she said. "The ostymopat came this morning. A stout gentleman with whiskers. Very nice, too, and American. But bless you, Mr. Sault, he'll never do any good to Christina, though I wish he could, for I'm up and down these blessed stairs from the moment I get up to the moment I go to bed. He'll never cure her. She's had ten doctors and four specialists, and she's been three times to St. Mary's Hospital, to say nothing of the Evelyna when she was a child and fell out of the perambulator; that did it. Ten doctors and four specialists—they're doctors too in a manner of speaking, so you might say fourteen."

Sault never interrupted his landlady, although his forbearance meant, very often, a long period of patient waiting. "Can I see Christina, Mrs. Colebrook?" he begged.

"Certainly you can; you needn't ask me. She'll be glad to see you," said Mrs. Colebrook conventionally. "I thought of going up myself, but she has always got those books. Do you think so much reading is good for her?..."

"I'm sure it is."

"But... well, I don't know. I've never read anything but the Sunday papers, and they've got enough horrors in 'em—but they actually happened. It isn't guesswork like it is in books. I never read a book through in my life. My husband!... Why, when he passed away, there was enough books in the house to fill a room. He'd sooner read than work at any time. He was a bit aristocratic in his way."

Sault had come to understand that 'aristocratic' did not stand, as Mrs. Colebrook applied the word, for gentleness of birth, but for a loftiness of demeanour in relation to labour. He made his escape up the stairs.

Christina was not reading. She lay on her back, her hands lightly folded, and she was inspecting the end bed-rail with a fixity of gaze that indicated to Ambrose how far she was from Walter Street and the loud little boys who played beneath her window. "I have nothing for you today... I haven't been baking."

She patted the bed and he sat down. "The osteopath has been, I suppose mother told you? She has the queerest word for him, 'ostymopat'. Yes, he came and saw, or rather he prodded, in a gentle, harmless kind of way, but I fancy that my spine has conquered. He didn't say very much, but seemed to be more interested in the bones of my neck and shoulders than he was in the place

where it hurts. He wouldn't tell me anything. I suppose he didn't want to make me feel miserable. Poor kind soul... after all the uncomplimentary things that have been said about my spinal column!"

"He told me," said Ambrose, and something in his face made her open her eyes wide.

"What did he say... please tell me... was it good?"

He nodded and a beatific smile lightened his face. "You can be cured; completely cured. You will walk in a year or maybe less. He thinks it will take six months to manipulate the bones into their place, he talked about 'breaking down' something, but he didn't mean that he would hurt you. He just meant that he would have to remove... I don't know what it is, but it would be a gradual process and you would feel nothing. He wants your mother to put you into a sort of thin overall before he comes." He lugged a parcel from his pocket. "I bought one... a smock of thick silk. I thought you had better have silk. He works at you through it, and it makes his work easier for him and for you if... anyhow, I got silk, Christina."

Her eyes were shining, but she did not look at him.

"It doesn't seem possible," she said softly, "and it is going to cost a lot of money... cost you. The silk overall is lovely, but I wouldn't mind if I wore sackcloth. You great soul!" She caught his hand in both of hers, and gripped it with a strength that surprised him. "Evie is quite sure that I am in love with you, Ambrose... I lied to her when I said I never called you Ambrose. And, of course, we are in love with one another, but in a way that poor Evie doesn't understand. If I were normal, I suppose I'd love you in her way... poor Ambrose, you would be so embarrassed." She laughed quietly.

"Love is a great disturbance," said Ambrose. "I think Evie means that kind."

"Were you ever in love that way? I have never been. I think I love you as I should love my child if I had one. If you say that you love me—as a mother, I shall be offended, Ambrose. Do you think it will really happen... will it cost very much?"

"A pound a visit, and he is coming every day except Sunday."

Christina made a calculation, and the immensity of the sum left her horror-stricken. "A hundred and fifty pounds!" she cried. "Oh, Ambrose... how can you? I won't have the treatment. It is certain to fail... I won't, Ambrose!"

"I've paid a hundred on account. He didn't want to take it, but I said that I would only let him come on those terms. I wasn't speaking the truth... I'd have

let him come on any terms. So you see, Christina, I've paid and you must be treated!"

"Hold my hand, Ambrose... and don't speak a word. I'm going for a long walk... I haven't dared walk before..." She resumed her gaze upon the bed-rail and he sat in silence whilst she dreamt. Evie returned at ten o'clock that night and heard Christina singing as she mounted the stairs. "Enter, sister; has mother told you that I am practically a well woman?"

"Don't put too high hopes—"

"Shut up! I'm a well woman, I tell you. In a year I shall walk into your medicine shop and sneer at you as I pass. Have you brought home any candy? 'Sweets' is hopelessly vulgar, and I like the American word better. And you look bright and sonsy. Did you see the god?"

"I wish you wouldn't use religious words, Christina, just when we are going to bed, too. I wonder you're not afraid. Yes, I saw my boy."

"Have you a boy?"—in simulated surprise. "Evie, you are a surprising child. Whom does he take after?"

"Really, I think you are indecent," said her sister, shocked. "You know perfectly well I mean... Ronnie."

"Oh, is he the 'boy'? To you girls everything that raises a hat or smokes a cheap cigar is strangely boyish. Well, is he nearly dead from his midnight labours?"

"I'd like to see you write a long article for the newspapers," said Evie witheringly.

"I wish you could. You may even see that. Tell me about him, Evie. What is he like... what sort of a house has he?" She waited.

"He lives in a flat, and, of course, I've never seen it. You don't imagine that I would go into a man's flat alone, do you?"

Christina sighed. "There are points about the bourgeoisie mind which are admirable," she said. "What does 'bourgeoisie' mean? The bourgeoisie are the people who have names instead of numbers to their houses; they catch the nine- twenty-five to town and go home by the five-seventeen. They go to church at least once on Sunday, and their wives wear fascinators and patronise the dress- circle."

"You talk such rubbish, Christina. I can't make head or tail of it half the time. I

don't see what it has got to do with my going into Ronnie's flat. It wouldn't be respectable."

"Why didn't I think of that word?" wailed Christina. "Evie?"

"Huh?" said Evie, her mouth full of pins and in an unconscious imitation of one who, did she but know it, held her soul in the hollow of his hands.

"Where do you meet your lad—I simply can't say 'boy'."

"Oh, anywhere," said Evie vaguely. "We used to meet a lot in the park. As a matter of fact, that is where I first saw him, but now he doesn't go to the park. He says the crowd is vulgar, and it is you know, Christina; why I've heard men addressing meetings and saying that there wasn't a God! And talking about the King most familiarly It made my blood boil!"

"I don't suppose the King minds, and I'm sure God only laughed."

"Christina!"

"Well, why not? What's the use of being God if He hasn't a sense of humour? He has everything He wants, and that is one of the first blessings He would give Himself. Where do you meet Ronnie, Evie?"

"Sometimes I have dinner with him, and sometimes we just meet at the tube-station and go to the pictures." Christina pinched her chin in thought. "He knows that girl who came to see you—Miss Merville. I told him about her visit, and he asked me if she knew that I was a friend of his, and whether she had seen me. She rather runs after him I think. He doesn't say so, he is too much a gentleman. I can't imagine Ronnie saying anything unkind."

"But he sort of hinted?" suggested Christina.

"You are uncharitable, Christina! Nothing Ronnie does is right in your eyes. Of course he didn't hint. It is the way he looks, when I speak about her. I know that he doesn't like her very much. He admitted it, because, just after we had been talking about her, he said that I was the only girl he had ever met who did not bore him—unutterably. His very words!"

"That was certainly convincing evidence," said Christina, and her sister arrested the motion of her hairbrush to look suspiciously in her direction. You could never be sure whether Christina was being nice or unpleasant.

CHAPTER XV

RONALD MORELLE had once been the victim of a demoralising experience. He had awakened in time to hear the church clock strike nine, and for the space of a few seconds he had suffered the tortures of hell. Why, he never discovered. He had heard the clock strike nine since then, in truth he had been specially wakened by Francois the very next morning in the expectation that the tolling of the bell would recall to his mind the cause of his abject fear. But not again did the chimes affect him. He had made a very thorough examination of his mind in the Freudian method, but could trace no connection between his moments of terror and the sound of a bell. 'A nightmare, as an unpleasant dream is called, may be intensely vivid, yet from the second of waking, leaves no definite memory behind it', said a lesser authority. He had to rest content with that.

He had other matters to think about. Steppe, an unusual visitor, came to his flat one morning. Ronnie was in his dressing-gown, reading the morning newspapers, and he leapt up with a curious sense of guilt when the big man was announced. "You dabble in press work, Morelle, don't you?" Ronnie acknowledged his hobby. "Do you know anybody in Fleet Street... editors and suchlike?"

"I know a few... why, Mr. Steppe?"

Steppe lit a cigar, and, strolling across the room, looked out of the window. He carried the air of a patron to such an extent that Ronnie felt an interloper, an uncomfortable feeling to a man still in pyjamas. "Because we've got to beat up a few friendly press criticisms," said Steppe at last. "The financial papers are raising merry hell about that Klein River diamond flotation and we have to get our story in somehow or other. You don't want to be called a swindling company promoter, huh? Wouldn't look good, huh?"

"I don't see how I come into it," said Ronnie.

"You don't, huh? Of course you don't! Have you ever seen anything but a shop-girl's ankles? You... don't see! You're a director, so is Merville. You've drawn director's fees. I'm not a director... it doesn't matter a damn to me what they say."

The name of Jan Steppe seldom appeared amongst the officers or directors of a company. He had his nominees who voted according to the orders they received. "What makes it so almighty bad is that I was floating the Midwell Traction Corporation next week. We'll have to put that back now, but it will

keep. What are you going to do?"

"I don't exactly know what to do," said Ronnie. It was the first time he had ever been called upon to justify his director's fees. "I know a few men... but I doubt if I can do anything. Fleet Street is a little rigid in these things."

"Get an article in somehow," ordered Steppe peremptorily. "Take this line: That we bought the Klein River Mine on the report of the best engineer in South Africa. We did. There's no lie about that. Mackenzie—he's in a lunatic asylum now. And the report was in his own hand-writing, so there won't be a copy. And you needn't mention that he is in a lunatic asylum, most people think he is dead."

"Didn't he write to us complaining that we only put an extract from his report into the prospectus?"

"Never mind about that!" snarled Steppe. "I didn't come here for a conversation. He did write; said that we'd published a sentence away from the context. He didn't think I was going to put the worst into the prospectus, did he? What he said was that the Klein River Mine would be one of the richest in South Africa if we could get over difficulties of working, which he said were insuperable. He was right. They are. The only way to work that mine is with deep-sea divers! Now, have this right, Morelle, and try to forget Flossie's blue eyes and Winnie's golden hair. This is business. Your business. You've got to take that report (Moropulos will give it to you, but you mustn't take it from the office) and extract all that is good in it. At the General Meeting you have to produce your copy and read it. If anybody wants to see the original, refer 'em to Mackenzie. You've got to make Klein River look alive, and you haven't to defend it, d'ye hear me? You've got to handle that mine as though you wished it was yours, huh? No defence! The hundred pound shares are at twelve; you've got to make 'em look worth two hundred. And it is dead easy if you go the right way about it. Ask any pickpocket. The easiest way to steal a pocket-book is to go after the man that's just lost his watch. Make 'em think that the best thing they can do is to buy more Klein Rivers and hold them, huh? You've got to think it, or you won't say it. Get this meeting through without a fuss, and there's a thousand for you."

"I'll try," said Ronnie.

Yet it was in no very confident mood that he faced a hall full of enraged stockholders a week later. The meeting was described as 'noisy'; it ended in the passing of a vote of confidence in the directors. Ronnie was not elated; no other man but Steppe could have induced him to present a forged document to a meeting of critical stockholders, and when Klein Rivers rose the next day to

seventeen, he was not as enthusiastic as Dr. Merville, who 'phoned his congratulations on what was undoubtedly a remarkable achievement. He spoke of nothing else that day, and Beryl basked in the reflected approval.

Her father knew nothing. He wondered why Ronnie, whom he did not like over-much, called with greater frequency. He had too large an experience of life to harbour any misconception as to his second cousin's private character, although he would, in other circumstances, have passively accepted him as a son- in-law. Men take a very tolerant view of other men's weaknesses. The theory that the world holds a patch of arable land reserved for young men to put under wild oats, and that without exciting the honest farmers whose lands adjoin, is a theory that dies hard as the cultivated fields increase in number. He did not regard Ronnie as a marrying man, and with the exception of a few moments of uneasiness he had when he noted Beryl's preference for his associate's society, he found nothing objectionable in the new interest which Ronnie had found. But he wished he wouldn't call so often.

Dr. Merville might, and did, dismiss Ronnie's errant adventures with a philosophical sua cuique voluptas... he found himself talking a more and more lenient view of Ronald Morelle's character. A man is never himself until he is idle. Successions of nurses, schoolmasters, and professors shepherd him into the service of his fellows, and the conventions of his profession, no less than a natural desire to stand well with the friends and clients he has acquired in his progress, assist him in maintaining something of the appearance and mental attitude which his tutors have formed in him. Many a man has gone through life being some other man who has impressed him, or some great teacher who has imparted his personality into his plastic pupil. The first instinct of a man lost in the desert is to discard his clothes. The doctor, wandering in this financial waste, began to discard his principles. He was unconscious of the sacrifice. If, in the course of his professional life he had made a mistaken diagnosis, or blundered in an operation, he would have known. If at school he had committed some error, he would have been corrected. Now, though this he did not realize, he was, for the first time in his life, free from any other authority than his own will and conscience. He fell into a common error when he believed, as he did, that standards of honour and behaviour are peculiar to the trades in which they are exercised and that right and wrong are adaptable to circumstances.

"Ronnie is coming to dinner tonight, isn't he? You know I shall not be here, my dear? I promised Steppe I should spend the evening with him. I wish you would tell Ronnie how pleased we all are at his very fine speech. I never dreamt that he had it in him. Steppe talks of making him chairman of the company."

"I thought he was that."

"No... er... no. The chairman is a man named Howitt... a very troublesome fellow. Steppe bought him out before the meeting, Ronnie was only acting-chairman."

"I thought you were a director, daddy?" She was curious on this point, and had waited an opportunity of asking him why he had not been present at the meeting.

"I am... in a sense... but my nerves are in such a state just now, that I simply couldn't bear the strain of listening to a crowd of noisy louts jabbering stupid criticism. The company is in a perfectly sound position. You can see that from the way the stock has jumped up in the past few days. These city people aren't fools, you know."

She wondered if it was the 'city people' who were buying the stock or were responsible for the encouraging rise in Klein River Diamonds. More likely, she thought, the buyers were the people who knew very little about stock exchange transactions.

Ronnie arrived as the doctor was going out, and they met in the street before the door. "It was nothing," said Ronnie modestly; 'they were rather rowdy at first, but after I had had a little talk with them... you know how sheep-like these fellows are. I discovered from Steppe who was likely to be the leader of the opposition, and I saw him before the meeting. Of course, he was difficult and full of threats about appointing a committee of investigation. However..."

"Yes, yes, you did splendidly... you'll find Beryl waiting for you. Er... Ronnie."

"Yes?"

"Don't unsettle her... she is in an maddening mood just now, especially about the companies and things. I shouldn't talk too much about Klein Rivers. She is a very shrewd girl. Not that there is anything about Klein Rivers that is discreditable."

"I never talk business to Beryl," said Ronnie. Which was nearly true.

He found her in the drawing-room and took her into his arms. She was so dear and fragrant. So malleable in his skilled hands now that the barrier of her suspicion had been broken down.

CHAPTER XVI

IN the middle of the night Ambrose Sault turned in his narrow bed and woke. He was a light sleeper and the party-walls of the tiny house were thin. He got out bed, switched on the light of a portable electric lamp which stood within reach of his hand, and, thrusting his feet into slippers, opened the door. The house was silent, but a crack of light showed under Christina's door. "Are you awake, Christina?" he asked softly. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing, Mr. Sault." It was not Christina. There was no hint of tears in her voice. Ambrose went back to his bed, and to sleep. He knew that he had not been mistaken either as to the sound that had awakened him or the direction from whence it came. For one terrific moment he had thought it was Christina and that the new treatment which had already commenced was responsible for the loud sobs which had disturbed his sleep. He was sorry for Evie. He was easily sorry. A cat writhing in the middle of the street, where a too—swift motor-car had passed, wrung his heart. A child crying in pain made him sweat. When he saw a man and a woman quarrelling in this vile neighbourhood, he rushed from the scene lest the woman be struck.

"What did he get... up for?" whispered Evie; "he is always... interfering."

"The wonder to me is that the whole street isn't up," said Christina. "What is the matter, Evie?"

"I don't know... I'm miserable." Evie flounced over in her bed. "I just had to cry. I'm sorry."

Christina was very serious; she too had been awakened by the hysterical outburst. It carried a meaning to her that she had the courage to face. "There is nothing wrong is there, Evie?" No answer. "I can't be all the help to you that I should like, darling, and I am a pig to you at times. But I get tetchy myself, and it is a bore lying here day after day. You would tell me if there was anything wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," whispered the girl.

"I mean, really wrong. If it was anything that affected your health. Nothing would make you wrong in my eyes. I should just love you and help you all I could. You know that. It isn't wise to keep some secrets, Evie, not if you know that there is somebody who loves you well enough to take half your burden from you."

"I don't know what you're driving at," said Evie in a fret. "I've nothing to

reproach myself with, if that's what you mean."

Christina snorted. "Then what are you snivelling about?" she demanded. She was not unreasonably irritated.

"I haven't... seen... Ronnie... for a week!" sobbed the girl.

"I wish to God you'd never seen him," snapped Christina, and wished she hadn't, for the next minute Evie was in bed with her, in her arms.

"I'm so unhappy... I wish I hadn't met him, too... I know that it isn't right, Chris... I know it isn't... I know I shall never be happy. He is so much above me... and I'm so ignorant... such a... such a shop-girl."

Christina cuddled the slim figure and kissed her damp face. "You'll get over that, Evie," she said soothingly.

"But I love him so!"

"You don't really... you are too young, Evie you can't test your feelings. I was reading today about some people who live in Australia, natives, who think that a sort of sour apple is the most lovely fruit in the world. But it is only because they haven't any other kind of fruit. If you go to a poor sort of store to buy a dress, you get to think the best they have in stock is the best you can buy anywhere. It takes a lot of courage to walk out of that shop and find another. After a while you are sure and certain that the dress they show you is lovely. It is only when you put it against the clothes that other women have bought from the better shops that you see how old-fashioned and tawdry and what an ugly colour it is." She waited for an answer, but Evie was asleep.

Ambrose came home early the next day. Every other afternoon he took Christina to Kensington Gardens. He kept the long spinal carriage in a stable and spent at least half an hour in cleaning and polishing the wheels and lacquered panels of the 'chariot'. "Shut the door, Ambrose." He obeyed. "You heard Evie crying? It was nothing. She hasn't seen her man for a week and she was a little upset. I promised her to tell you that it was all your imagination if you asked. Poor Evie doesn't know that you wouldn't ask, anyhow."

"Is it Ronald Morelle, Christina?" She nodded, and seeing his face lengthen she asked: "Is he a good man, Ambrose? Do you think there is my danger to Evie?"

"I don't know him personally." Ambrose was speaking very slowly. "No. I don't know him. Once or twice I have seen him, but I have never spoken. Moropulos says he is rotten. That was the word he used. There have been one or two nasty incidents. Moropulos likes talking about that sort of thing... what

was that word you told me, Christina? It is not like me to forget? It describes a man with a bad curiosity."

"Prurient?"

"That is the word. Moropulos has that kind of mind. He is interested in that kind of subject. He says that Ronald Morelle is bad. The worst man he has ever met. He wasn't condemning him, you understand? In fact he was admiring him. Moropulos would."

Christina was plucking at her underlip pensively. "Poor Evie!" she said. "She thinks she is in love with him. He is a beautiful dream to her, naturally, because she has never met anybody like him. I wish he had made the mistake of treating her cheaply the first time he met her. That would have ended it. What I am afraid of is that he does understand her, and is proceeding on a definite plan. What am I to do, Ambrose?"

Years before, when he was working in a penal settlement, Ambrose Sault had bruised and cut his chin. He had been working in tapioca fields and the prison doctor had warned him not to touch the healing wound with his hand for fear of poisoning it. From this warning he had acquired a curious trick. In moments of doubt he rubbed his chin with the knuckle of a finger. Christina had often seen him do this and had found in the gesture sure evidence of his perplexity. "You can't advise me?" she said, reading the sign. "I didn't think you would be able to."

"I can go to Morelle and warn him," suggested Sault, 'but that means trouble—here. I don't want to make mischief."

She nodded. "Evie would never forgive us," she said, with a sigh. "I'm ready, Ambrose."

He stooped and lifted her from the bed, as though, as she once described it, she were of no greater weight than a pillow.

Mr. Jan Steppe was dressing for dinner when Sault was announced. "Tell him to wait... no, send him up."

"Here, sir?" asked the valet.

"Where else, you fool, huh?" Sault came into the dressing-room and waited until his employer had fixed a refractory collar. "Don't wait, you."

The valet retired discreetly. "Well, Sault, what do you want?"

"The daughter of the woman I lodge with knows Morelle," said Ambrose Sault

briefly, 'she's a pretty child and I don't want anything to happen to her that will necessitate my taking Morelle and breaking his neck."

Steppe looked round with a scowl. "Necessitate'? You talk like a damned professor. I'm not Morelle's keeper. It is enough trouble to keep him up to the scratch in other matters. As to breaking his neck, I've got something to say to that, Sault, huh?" He faced the visitor, a terrifying figure, his attitude a threat and a challenge.

"You might have to identify him," said Sault thoughtfully, "that is true."

Steppe's face went red. "Now see here, Sault. I've never had a fight with you and I don't want to, huh? You're the only one of the bunch that is worth ten cents as a man, but I'll allow nobody to dictate to me... nobody, whether he is a girl-chasing dude or an escaped convict. Get that right! I've smashed bigger men and stronger men than you, by God!"

"You'll not smash me," said Sault coolly, "and you needn't smash: Morelle. I'm telling you that I won't have that girl hurt. A word from you will send Morelle crawling at her feet. I don't know him, but I know of him. He's that kind,"

Steppe glared. "You're telling me, are you?" he breathed. "You think you've got me because you're indispensable now that you know about the safe. But I'll have another safe and another word. D'ye hear? I'll show you that no damned lag can bully me!"

The other smiled. "You know that the code is safe with me. That's my way. I would break Morelle or you for the matter of that... kill you with my hands before your servant could come... but the code would be with me. You know that, too."

He met—had not feared to meet—the fury of Steppe's eyes, and presently the big man turned away with a shrug. "You might," he said, speaking more to himself than to Ambrose Sault. "One of these days I'll try you out. I'm not a weakling and I've beaten every man that stood up to me." He looked round at the visitor and the anger had gone from his face. "I believe you about the safe. You're the first man or woman I've ever believed in my life. Sounds queer, huh? It is a fact. I'm not frightened of you... nobody knows that better than you." Sault nodded. "About Morelle... I'll talk to him. What is this girl... you're not in love with her yourself, huh? Can't imagine that. All right, I'll speak to Morelle... a damned cur! Anything more?"

"Nothing," said Ambrose, and went out. Steppe stared at the closed door. "A man," he said, and shivered. No other man breathing had caused Steppe to shiver.

He saw Ronnie at a club late that night. "Here, I want you." He jerked his head in the direction of a quiet corner of the smoking-room, and Ronnie followed him, expecting compliments, for they had not met since the meeting.

"You've got a parcel of women in tow, huh?" said Steppe.

"I don't quite understand—" began Ronnie.

"You understand all right. One of them is a friend of Sault's... Colebrook, I think her name must be. Go steady. She is a friend of Sault's. He says he'll break your neck if you monkey around there; do you get that, huh? Sault says so. He'll do it."

Ronnie did not know Ambrose Sault any better than Ambrose knew him. The threat did not sound very dreadful and he smiled.

"You can grin; maybe I'll see the same grin when I come to look at you on the mortuary slab. Sault is a hell of a bad man to cross. He has had his kill once, that will make the second seem like blowing bubbles. That's all."

Ronnie was annoyed, but not greatly impressed. He only knew Sault as a sort of superior workman, who did the dirty work of the confederacy. Sometimes he used to wonder how Steppe employed him, but then he also speculated upon the exact standing of Moropulos whose name never appeared on a prospectus and who had, apparently, no particular duties. Threats did not greatly distress Ronnie Morelle. He had been threatened so often; and it was his experience that the worst was over when the threat came. He was free of the park now. Walking down Regent Street, one Saturday afternoon, he had come face to face with The Girl Who Had Screamed. She was with a tall, broad-shouldered young man and she had recognized him. After he had passed them, Ronnie, from the tail of his eye, saw the couple stop and the girl point after him. The man looked as though he were going to follow, but The Girl Who Had Screamed caught his arm. And that was the end of it. The man might hate him, but would not make a fuss. The offence was comparatively old, and men did not pursue other people's stale vendettas. The beginning and end of vengeance was a threatening gesture.

He knew just what that broad-shouldered man was saying, and thinking. He was a scoundrel, he deserved flogging. If he had been on hand when the girl squealed, he would have torn the heart out of the offender. But he wasn't there; and the girl had shown both her purity and her intelligence by preferring his gentle courtship to the violent love-making of Ronnie Morelle. In a sense the incident was subtly flattering to the broad-shouldered young man.

Ronnie was not seeing Evie in these days; he was more pleasingly engaged.

The new game was infinitely more intriguing, an opponent better armed for the fight and offering a more glorious triumph. But Steppe's warning piqued him. Sault! His lips curled in derision. That nigger! That half-caste jail-bird! He wrote to Evie that night making an appointment.

CHAPTER XVII

"You don't know how happy I was when I found your letter at the store this morning. The manager doesn't like girls to get letters; he is an awful fossil, but he's rather keen on me. I told him your letters were from an uncle who isn't friends with mother."

"What a darling little liar you are!" said Ronnie, amused. "My dear, I've missed you terribly. I shall have to give up my writing if it is going to keep me from my girl." She snuggled closer to his side as they walked slowly through the gloom to her favourite spot. She did not tell him how she had sat there every evening, braving the importunities of those less attractive ghouls who haunt the park in the hours of dusk. "There have been times," said Ronnie when they had found chairs and drawn them to the shadow of a big elm, "when I felt that I could write no more unless I saw you for a moment. But I set my teeth and worked. I pretend sometimes that you are sitting on the other side of the table, and I look up and talk to you."

"You are like Christina," said the delighted girl; "she makes up things like that. Would you have liked to see me really walk into the room and sit down opposite to you?"

"Nine-tenths of my troubles would vanish," he said fervently, "and I could work... by heaven, how I should work if I had the inspiration of your company! I wish you weren't such a dear little puritan. I'm half inclined to engage a housekeeper if only to chaperon you." He waited for a rejoinder, but it did not come. "You have such queer ideas about how people should behave," he said. "In fact you are awfully old-fashioned, darling."

"Am I... I suppose I am."

"Why, the modern girl goes everywhere: bachelor parties and dances... chaperons are as much out of date as the dodo."

"What is a dodo?"

"A bird... a sort of duck." he gurgled with laughter.

"You funny boy..."

"You know Sault, don't you? Isn't he a great friend of yours?"

She struggled up out of his arms. "Friend! Of course not, He is a great friend of Christina's, but not of mine. He is so old and funny—looking, He has grey hair and he is quite dark... when I say dark, I mean he is not a negro, but... well, dark."

"I understand. Not a friend of yours?"

"Of course not. There are times when I can't stand him! He doesn't read or write, did you know that? Of course you do... and he has been in prison, you told me that too. If mother knew she would have a fit. Why do you talk about him, Ronnie?"

"I've no special reason, only..."

"Only what? Has he been talking about me?"

"Not to me, of course... he told a friend of mine that he didn't like you to know me. It was a surprise to me that he was aware we were friends. Did you tell him?"

"Me—I? Of course not. I never heard of such nerve! How dare he!"

"Ssh... don't get angry, darling. I'm sure he meant well. You have to do something for me, Evie dear."

"Talking about me!..."

"What is the use." He bent his head and kissed her. "It will be easy for you to say that you've only met me once or twice... and that you are not seeing me any more."

"But you... you will see me, Ronnie?"

"Surely. You don't suppose that anything in the world will ever come between us, do you? Not fifty Saults."

"It is Christina!" she said. "How mean of her to discuss me with Sault! And I've done so much for her; brought her books from the store and given her little things... I do think it is deceitful of her."

"Will you do as I ask?"

"Of course, Ronnie darling. I'll tell her that I've given you up. But she is terribly sharp and I must be careful. We sleep in the same room; ours is a very small house. I used to have a room of my own until Sault came—the horrid old man. He is in love with Christina. It does seem ridiculous, doesn't it, a man like that? Christina says she doesn't, but really... she is so deceitful."

"Will you tell her what I suggest?" he insisted.

"Yes... I'll tell her. As for Mr. Sault..."

"Leave me to deal with Mr. Sault," said Ronnie grandly.

Evie reached home, her little brain charged with conflicting emotions. Her relief at meeting the man again, the happiness that meeting had brought, her resentment at Sault's unwarranted interference, her hurt from Christina's supposed duplicity and breach of confidence, each contended for domination and each in turn triumphed. "I have given up Ronnie and I am not going to meet him again," she said, as she entered the room.

She was without finesse and Christina, instantly alert, was not impressed. "This is very sudden. What has happened?"

"I've given him up!" Evie slammed her hat down on the rickety dressing-table. She had no intention of letting the matter rest there. Her annoyance with Sault must be expressed. "If a girl cannot have a friendship without her own sister and her sister's friends making up all sorts of stories about her and breaking their sacred word, too, by telling people about their private affairs, then she'd better give up having friendships," she said a trifle incoherently.

"I want to sort that out," said Christina, frowning. "The only thing I'm perfectly sure about, is that somebody is behaving badly. Do you mean that people have been talking about you and your... Ronnie?"

Evie glowered at her. "You know... you know!" she blurted tremulously. "You and Sault between you, trying to interfere in my... interfering in my affairs."

"Oh," said Christina, "is that all?"

"Is that all! Don't you think it enough, parting Ronnie and I? Breaking my heart, that is what you're doing!" she wailed. "I'll never speak to Sault again. The old murderer... that's what he is, a murderer! I'm going to tell mother and have him chucked out of the house. We're not safe. Some night he'll come along with a knife and cut our throats. A nigger murderer," she screamed, 'he may be good enough to be your friend, but he's not good enough for me!"

"Open the window and tell the street all about it." suggested Christine. "You'll

get an audience in no time! Go along! Open the window! They would love to hear. Every woman in this street screams her trouble, sooner or later. The woman across the road was shouting 'murder' all last night. Be fashionable, Evie. Ronnie would love to know that you made a hit in Walter Street."

Evie was weeping now. "You're horrible and vulgar, and I wish I was dead. You've... parted Ronnie and I... you and Sault."

"I don't think so," said Christina quietly, "my impression is that you are saying what Ronnie told you to say."

"I swear—" began Evie.

"Don't swear, Evie, screech. It is more convincing. Ronnie told you to say that you had given him up. What did Ambrose Sault do?"

"He went to a friend of Ronnie's with a lot of lies... about me and Ronnie. And you must have told him, Christina. It was mean, mean, mean of you!"

"He didn't want telling. He heard you the other night when you were having hysterics and yelling 'Oh, Ronnie, Ronnie!' at the top of your voice. You did everything except give Ronnie's address and telephone number. Apart from that, I did tell him. I wanted to know what kind of man you're raving about. And your Ronnie is just dirt."

"Don't dare to say that—don't dare!"

"If mother didn't sleep like a dormouse she'd hear you. Some people think they can make white black if they shout 'black' loudly enough. Ronald Morelle has a bad reputation with girls. I don't care if you foam at the mouth, Evie, I'm going to say it. He is a blackguard!"

"Sault told you! Sault told you!" Evie's voice had a shrill thin edge to it. "I know he did... a murderer, a nigger murderer, that is what he is. Not fit to live under the same roof as me... I shall tell Ronnie what he is."

"As you are permanently parted, I don't see how you will have an opportunity of telling him," said Christina. "I could have told him myself today, I saw him."

"Saw him, how?" Evie was surprised into interest.

"With my eyes. Mr. Sault took me into Kensington Gardens and I saw him—he pointed him out to me."

Evie smiled contemptuously. "That is where you and your damned Sault were wrong," she said in triumph. "Ronnie has been working in his flat all the

afternoon! He was writing an article for The Statesman!"

"He didn't seem to be working very hard when I saw him," said Christina, unmoved, "unless he was dictating his article to Miss Merville. They were driving together. Sault said: 'There is Morelle'—"

"He should have said 'Mister'."

"And I saw him. He is good-looking; the best-looking man I have ever seen."

"It wasn't Ronnie... I don't mean that Ronnie isn't good-looking. He's lovely. But it couldn't have been him. Besides, he hates that Merville girl, at least he doesn't like her. You are only saying this to make me jealous. How was he dressed?"

"So far as I could see, he wore a long-tailed coat—he certainly had a top hat. Mr. Sault said that he thought had been to Lady Somebody-or-other's garden-party. Mr. Steppe was going, but couldn't get away."

"Now I know it wasn't Ronnie! He was wearing a blue suit... no, he hadn't changed his clothes. He told me he didn't dress until an hour before he met me. Sault is a... he must have been mistaken."

Before she went to bed she came over to say 'good night'. "I'm sorry I lost my temper, Chris."

"My dear, if you lose nothing else I shall be happy."

"I hate your insinuations, Christina! Some day you will find out what a splendid man Ronnie is... and then you'll be surprised."

"I shall," admitted Christina, and later, when Evie was dropping into sleep: "Who did Ambrose kill?"

"Eh?... I don't know. Somebody in Paris..." Another long silence.

"He must have been a terrible villain!"

"Who, Sault?"

"No, the man he killed," said Christina.

She lay awake for a long time. It was two o'clock when she heard his key in the lock. She raised her head, listening to the creaking of the stairs as he came up. He had to pass her room and she whispered: "Good night, Ambrose!"

"Good night, Christina." She blew a kiss at the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. STEPPE, with a gardenia in his buttonhole, leant out of the window of his car and waved his yellow glove in greeting, and Beryl, who was just about to enter her own machine, stepped back upon the sidewalk and waited. She felt a little twinge of impatience, for she was on her way to the Horse Show and Ronald. "Is the doctor in? Good! He can wait... Where are you off to, Beryl, huh? Looking perfectly lovely too... I often wonder what those old back-veld relation of mine would say if they ever saw a girl like you. Their women are just trek-oxen... mustn't say 'cows', huh! Are you in a great hurry?"

"Not a great hurry," she smiled, 'but I think father is expecting you."

"I know. But he'll not be worried if I'm late. Drive me somewhere. I want to talk."

She jumped at the opportunity of placing a time-limit on the conversation. "Drive to Regent's Park, round the inner circle an back to the house," she ordered, and Mr. Steppe handed her into the car. "I want to have a little chat about your father," he said, greatly to her surprise. He had never before spoken more than two consecutive sentences in reference to Dr. Merville. "What I tell you, Beryl, is in confidence," he said. I'm not sure whether I ought to tell you at all, but you're a sensible girl, huh? No nonsense. That is how a woman should be. The doctor has lost a lot of money—you know that?"

"I didn't know," she answered in alarm, "but I thought that father confined his investments to your companies?"

"Yes... so he has. He has taken up a lot of shares... against my advice. He is carrying... well I shouldn't like to tell you the figure. He bought them—against my advice. Most of my stock is only partly paid up. He is carrying nearly a million shares in one concern or another. That is all right. You can carry millions, always providing there is a market, and that you can sell at a profit, or else that there isn't any need to call up the remainder of the capital. That need has arisen in the case of two companies in which he is heavily involved. Now, Beryl, you are not to say a word about what I have told you."

"But... I don't quite follow what you have said. Does it mean that father will be called upon to pay large sums of money?" He nodded. "Or else... ?"

"There is no 'or else'," said Steppe. "The capital has to be called in, in justice

to the shareholders, and the doctor must pay. Somebody must pay. In fact, I am going to pay. That was the reason I was calling on him today."

"He has been very worried lately," said Beryl in a troubled tone. "I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Steppe. Is it a big sum?"

"It runs to hundreds of thousands," said Steppe. "Very few can lay their hands on that amount, huh? Jan Steppe! They know me in the city, hate me, would slaughter me, but they don't despise me. I can sign cheques for a million and they'd be honoured."

"But father must make some arrangement to pay you, Mr. Steppe..." she began.

"That is nothing. The shares may rise in value... there is no telling what may happen with the market in an optimistic mood. But I thought I would let you know. Steppe isn't a bad fellow, huh?"

She heaved a long sigh. "No... you are kind, most kind. I wish father wouldn't touch the stock-market. Temperamentally, he is unfitted for a gambler. He is so easily depressed. Can't you persuade him, Mr. Steppe?"

"If you say the word, I'll stop him," said Steppe "There is nothing I wouldn't do for you, Beryl."

She was silent. "I'm grateful," she said, as the car was heading for the house. "I cannot put myself under any bigger obligation... father must do as he wishes. But if you could help him with advice..."

It occurred to her then that if he could, at a word arrest the speculative tendencies of Dr. Merville, why had he contented himself with 'advice' when her father had made his disastrous investments? Saying goodbye to him at the door of the house, Beryl drove on to Olympia a disturbed and anxious girl.

Steppe watched the car out of sight before he mounted the step and rang the bell. "You saw us, huh? Yes, I wanted to talk to Beryl and I knew that you wouldn't mind waiting. I've got to call up the unpaid capital of Brakpan Mines and Toledo Deeps."

The doctor moved uneasily. "Couldn't you wait a little while?" he asked nervously. "The shares are moving. They went up a fraction yesterday—which means that there are buyers."

"I was the buyer," said Steppe. "I took a feeler at the market. I bought five hundred—and I could have had five hundred thousand at the price. They were falling over one another to sell. No, I'm afraid I've got to make a call and you'll

have to take up your shares, huh? Well, I'm going to let you have the money."

"That is good of you—"

"Not at all. I must keep your name sweet and clean, Merville. I am going to marry Beryl."

The doctor opened a silver box and took out a cigar with a shaking hand. "Beryl is a very dear girl," he said. "Have you spoken to her?"

"No, there is plenty of time. I don't want to scare her—let her get used to me, Merville, huh? That's the way. You are crossing with me tonight, huh? Good, I hate the Le Havre route, but you can sleep on board and that saves time. Abrahams is coming from Vienna with the Bulgarian concession. I'm inclined to float it."

Ronnie was waiting in the main entrance when the girl arrived. In some respects he was a model escort. He never expected a woman to be punctual and had trained himself in the art of patient waiting. "No, really, I haven't been here very long," he replied to her apology, "and you, of all women, are worth waiting for."

"You are a dear. I don't believe you, but still you are dear. I'm so sick of life today, Ronnie... don't ask me why. Amuse me."

"How is the doctor?" he queried, as they were shown into their seats.

"He is going to Paris tonight with Mr. Steppe," she said. "I'm rather glad. Two or three days abroad will do him lot of good. There aren't many people here this afternoon, Ronnie."

"Most of the swells are at Ascot," he explained; 'the night seance is crowded. Gone to Paris, eh?"

The news made him thoughtful.

She drove him back to the house to tea. Dr. Merville was out and was not returning to dinner. The maid said he had left a letter in his study. Beryl found it to be a note saying he was unlikely to see her before he went. His bag would be called for, he added.

"My hard-hearted parent has gone without saying goodbye," she said. "Take me out to dinner, Ronnie. After I would like to see a revue. I feel unintellectual today; I'm in the mood when I want to see people with red noses and baggy trousers. And I want to be in a box. I love boxes, since...

Ronald Morelle walked home from Park Crescent stopping at a messenger

office to scribble a note.

"It is at a drug store in Knightsbridge," he said. "I want the boy to give it to the young lady in the pay desk. Perhaps he had better make a purchase... a cake of soap, if that is the boy," he smiled upon the diminutive messenger, "and let him hand the letter to the lady when he puts in his bill."

He came to the flat to find Francois laying out his dress clothes. "Finish what you are doing and go home. I shall not want you this evening," he said. "Stay —have a bottle put on ice. You can lay the small table. You might have bought some flowers. I hate flowers but—get some. You can throw them away tomorrow."

"Yes, m'sieur," said his imperturbable man, "for how many shall I lay supper?"

"For three," answered Ronnie. It was a convention that he invariably entertained two guests, but Francois had never had to wash more than two used glasses.

CHAPTER XIX

BERYL was still in the drawing-room and the tea-table had not been cleared when Ambrose Sault came for the doctor's bag. She heard the sound of his voice in the hall and came to the head of the stairs. "Is that you, Mr. Sault? Won't you come up for moment?" The doctor had telephoned to Moropulos, he explained, asking him to take the grip to his club. She gathered that it was usual for Ambrose to carry out these little commissions.

"How is Miss Colebrook... has she forgiven me for acting the part of district visitor? She is a nice girl and her hair is such a wonderful colour."

"The osteopath says she will get well," replied Ambrose simply, "and when I went in to see her this morning she told me she really thought that she felt better already. She has the heart of a lion, Miss Merville."

"She is certainly brave." Beryl knew she was a brute because she could not work up an enthusiastic interest in Christina Colebrook.

"It will be wonderful if she is cured." Sault's voice as hushed. "I daren't let myself think about it—in fact, I shall be more bitterly disappointed than she if the treatment does not succeed."

"You are very fond of her?" She had been examining his face as he spoke, wondering what there was in him that she had seen at their first meeting which reminded her of Ronnie. There was not a vestige of likeness between them. This man's face, for all its strength, was coarse; the eyes were the only fine features it possessed. And the skin... there was a yellow-brown tinge in it. She remembered her father saying once that people who had negro blood in their veins betrayed their origin, even though they were quite white, by a dark half-moon on their finger-nails. Whilst he was speaking he moved his hands so that the nails were discernible. They were ugly nails, broad and ragged of edge... yes, there it was. A brown crescent showing against the deep pink.

"Yes, I'm very fond of her. She is lovable. I haven't let anybody like Christina before." Why was she annoyed? Perhaps 'annoyed' hardly described her emotion. She was disappointed in him. Her attitude toward Sault was enigmatical—it was certainly capricious. She was a little nauseated and was glad when he went.

Sault carried the suitcase to the club and left it with a porter. He wished he had an excuse for calling every day at the house... the sight of her exalted him, raised him instantly to a higher plane. He saw Evie walking home in front of him; she saw him, stopped, and became interested in a shop window. She always avoided him in the street and would not dream of walking with him. In the kitchen, to which she followed him, she condescended to speak.

"You were looking very pleased with yourself when I saw you in High Street, Mr. Sault," she said.

"Was I?... yes, I was feeling good. You're home early tonight, Evie."

Mrs. Colebrook had a washing day and was at her labours in the scullery, and Evie could flare up without reproof. "I'm so glad you notice when I come in, and go out!" she said. "It is nice to know that all your movements are watched. I suppose I ought to ask your permission when I stay out late? We always like to please the lodger!"

He looked down into the pretty flushed face and smile gently. "I believe you are trying to be cross with me, Evie," he said good-naturedly, "and I don't feel like being cross with anybody. My dear, it is no business of mine—"

"Don't call me 'my dear' if you please! You have nerve to 'my dear' me! A man like you!"

Sault's knuckle touched his chin awkwardly. "I didn't mean to be offensive—"

"You are offensive! You are the most beastly offensive person I know! You go

prying and spying into my business and telling lies about gentlemen whose boots you're not fit to blacken."

"Hello, hello!" Mrs. Colebrook stood in the kitchen doorway, wiping her soapy hands on her apron. "What's this, Evie? Telling lies about you? Mr. Sault would not tell a lie to save his life. What gentleman? He'd have to be a pretty good gentleman for Mr. Sault to black his boots."

Evie wilted before her mother's fiery gaze and, turning, slammed from the room. "It is nothing, Mrs. Colebrook," smiled Ambrose. "I made her angry... something I said. It was my fault entirely. Now what about those blankets?"

"You're not going to wash any blankets," said Mr Colebrook, "and Evie has got to say she is sorry."

"I washed blankets before you were born, Mrs. Colebrook, or soon after, at any rate. I promised you I'd come home and help you." He went with her to the little scullery with its copper and wash tub, she protesting.

"I didn't think you meant it," she said, "and I can't let you do it. You go into the kitchen and I'll make you a cup of tea."

"Blankets," said Ambrose, rolling up his sleeves.

Evie burst into her room, red with anger. She hated Sault more than ever. She said so, flinging her hat wildly on the bed. "Oh... was that who you were strafing?" asked Christina.

"I gave him a piece of my mind," said Evie, with satisfaction.

"That was generous, considering the size of it." Christina bent outward and laid down the paper and dactylograph she had been using. "I couldn't have done that a few days ago," she said, "and what has poor Ambrose done?"

"He had the cheek to tell me I was home very early, as if he was the lord of the house!"

"Aren't you home early?"

"It is no business of his, the interfering old devil!"

Christina eyed her critically. "You came home in a bad temper," she said. "I suppose giving up Ronnie has got on your nerves."

"I haven't given him up!" Evie snapped, "only he's busy tonight."

Christina chewed a toffee ball reflectively. "That man is certainly industrious,"

she said; "they will have to bring out new papers to print all he writes. Does he find time to eat?" Evie lifted her nose scornfully. "What did you say to my Ambrose?"

"I told you."

"You said that you gave him a piece of your mind—that doesn't mean anything to me. Did you call him a murderer?"

"Of course I didn't... I hope I'm a lady."

"I've often hoped so, and maybe one of these days my hopes will be realized. So you didn't call him a murderer? You lost a great opportunity. Don't be offensive to him again, Evie," she said quietly. Evie did not reply. When Christina spoke in that tone of voice she was frightened of her. "What is Ambrose doing now?"

"I don't know... in the kitchen I suppose, guzzling food. And I'm starving! But I won't sit down at the same table as a black man, I won't!"

"Don't be a fool, Evie. Go down and get some food. You can bring it up here and eat it. And Evie... Ambrose is a very dear friend of mine and I dislike hearing you call him a 'black man'. He is almost as white as you and I. His great grandfather was an Indian."

"If you don't like to hear me say unpleasant thing about your friends, don't say them about mine."

Here, Evie thought, not without reason, that she had a point which was worth labouring. She was astonished when Christina surrendered without firing another shot. "Perhaps you are right, dear. Go and get something to eat."

Evie returned almost immediately with the news that the kitchen was empty and that she had seen one whom she was pleased to describe as 'the enemy' bending over a wash tub, his arms white with lather. "Do you think he is making up to mother?" she asked, as that interesting possibility presented itself.

Christina choked. "Don't say funny things when I'm eating candy," she begged.

CHAPTER XX

THE revue had reached its seventh scene before Beryl and her escort were shown into the big stage box of the Pavilion. She had hardly taken her seat before she saw a familiar face in the stalls.

"Isn't that Mr. Moropulos?" she asked, and following the direction of her eyes he nodded.

The Greek did not appear to have noticed them. He was conspicuous as being the only man in that row of the stalls who was not wearing evening dress. "Yes, that is Moropulos. Don't let him see you, Beryl."

Apparently Mr. Moropulos did not identify the pair, for though he turned his head in their direction he showed no sign of recognition. Half-way through the last part of the revue he disappeared, and they did not see him again. "And now home. It has been a jolly afternoon and evening," said Beryl, as they came out.

Ronnie was looking round for his car. "What a fool I am," he said. "I told Parker not to wait... for some extraordinary reason I imagined your car would be here. We'll have to take a taxi."

The cab had hardly started before he tapped at the window and, leaning out, gave a fresh direction. "Come home and have some supper. I've just remembered that I told Francois I was bringing a couple of men home... told him early this morning."

She hesitated. "I can't stay very long," she said. "No... nobody is waiting for me. My maid never does... it spoils my enjoyment of a dance if I think that I am keeping some poor girl out of her bed. I'll come in for five minutes, dear."

His arm came round her, her head drooped toward him. "Ronnie... I'm so glad all this has come about, darling... I've run after you... I know I have. But I don't care... four years seems such an awful long time to wait."

"An eternity," he breathed.

"And marriage is, as you say... in your immoral way... only a third party sanction... it is silly."

He kissed her. An automatic lift carried them to the third floor and Ronnie went in, switching on the lights. "I wonder whether father will be angry," she asked. "If your man..."

"He sleeps out." Ronnie helped her off with her wrap. "He's never here after nine. This is my own room, Beryl—but you saw it when the doctor brought you here to dinner."

She walked over to the big black table and sat down. "Here genius broods," she laughed quietly. "What a humbug you are, Ronnie! I don't believe you write a thousand words a month!" He smiled indulgently. "And there is your wicked Anthony! He looks worse by artificial light. Now, Ronnie, I really must go."

"Go?"—incredulously, "with foie-gras sandwiches and beautifully dry wine?" The door into the dining-room was open and he pointed. "It is the last bottle of that wine. Jerry will be furious when he comes to breakfast in the morning and finds it gone." Ronnie had a friend, one Jeremiah Talbot, a man after his own heart. Beryl had met him once, a languid, loose lipped man with a reputation for gallantry.

"Well... I'll eat just a little... and then you must take me home. You shouldn't have paid off the cab."

He was too busy at the wine bucket to listen. She sat on the edge of one of the window chesterfields and let her eyes rove around the room, and after a while he brought a plate of sandwiches and a filled glass. She put her lips to the wine and handed it back to him "No more, dear."

A sudden panic had taken possession of her, and she was shaking. "No!..." And yet it was so natural and so comforting to let him hold her. She relaxed, unresisting. "I shouldn't be here, Ronnie," she murmured between his kisses; 'let me go, darling... please." But he held her the tighter and she did not deny his lips.

CHAPTER XXI

RONNIE woke with a start, stared at the window and cursed. Pulling on a dressing-gown he slipped from the room and at the sight of him the woman who was dusting the side-board paused in her work. "I don't want you here today... where is your friend?"

"In the pantry, sir."

"Well, take her with you... ah, Francois, listen. Turn these women out and then go out yourself... go to the city... and get... buy anything you like, but don't come back before eleven... no, twelve."

He waited until the flat was empty and returned to his room. Beryl was lying

with her head in the crook of her arm. She was not asleep... nor crying, as he had feared. "I'm dreadfully sorry, darling... I must have fallen asleep."

"What is the time?" She did not turn, but spoke into the pillow. "Eight... curse it! You can't go home in evening dress."

"Why not?" She struggled up, her face averted. "It is the best way," she said. "Will you get me a cab?" When he came up again, she was tidying her hair at the mirror. "It was very foolish," she remarked, without emotion.

"There is nobody below, and thank God there was an Albert Hall ball last night," said Ronnie, "and it is only eight... shall I come down with you?"

She shook her head. "No... just show me how to work the elevator. An Albert Hall ball? Where could I have been after that finished? You lie better than I, Ronnie."

"Having breakfast... lots of people make a special function of breakfast after those shows."

"All right... show me how the elevator works."

To her maid a quarter of an hour later: "I'm going to bed, Dean, and if Mr. Morelle rings up will you tell him that I am sorry I cannot see him this morning. You can bring me a cup of chocolate... yes, I've had breakfast, but bring me some chocolate."

She was standing by the window in a silk wrap when the maid brought the tray. Beryl did not look round. "Put it down, Dean... I will ring when I want you."

She walked across the room and locked the door. Then she came to the mirror and looked for a long time at herself. "Yes... Beryl... Beryl... it is you! I was hoping it was somebody else."

CHAPTER XXII

THAT same morning Mr. Moropulos asked a question of Ambrose Sault. "What exposure should you give to a photograph taken, say, soon after eight o'clock in the morning?"

"What sort of a morning?"

"This morning." Ambrose glanced out of the window. "You could get a snapshot on a twenty-fifth of a second.' Mr. Moropulos produced a folding Kodak from his pocket. "Would this stop be wide enough?"

Ambrose took the camera in his hand. "Yes," he said. "What were you taking, a scene or a figure?"

"A figure," said Mr. Moropulos, "a lady in evening dress."

Ambrose smiled. "Eight o'clock is a funny time to photograph a lady in evening dress," he said.

"An amusing time... if one hadn't been waiting up all night to take it. I was here at five. Yes... I came back for the camera. I took a chance of missing the lady, but even if I had it wouldn't have mattered. But eight o'clock!" he laughed gleefully—"how very obliging! Sault, my Ambrosial man, I am going to sleep."

"I think you need it," said Ambrose. He did all the work of the house, even to making Mr. Moropulos' bed, and he was glad of the opportunity to 'spring clean' the sitting-room. He only interrupted his labours to cut a crust of bread and a slice of cheese for his lunch. At five o'clock in the afternoon the telephone bell rang for the first time that day. "Is that Mr. Moropulos... is that you, Mr. Sault?"

"Yes, lady." He recognized her voice instantly and his heart leapt within him. "I'm so glad... will you come to the house, please?"

"Yes... I'll come right away." He hung up the receiver as Moropulos strolled in, yawning. "He-e! Who was the caller?"

"A friend of mine," said Sault.

"Didn't know you had any friends... are you going? Make me some coffee before you go, Sault."

"Make it yourself," said Ambrose.

Moropulos grinned after him. "I'd give a lot of money to stick a knife into that big chest of yours, my good Ambrose," he said pleasantly.

Marie opened the door to the untidy visitor, showing him straight to the drawing-room, and Beryl came half-way to him, taking his hand in both of hers. "I'm so glad you've come... I had to send for you... Do you mind? I want to talk to you about nothing in particular... I'm nervy. Can't you tell from my hand?"

The hand in his was shaking, he felt the quiver of it. And she looked pale. Why had she sent for him? She was amazed at herself. Perhaps it was his strength she wanted; a rock on which she might rebuild the shattered fabric of her reason. She had been thinking of him all the afternoon.

Ronnie never came to her mind. He was incidental... reality lay with the coarse-featured man whom she had likened to a Caesar. "I don't want you to do anything for me, except be here. Just for a little while." She was pleading like a frightened child.

"I am here—I will stay here until you want me to go," said Ambrose, and smiled into her eyes.

"Mr. Sault, I do so want to talk about something. It won't hurt you, will it?" She had only released his hands to pull a chair forward. Opposite to him she sat, this time both of her hands in his. Why? She gave up asking the question. "You killed somebody, is it true?... I knew it was true before I asked you. Did it injure you... make you think less of yourself... did you loathe the man you killed because he made you do it? You are looking at me so strangely... You don't think I am mad, do you?"

"I don't think you are mad. No, I didn't even hate the man. He deserved death. I did not wish to kill him, but there was no other way. There must be that definite end to some problems... death. There is no other. I believe implicitly in it... destruction. A man who is so vile that he kills in his greed or his lust, who takes an innocent and a helpful life—helpful to the world and its people—you must destroy him. The law does this, so that the brain behind his wicked hands shall not lead him to further mischief. If you have a sheepdog that worries sheep you shoot him. There is no other way. Or he will breed other sheepdogs with the same vice. Most problems are soluble by various processes. Some of them drastic, some of them commonplace. A few, a very few, can only be ended that way. My man was one of these. I won't tell you the story... he was a bad man and I killed him. But I didn't hate him, nor hate myself. And I think no less of myself... and no more. I did what I thought was right... I've never regretted it, but I've never been proud of it."

She listened, fascinated. The hands in his were quiet now, there was a hue in her cheeks. "How fine to feel like that... to detach yourself... but why should you regret? You injured no one. Except the man and... was he married?"

He nodded. "I didn't know at the time. She came forward afterwards and paid the expenses of my defence... She hated him... It was very sad."

They were quiet together until she lifted her head and spoke. "Mr. Sault... I'm going to ask you another strange question. Have you, in all your life, ever been

in love?"

"Yes," he said instantly.

"With a woman, just because she is a woman? As I might love a man because he has all the outward attractions of a man? Have you loved her just for her beauty and despised her mean soul and her vicious mind, and... and despising... still loved?" She hung upon his words, and when he said 'no' her heart sank.

"No... no, I couldn't do that. That would be... horrible!" He shuddered.

She had made Ambrose Sault shudder! Ambrose Sault who spoke calmly of murder, had shuddered at something, which to him was worse than murder. The fragrance of sin which had held to her and supported her through the day, was stale and sour and filthy. She shrank away from him, but he held her hands tightly.

"Let me go, please." Her voice sounded faint.

"In a moment... look at me, lady." She raised her eyes to his and they held them. "I am going to say something to you that I never dreamt I would say; I never thought the words would come to me. Look at me, lady, a rough man... old... I'm more than fifty, ugly, with an old man's shape and an old man's hands. Illiterate... I love you. I shall never see you again... I love you. You are beautiful... the most beautiful lady I have seen. But it isn't that. There is something in you that I love... I don't know what... soul... spirit... individuality. I hope I haven't revolted you... I don't think I have."

"Ambrose!" She clutched at the hands he was drawing away. "I must tell you... there is nothing to love but what you see... there is no soul... no soul... nothing but weakness and a pitiful cowardice... I love a man who is like that, too. Foul, foul! But beautiful to look at... and, Ambrose, I have given him all that he can take."

Not a muscle of his face moved.

"I have given him everything... this very day... that is why I sent for you. There must be something in what you say... a spirit in me responds to you... oh, Ambrose, I love him!" She was sobbing against the stained and ravelled coat. There was a scent of some pungent oil... turpentine... But he did not speak. His big hand touched her head lightly, smoothing her hair. "You think I'm... what do you think I am?" she asked. "You know."

He patted her shoulder gently. "I suppose you are wondering what I am feeling? I will tell you this... I am not hurt. I can't be hurt, for you have lost

nothing which I prize. If you were different, you wouldn't like me to say that." He took her face between his rough hands and looked into her eyes. "How very beautiful it is!" he said.

She shut her eyes tight to keep back the tears. "I said I wouldn't see you again. Perhaps I won't, but if you want me, send for me."

She dried her eyes. "I'm a weakling... I wish I was wicked and didn't care... I don't care, really. What has happened is..." she shrugged, 'it is the discovery of my own rottenness that has shocked me... nearly driven me mad. You are going now, Ambrose... that is so lovely of you... you even know when to go!" She laughed nervously and laid her two hands on his shoulder. She did not want to kiss or to be kissed. And she knew that he felt as she did. "Come to me when I want you. I shall be busy inventing lies for the next few days. Goodbye, Ambrose."

When he had gone, she realized that no man's name had been mentioned. Perhaps he knew.

CHAPTER XXIII

FOR the first time in his life Ronald Morelle was regretting an adventure. All day long he had been trying to write, with the result that his waste-paper basket was full of torn and twisted sheets, even as the silver ashtray on the table was heaped with cigarette ends. He had gone half a dozen times to the telephone to call up Merville's house and had stopped short of giving the number. Then he tried to write her a note. He could think of nothing to say beyond the flamboyant beginning. What was the use of writing? And what was she thinking about it all? He wished... and he wished again.

He had made a hopeless fool of himself. Why had he done it? For the truth unfolded as the hours passed, that an end must be found to this affair. In other cases finis had been written at his discretion, sometimes cheerfully. sometimes with tears and recriminations. There had been instances that called for solid compensations. Beryl was not to be ended that way. Besides. he had half-promised her...

He grew hot at the very thought of matrimony, and in the discomfort of the prospect, the pleasant irresponsibilities of bachelorhood, and the features that went to the making of his life, too good to lose. In such a mood he thought of

Evie Colebrook. How perfectly attractive she was; he could admire her virtue, and cold-bloodedly compare her with Beryl. To Beryl's disparagement.

He was hemmed in by his new responsibility; ached to be free from fetters that were still warm from the forge. Late at night he wrote two letters, one to Beryl, the other and the longer to Evie. Beryl had hers with her morning tea, saw who it was from the moment the maid pulled aside the curtains and let in the morning sunlight. She turned it over in her hand... now she knew. So that was how she felt about a letter from Ronnie. Not so much as a tremor, not a quicker pulsation of heart. She opened the envelope and read: 'My very dearest,—I don't know what to write to you or how. I adore the memory of you. I am shaken by the calamity—for you. Command me; I will do as you wish. I will not see you again though it breaks my heart.'

It was written on a plain card, unsigned, a wire that morning: She sent him 'Come to tea'. In answer came a hurried note by special delivery. 'I cannot: I dare not trust myself. I am overwhelmed by the sense of my treachery. That I should have brought a second's unhappiness to you!' Unsigned. Ronnie never signed or dated such epistles.

She read the note and laughed. Yes, she could laugh.

On the third evening, her father returned in almost cheerful frame of mind. And he had enjoyed the trip, having met a number of French medical men who had entertained him. "They were charming, and the new Pasteur laboratories were most fascinating. We feared you would have had a dull time, Beryl. I hope Ronnie didn't desert you!"

"I am afraid he didn't," she said, and the doctor beamed.

"You're not too fond of him, I am glad of that, for he is rather a rascal. I suppose young men, some young men, are like that... conscienceless."

"Did you have a good crossing?" she asked, and turned the conversation into a more pleasant way.

"Sault was to have met us at the station but he did not turn up. Perhaps Moropulos is drinking. One never knows when Moropulos will break out. He is afraid of Steppe."

"Who isn't?" she asked, with a grimace.

The doctor scratched his cheek meditatively. "I don't know... I'm not afraid of him. Naturally I shouldn't like a rough and tumble with him, physically or verbally. Ronnie, of course, is in the most abject terror of him. The only man who isn't... er... reluctant to provoke him, is Sault." He chuckled. "Steppe told

me that he had a row with Sault over some girl that Ronnie had been carrying on with... the daughter of the woman Colebrook, my dear. Apparently Sault went to our friend Jan and told him to put a stop to it, and Steppe was naturally annoyed, and do you know what Sault said?" Her eyes were shining. "He told Steppe that in certain contingencies he would kill him, before his servant could reach him; to his face!"

"What did Mr. Steppe think of it?" she found her voice to ask.

"Amused... and impressed too. He says Sault wouldn't tell a lie, wouldn't do a mean thing to save his soul. That is something of a testimonial from a man like Steppe who, I am sorry to say, is inclined to be a little uncharitable."

Beryl folded her serviette; she looked to be absorbed in the operation.

"He was telling me that Sault is one of the finest mathematicians in the country. And he doesn't read or write! Of course he writes figures and symbols perfectly. He attends every lecture that he can get to; a remarkable personality."

"Very."

"I thought you rather liked him?"

She started from her reverie. "Who... Ambrose?"

"Ambrose!"

"That is his name, isn't it?"

"But, my dear," smiled the doctor indulgently, "you wouldn't call him by his Christian name! I think he would be rather annoyed to be treated like a servant."

"I wasn't thinking of him as a servant."

They got up from the table together and she went with him as far as his study door. "What have you been doing with yourself... theatres?"

"Yes, and a ball. An all-night affair. I came home at eight."

"Humph... bad for you, that sort of thing."

She was sure it was. It was bad to lie too, but she was beyond caring. Ambrose never lied. He would lie for her. Ronnie also would lie—for himself.

She mused and mused, thinking of Sault... Ambrose Sault. And the red- haired invalid. And this sister of hers whom Ambrose had gone to Steppe about... she

laughed quietly. She would have loved to have seen that contest of giants. Could Steppe be brow-beaten? It seemed impossible, and yet Ambrose had cowed him.

She dreamt that night that she saw Ronald and Sault fighting with reaping hooks... She woke up with a shiver, for in her dreams their heads had been exchanged and Ronnie's face smiled at her from Sault's broad shoulders.

It was growing light, she found, when she peeped through the curtains. She went to bed again but did not sleep any more. It was a coincidence that Ronald Morelle was also awake at that hour. His new responsibility was weighing on him like a leaden weight. She would never let him go. Her wire had terrified him. "There's no end to it!" he said, with a groan. "No end!"

He did not love Beryl; he loved nobody, but there were some girls whom he wanted to see again and again. Evie was one of that kind. He did not want to see Beryl. He pictured himself chained for life to a woman who was now wholly without attraction.

To this misery, was added a new and unbelievable horror. Steppe called just as Ronald was going out to lunch. At any time Steppe was an unwelcome visitor. In the state of Ronnie's nerves, he felt it impossible that he could support the strain of the big man's company for five minutes. He wished Steppe wouldn't barge in without warning. It was not gentlemanly... "I'm awfully glad to see you, Mr. Steppe; when did you get back?"

"Last night... I won't keep you a minute. I'm on my way to make a call on that swine Moropulos," he growled. "I want to see you about Beryl." Ronald Morelle's heart missed a beat. Had she told? He turned white at the thought. Luckily Steppe was striding up and down the room, hands in pockets, bearded chin on chest.

Ronnie's mouth had gone dry and he had a cold sinking feeling inside him. "Yes... about Beryl," he managed to say.

"You're a great friend of hers, huh? Known her for a long time?" Ronnie nodded. "You have some influence with her?"

"I... I hope so... not a great influence."

"I am going to marry Beryl. The doctor has probably hinted to you that I have plans in that quarter, huh?"

Ronnie swallowed..."No," said, "I didn't know... my congratulations..."

"Keep 'em," said the other shortly, 'they're not wanted yet. You're a great friend

of hers, huh? Go about with her a great deal? I suppose it is all right. I'd pull the life out of you if it wasn't... but Beryl is a good girl... What I want you to do is this: give me a good name. If you have any influence, use it. Get that?"

"Certainly," Morelle found voice to say. "I'll do what I can."

"That's all right. And, Morelle, when I'm married you won't be asked to spend a great deal of time at my house. You'll come when I invite you. That's straight, huh? So long."

Ronald shut the door on him.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT a mess! What a perfect hell of a mess he was in! He stood by the window, biting his nails. Suppose Beryl told? He wiped his forehead. Girls had queer ideas about their duty in that respect. He knew of cases. One of those threatening gestures which had come his way was the result of such a misguided act of confession on the part of a girl whom he had treated very handsomely indeed. A baser case of ingratitude it would be difficult to imagine. Beryl might. She had principles. Phew!

He heard the trill of the telephone in Francois' pantry.

"Mr. Moropulos," said Francois, emerging from his room.

Ronnie scowled. "Tell him... no, put him through." He laid down his walking-stick and gloves. "Yes, Moropulos; good morning... lunch? Well, I was going out to lunch with some people." Moropulos said that his business was important. "All right... oh, anywhere... one of those little places in Soho."

He slammed down the instrument viciously. But this was a time to consolidate his friends and their interests. Not that Moropulos was a friend, but he was useful and might be more so.

The Greek arrived at the restaurant to the minute and was looking more spruce than usual. "Have you seen Steppe?" was his first question.

"I understand he was on his way to see you... he seemed angry," said Ronnie.

"Our dear Steppe is always angry," answered the Greek coolly, "this time, however, he has no cause. If he has gone to my house, he will not see me."

"What is the trouble?"

Moropulos shrugged. "He has been informed by evil-minded people that during his absence I was... well, not to put too fine a point on it, very drunk."

"And were you?"

"On the contrary, at the very hour when his spies informed him I was dancing on a table in a low part of the East End, and shouting that the Mackenzie report was a forgery—"

Ronnie went pale. "Good God! You never said that?" he gasped.

"Of course not. If I had, it would be a serious thing for me. I, Paul Moropulos, tell you, Ronald Morelle, that it would be a disastrous thing for me. Just now my relations with dear Jan are—er—strained. I do not wish a breach."

"But surely if Steppe's men say—"

"'Let them say'," quoted Moropulos, 'it is what I say, and you say, and somebody else says, that counts, for at the very moment I was supposed to be misbehaving,"—he emphasized his words—"I was dining with you and the lovely Miss Merville in your flat."

"What! Why, that is a lie!"

"What is one lie worse than another? Observe I give you the date; it was one day before the charming Miss Merville spent the night with you alone in your very beautiful flat."

Had the floor collapsed, Ronald Morelle could not have received a worse shock. "I recognise your embarrassment and sympathize with you," said Moropulos, 'but it is essential for my happiness and ultimate prosperity, that both you and Miss Merville should testify that I dined with you on the previous night."

Ronnie had nothing to say. He had not yet realized the tremendous import of the man's threat.

"I will save you a lot of trouble by telling you that I followed you from the Pavilion to Knightsbridge. I spent the whole of the night outside, wondering when she would come out, and I photographed her as she got into the cab. The photograph, an excellent one, is now in a secret place. Steppe, I hope, will never see it," he added, looking at his vis-a-vis from under his eyelids. "Steppe is angry with me; how unjust! It is impossible that I could have been making a fool of myself at the very hour we three together were talking of... what were

we talking of?... Greece, let us say, the academies... Steppe would not believe you, of course, but he would believe Miss Merville, and a great unpleasantness would be avoided. I am sorry to make this demand of you, but you see how I am situated? I swear to you that I had no intention of using my knowledge. It was an amusing little secret of my own."

Ronald found his voice. "Am I to tell... Miss Merville that you know? That you have a photograph?"

Moropulos spread his hands. "Why should she know? It is not necessary."

Ronnie was relieved. It was something to be spared the scene which would follow the disclosure that a third person was in their secret. He asked for no proofs that Moropulos knew, and any thought of the girl and what this meant to her never entered his head. If Steppe knew! He grew cold at the thought. Steppe would kill him, pull his life out of him. Ronald Morelle was prepared to go a long way to keep his master in ignorance. "I will see Miss Merville," he said, and then, feeling that a protest was called for: "You have behaved disgracefully, Moropulos... to blackmail me. That is what it amounts to!"

"Not at all. It was a simple matter to tell Steppe that on the night in question I was waiting soberly outside your flat, watching his interests. He is immensely partial to Beryl Merville. A confusion of dates would not have been remarked; he would be so mad that the lesser would be absorbed in the greater injury. Me, he would forgive—you..."

Ronald shuddered.

In the afternoon he made his call. "It is lucky finding you alone, dear," he began, awkwardly for him; "you'll never guess what I've been through during the past few days..." She was very calm and self-possessed. A shade paler, perhaps, but she was of a type that pallor suited. And she met his eyes without embarrassment. That made matters more difficult for Ronald. He plunged straight away into the object of his visit.

"Where were you on Tuesday night, Beryl?"

She was puzzled. "Tuesday?... I forget—why?"

"Try to think, dear," he urged.

"I was dining at home. Father was out, I think. I'm not sure. I went to a concert after with the Paynters. Yes, that was it—why?"

"You were dining with Moropulos and I."

She stared at him. "I don't understand."

"Moropulos is in trouble with Steppe. He has been drinking and some of Steppe's watchers have reported that he made an ass of himself, gave away some business secrets, and that sort of thing. Steppe is naturally furious and Moropulos wants to prove an alibi."

"That he was dining with us; how absurd! Where?"

"In my flat."

She surveyed him steadily. He was unusually excited. She had never seen Ronnie like that before. Nothing ever ruffled him. "Of course, I can't tell such a lie, even to save your friend," she said. "I was dining at home, although father has such a wretched memory that he won't be sure whether I was here or not."

"Where did you meet the Paynters; did they call for you?" he asked eagerly, and she shook her head.

"No, I met them at Queen's Hall. I was late and they had gone into the Hall. But that is beside the point. I am not helping you in this matter."

"But you must, you must!" He was frenzied. "Moropulos knows... he saw you come into the flat... and come out."

There was a dead silence.

"When... on that night?"

She walked across the room, her hands clasped behind her. Ronnie had expected hysteria... he marvelled at her calm.

"Very well," she said at last. "I dined with you and Moropulos. You had better invent another lady. Let us be decent, even in our inventions. And Mr. Moropulos entertained us with talk about... what?"

"Anything"—nervously; "I know that you think I'm a brute... I can't tell you what I think about myself."

"I can save you the trouble. You think you are in danger, and you are hating me because I am the cause."

"Beryl!"

She smiled. "Perhaps I am being uncharitable. The complex of this situation doesn't allow for very clear thinking. I may take another view next week. Will

you post this letter for me as you go out?"

He went down the stairs dumbfounded. Her quietness, the unshaken poise of her, staggered him. "Will you post this letter?"!... as if his visit had been an ordinary call.

He glanced at the envelope. It was addressed to a Bond Street milliner, and on the back flap was scribbled: 'Send the blue toque also'.

"H'm," said Ronnie, as he dropped the letter into the post box. He felt in some indefinable way that he was being slighted.

CHAPTER XXV

MRS. COLEBROOK acclaimed it as a miracle and discovered in the amazing circumstance the result of her industrious praying. "Every night I've said, 'Please God make Christina well, amen'." The osteopath, a short, bearded man, who perspired with great freedom, grunted his grudging satisfaction. Christina was not well by any means, but for the first time in her life she stood upon her own two feet. Only for a few seconds, with Mrs. Colebrook supporting her on the one side and the bone doctor on the other, but she stood.

"Yes... not bad after a month's work," said the osteopath. "You must have massage for those back muscles; they are like wool. If you don't mind a man doing it, you couldn't do better than persuade Mr. Sault. He is an excellent masseur... I found this out by accident. The evening he came to engage me, I'd been dining out and sprained my ankle getting out of a cab... young lady, I observe your suspicion. I am an abstainer and have not touched strong wines for twenty years. I came in feeling bad and was not inclined to discuss spines with him or anybody. But he insisted on massaging the limb... said he had learnt the art in an hospital somewhere... yes, ask him. Otherwise it will cost you half a guinea a day."

Evie heard all this early in the afternoon. It was early-closing day and she came home to lunch. She flew up the stairs and literally flung herself upon Christina. "You darling!... Isn't it wonderful! Mother says you stood up by yourself... Oh, Chris, didn't it feel splendid?"

"Mother is a romancer," smiled Christina. "I certainly did stand on my feet with considerable assistance, and it felt like hell—pardon the language—

physically. Spiritually and intellectually it was a golden moment of life. Oh, Evie, I'm gurgling with joy inside, and the prospect of Ambrose rubbing my back fills me with bliss."

"Ambrose... Mr. Sault?" Christine inclined her bead gravely. "But not your bare back?"

"I fear so," said Christina. "I knew this would be a shock to you."

"Don't be silly, Chris .. it is all right, I suppose," and then with a happy laugh, "of course it is all right. I'm wrong. I think I must have an unpleasant mind. You've always said I had .. well you've hinted. I'd even let him rub my back if it would do you good."

"You Lady Godiva," murmured Christine admiringly, "quo vadis?"

"That means where am I going? I always mix it up with that other one, 'the sign of the cross'. I am going to a matinee with a girl from the shop. She had tickets sent to her by a gentleman who knows the manager. It will be a bad play; you can't get tickets for a success. How is your Ambrose? I haven't seen him for weeks. Ronnie says that ere has been an awful lot of trouble at the office..."

"Oh! Has he an office?"

"I don't know... some office Ronnie is connected with. He's a director, my dear. I saw his name in the paper... Ronnie I mean."

"Has Ambrose been in trouble?"

"No, some other man; I forget his name. It is foreign, and he drinks. But it has all blown over now."

Christina sighed. "I don't see how Ambrose came into it, even after your lucid explanation."

"Ambrose, that is to say, Mr. Sault, is supposed to look after... whatever his name is. It sounds like the name of a cigarette. He is supposed to stop him drinking. And he found this... Moropulos, that's the name, in a bar and hauled him out, and Moropulos fought him... I don't know the whole story, but I do know that there was a row."

"Is the cigarette person still able to walk about?" asked Christina incredulously.

"Yes, but they are very bad friends. Moropulos says he'll get even with Sault."

"Unhappy man," said Christina, "Ronnie is getting quite communicative, isn't he?"

"We're real friends," answered the girl enthusiastically, 'we're just pals! I sometimes feel... I don't know whether I ought to tell you this. But I will. I sometimes feel that I really don't want to marry Ronnie at all. I feel that I could be perfectly happy, married to somebody else, if I had him for a friend. Isn't that queer?"

Christina thought it was queer and wondered if this attitude of mind was Evie's very own or whether it had grown by suggestion. But she had evidently done Ronnie an injustice in this instance.

"I've never told Ronnie this," said Evie. "I don't fancy that he would understand, but I did ask him whether he thought that he could be friends with Beryl Merville if she married somebody else. I only asked him for fun, just to hear what he would say. My dear, how he loathes that girl! I could tell he was sincere. He was so furious! He said that if she married he would never visit her house, and he wished he had never seen her."

Christina made no response. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that Beryl Merville must know the man very well to have excited such hatred, but she observed the truce.

When Ambrose put in an appearance late in the evening she learnt that he had heard from the osteopath. His large smile told her that even before he spoke. "Now, Ambrose, did he say anything about massage?"

Ambrose nodded. "I'll do it if you let me," he said simply, 'my hands aren't as awkward as they look."

Later her mother, who had been an interested spectator of the treatment, spoke a great truth. "It seems natural for Mr. Sault to be rubbing your back, Christina. He's just like a... a soul with hands... sounds ridiculous I know, but that is what I felt. He wasn't a man and he wasn't a woman. It seemed natural somehow... how did you feel about it?"

"Mother, I begin to believe that I got my genius from you," said Christina, patting a rumpled sheet into place. "I couldn't have bettered that; 'a soul with hands'!"

Mrs. Colebrook blinked complacently. "I've always been a bit clever in describing people," she said. "Do you remember how I used to call Evie 'spitfire'?"

"Don't spoil my illusions, mother—'a soul with hands' entitles you to my

everlasting respect. And don't tell Evie, or she'll talk about his feet. He has big feet, I admit, though he makes less noise than Evie. And he snores, I heard him last night."

CHAPTER XXVI

THERE came a day when Christina put her feet to the grimy pavement of the street and walked slowly, but without assistance, to Dr. Merville's car, borrowed through Beryl for the afternoon. It was a cold, clear day in January, the wind was in the east and the gutters of Walter Street were covered with a thin film of ice. A momentous occasion, for in addition to other wonders, Christina was wearing her first hat! Evie had chosen and bought it. The woollen costume was one from Mrs. Colebrook's wash tub. Ambrose had provided a grey squirrel coat. It had appeared at the last moment. But the hat was a joy. Christina had worn it in bed all the morning, sitting up with pillows behind her and a mirror in her hand. "Lend me that powder-puff of yours, Evie," she said recklessly, "my skin is perfect... I admit it. But I can't appear before the curious eyes of the world wearing my own complexion. It wouldn't be decent."

"If you take my advice," suggested the wise Evie, "you'll put a dab of rouge on your cheeks. Nobody will know."

"I am no painted woman," said Christina, "I am poor, but I am respectable. Ambrose would think I had a fever and send for the osteopath. No, a little powder. My eyes are sufficiently languorous without eye-black, I think. It must be powder or nothing."

Ambrose did not accompany them, and Evie and Mrs. Colebrook were her attendants in the drive to Hampstead.

Beryl saw them; she had arranged with Ambrose and the chauffeur that the car should go past the house, and she watched from behind a curtained window. So that was Evie; it was the first time she had seen her... no, not the first time. She was the girl to whom Ronnie had been speaking that holiday morning when she had passed them in the park. She was very pretty and petite. The kind Ronnie liked. She lingered at the window long after they had passed, loath to face an unpleasant interview.

She knew it would be unpleasant: her father had been so anxious to please her

at lunch; his nervousness was symptomatic. He wanted to have a little talk with her that afternoon, he said; she guessed the subject set for discussion.

Sitting before the drawing-room fire, she was reading when he came in, rubbing his hands and wearing a cheerful smile which was wholly simulated.

"Ah, there you are, Beryl. Now we can have a chat. I get very little time nowadays."

He poked the fire vigorously and sat down.

"Beryl..." he seemed at some loss for an opening, "I had a talk with Steppe the other day... we were talking about you."

"Yes."

"Steppe is very fond of you... loves you." Dr. Merville cleared his throat. "Yes, he loves you, Beryl. A fine man, a little rough, perhaps, but a fine man and a very rich man."

"Yes?" said Beryl again, and he grew more agitated.

"Yes... of course it is heartbreaking for me... I feel terrible about it all... but it is a good match, Beryl. He is one of the richest men in town... it is for your good, dear."

"I don't know why you say 'Yes, yes'," he said irritably, "a young girl doesn't as a rule hear such things without displaying some... well, some emotion. How do you feel about the matter?"

"About marrying Mr. Steppe? I suppose you mean that? I can't marry him: I don't wish to."

"I'm sure you would learn to love him, Beryl."

She shook her head.

"Impossible. I'm sorry, father, especially if you wish me to marry him. But it is impossible."

The doctor stared gloomily into the fire.

"You must do as you wish. I cannot conscientiously urge you to make any sacrifice... he is a rough man and I'm afraid he will take your refusal badly. I don't mind what he does... really. I've made a hash of things... it was madness ever to invest a penny, I had a hundred and fifty thousand when I came into this house. And now... !"

She listened with a cold feeling in her heart.

"Do you mean... that you depend upon the goodwill of Mr. Steppe... that if you were to break your connection with him and his companies your position would be affected?..."

He nodded.

"I am afraid that is how matters stand," he said, "But I forbid you to take that into consideration."

Yet he looked at her so eagerly, so wistfully, that she knew his lofty statements to be so many words by which he expressed principles long since dead. The form of his vanished code showed dimly through the emptiness his speech.

"I am a modern father... I believe that a girl's hand should go where it will. Girls do not marry men to please their families, except in melodrama, and fathers do not ask such a ghastly sacrifice. I should have been glad if you had thought kindly of Steppe. It would have made my course much more smooth. However..."

He got up, stooped to poke the fire again, hung the poker timidly on the iron and straightened himself.

"Let me think it over," she said, not looking at him.

Not until he was out of the room did he feel comfortable.

She had been prepared for this development. Steppe had been a constant visitor to the house and his rare flowers filled the vases of every room except hers. And her father had hinted and hinted. That Dr. Merville was heavily in the debt of her suitor she could guess. Steppe had told her months before that he had come to the rescue of the doctor. Only she had hoped that so crude an alternative would not be placed before her, though she knew that such arrangements were not altogether confined to the realms of melodrama. At least two friends of hers had married for a similar reason. A knightly millionaire boot maker had married Lady Sylvia Frascommon, and had settled the Earl of Farileigh's bills at a moment when that noble earl was dodging writs in bankruptcy. She could look at the matter more calmly because she had come to a dead end. There was nothing ahead, nothing. She did not count Ambrose Sault's love amongst the tangibilities of life. That belonged to herself. Steppe would marry that possession. It was as much of her, as hands and lips, except that it was beyond his enjoyment.

In the midst of her examination, her father came in. "There is one thing I forgot to say, dear... Ronnie, who is as fond of you as any of us, thinks that you

ought to marry... he says that he'll be glad to see you married to Steppe... I thought it was fine of Ronnie."

"Shut the door, father, please; there's a draught," said Beryl.

Dr. Merville returned to his study shaking his head. He couldn't understand Beryl.

So Ronnie approved! She sat, cheek in hand, elbow on knee, looking at the fire. Steppe did not seem so impossible after that. Ronnie! He would approve of course. What terrors he must have endured when he discovered that Steppe was his rival! What mental agonies! An idea came to her.

She went down to the hall where the telephone was and gave his number.

"Hello... yes."

"Is that you, Ronnie?"

"Yes... is that you, Beryl?" His voice changed. She detected an anxious note. "How are you?... I meant to come round yesterday. I haven't seen you for an age."

"Father says that you think I ought to marry Steppe."

There was an interval.

"Did you hear what I said?" she asked.

"Yes... of course it is heartbreaking for me... I feel terrible about it all... but it is a good match, Beryl. He is one of the richest men in town... it is for your good, dear."

She nodded to the transmitter and her lips twitched.

"I can't marry him without telling him, can I, Ronnie?"

She heard his gasp. "For God's sake don't be so mad, Beryl! You're mad! What good would it do... it would break your father's heart... you don't want to do that, do you? It would be selfish and nothing good could come of it..."

She was smiling delightedly at her end of the wire, but this he could not know.

"I will think about it," she said.

"Beryl... Beryl... don't go away. You mustn't, you really mustn't... I'm not thinking about myself... it is you... your father. You won't do such a crazy thing, will you? Promise me you won't... I am entitled to some consideration."

"I'll think about it," she repeated, and left him in a state of collapse.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT happened sometimes that Mr. Moropulos had extraordinary callers at his bleak house in Paddington. They came furtively after dark, and were careful to note whether or not they were followed. Since few of these made appointments and were unexpected, it was essential that the Greek should be indoors up to ten o'clock. Therefore he failed in his trust when his unquenchable thirst drew him away from business. He was maintained in comfort by Jan Steppe to receive these shy callers. Mr. Moropulos was not, as might be supposed, engaged in a career of crime as we understand crime. The people who came and whom he interviewed briefly in his sitting room were respectable persons who followed various occupations in the city, and would have swooned at the thought of stealing a watch or robbing a safe. But it was known in and about Threadneedle Street, Old Broad Street, and in various quaint alleyways and passages where bareheaded clerks abound, that information worth money could be sold for money. A chance-heard remark, the fag-end of a conversation in a board-room, heard between the opening and closing of a door; a peep at a letter, any of these scraps of gossip could be turned into solid cash by the bearded Greek.

It was surprising how quickly his address passed round, and even more surprising how very quickly Moropulos had organized an intelligent service which was unique as it was pernicious. He paid well, or rather Steppe did, and the returns were handsome. A clerk desiring to participate in a rise of value which he knew was coming, could buy a hundred shares through Moropulos, and that without the expenditure of a cent. Moropulos knew the secrets of a hundred offices; there were few business amalgamations that he did not know about weeks in advance.

When the Westfontein Gold Mines published a sensational report concerning their properties, a report which brought their stock from eight to nothing, few people knew that Moropulos had had the essential part of the report in his pocket the day after it arrived in London. It cost Steppe three thousand pounds, but was worth every penny. The amount of the sum paid was exaggerated, but it was also spread abroad. And in consequence, Mr. Moropulos was a very busy man.

He was in his sitting-room on that shivering winter night. A great fire roared in

the chimney, a shaded lamp was so placed that it fell upon the book, and the occupant of the sofa could read in comfort. On a small eastern table was a large tumbler full of barley-water. From time to time Mr. Moropulos sipped wryly.

It was nearing ten and he was debating within himself whether he should go to bed or test his will by a visit to a cafe where he knew some friends of his would be, when he heard the street door slam and looked over his shoulder. It could only be Sault or...

The door opened and Jan Steppe came in, dusting the snow from the sleeve of his coat. It was a handsome coat, deeply collared in astrakhan, and its lining was sealskin, as Mr. Moropulos dill not fail to observe.

"Alone, huh?" said Steppe. He glanced at the barley-water by the Greek's side and grinned sardonically. "That's the stuff, not a headache in a bucketful!"

"Nor a cheerful thought," said Moropulos. "What brings you this way, Steppe?"

"I want to put something in the safe." Sault's invention stood on a wooden frame behind a screen. "Have to be careful about this word... give me some more light," said Steppe, at the dial. Moropulos rose wearily and turned a switch. "That's better... huh. Got it!" The door swung open, and taking a small package from his pocket, the big man tossed it in. "Got something here, huh?" He pulled out an envelope. There was a wax seal on the back. "'The photograph'?" he read, and frowned at the other.

"It is mine," said Moropulos. "Nothing to do with the business?"

"Nothing." Steppe threw it back and turned the dial. "Nothing new, huh?" He glanced at the barley-water again. "Where's Sault?"

"He goes home early. I don't see him again unless one of your hounds sends for him..."

Steppe's smile was half sneer. "You don't like Sault... a good fellow, huh?"

Moropulos wrinkled his nose like an angry dog. His beard seemed to stiffen and his eyes blazed. "Like him... he's not human, that fellow! Nothing moves him, nothing. I tried to smash him up with a bottle, but he took it away from me as if I were a child. I hate a man who makes me feel like that... if he hadn't got my gun away I'd have laid him out. It would be fine to hurt the devil... and he is a devil, Steppe. Inhuman. Sometimes I give him a newspaper to read—just for the fun of it. But it never worries him."

"Don't try. He's a bigger man than you. You want to rouse him, huh? The day you do, God help you! I don't think you will. That's how I feel about him. He's cold. Chilly as a Druid's hell. He is dangerous when he's quiet... and he's always quiet."

"He is no use to me. It is a waste of money keeping him. I'll give you no more trouble."

Steppe pursed his lips until his curling black moustache bristled like the end of a brush. It was a grimace indicative of his scepticism. He had reason. "Leave it. Sault will not give you any bother. I don't want strangers here, huh? Cleaners who are spying detectives."

Moropulos took his book again as his employer went out. But he did not read. His eyes looked beyond the edge of the page, his mind was busy. Detestation of Ambrose Sault was not assumed, as he had simulated so many likes and dislikes. Sault's maddening imperturbability, his immense superiority to the petty annoyances with which his daily companion fed him, his contempt for the Greek's vulgarity, these things combined to the fire of the man's hatred. They were incompatibles—it was impossible to imagine any two men more unlike. Moropulos was one whose speech was habitually coarse; his pleasures coarse and elemental. He delighted to talk of his conquests, cheap enough though they were. It pleased him, beyond normal understanding, to bring Beryl Merville into the category of easy women. He had never doubted that she was bad. There were no other kind of women to Moropulos. Suspecting, before there were grounds for suspicion, he had watched and justified his construction of the girl's friendship with Ronnie Morelle. He was certain when he watched her come out of the Knightsbridge flat that if he had been fortunate he would have seen her there before, perhaps the previous night.

Beryl was no less in his eyes than she had been. She was bad. All women were bad, only some were more particular than others in choosing their partners in sin.

He had reason to meet Ronald Morelle the next morning, and returning he brought news. Ambrose was clearing the snow from the steps and path before the house when he arrived. "Come in." He was bubbling over with excitement. "I've got a piece of interesting information."

Ambrose in his deliberate fashion put away broom and spade before he joined the other.

"You know Beryl Merville, don't you? Steppe is marrying her." He had no other idea than to pass on the news, and create something of the sensation which its recital had caused him. But his keen eyes did not miss the quick lift

of Sault's head or the change that came to his face. Only for the fraction of a second, and then his mask descended again. "What do you think of it, Sault? Some girl, eh?"

He added one of own peculiar comments. "Who told you?"

"What do you think of it, Sault? Some girl, eh ?"

"Ronald Morelle. I don't suppose he minds now. Lucky devil, Steppe. God! If I had his money!"

Ambrose walked slowly away, but his enemy had found the chink in his armour, he was certain of it. It was incredible that a man like Ambrose Sault would feel that way, but he would swear that Ambrose was hurt. Here he he was wrong. Ambrose was profoundly moved; but he was not hurt.

That day Moropulos said little. It was on the second and third days that he went to work with an ingenuity that was devilish, to break farther into the crevice he had found.

Ambrose made little or no response. The sliest, most outrageous innuendo he passed as though it had not been spoken. Moropulos was piqued and angry. He dare not go further for fear Sault complained to Steppe. That alone held him within bounds. But the man was suffering. Instinctively he knew that. Suffering in a dumb, hopeless way that found no expression.

On the Friday night. Ambrose returned to his lodging looking very tired. Christina was shocked at his appearance.

"Ambrose... what is the matter?"

"I don't know, Christina... yes, I know. Moropulos has been trying, very trying. I find it much more difficult to hold myself in, I suppose I'm getting old and my will-power is weakening."

She stroked the hand that lay on the arm on the chair (for she was sitting up) and looked at him gravely.

"Ambrose, I feel that you have given me some of your

strength. Do you remember how you gave it to mother?"

He shook his head,

"No, not you... I purposely didn't. I've a loving heart for you, Christina. I shall carry you with me beyond life."

"Why do you say that tonight?" she asked, with an odd little pain at her heart.

"I don't know. Steppe wants me to go down with Moropulos to his place in the country. Moropulos has asked me before, but this time Steppe has asked me. I don't know..."

He shook his head wearily. She had never seen him so depressed. It was as if the spirit of life had suddenly burnt out. "I hope you will be as you say, Ambrose, but, my dear, you are overtired; we oughtn't to discuss souls and eternities and stuff like that. It is sleep you want, Ambrose."

"I'm not sleepy." He bent over her, his big hand on her head. "I am glad you are well," he said. She heard him go downstairs and out of the house, late as it was.

A few minutes afterwards Evie came in. "Where is Sault going?" she asked. "I saw him stalking up the street as though it belonged to him. And oh, Chris, what do you think Ronnie says? Mr. Steppe is marrying that girl that came here... Beryl Merville!"

"Fine," said Christine absently. She knew now, and her heart was bursting with sorrow for the man who had gone out into the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"THE PANTHEON" occupied an acre of land that had once been part of a monastery garden. Until Mr. Moropulos with his passion for Hellenic nomenclature had so named it, the old cottage and its land were known by the curious title: "Brother-god Farm', or as it appeared in ancient deeds, 'The Farmstead of Brother-of-God'. For Mr. Moropulos there was peculiar pleasure in setting up in the monastery land such symbols of the monotheistic religion of ancient Greece as he could procure.

The house itself consisted of one large kitchen-hall on the ground floor, and two bedrooms above. A more modern kitchen had been built on to the main walls by a former tenant. The cottage was well-furnished, and; unlike his home in Paddington, the floors were carpeted—a piece of needless extravagance from the Greek's point of view, but one which he had not determined, for he had bought the cottage and the furniture together, the owner being disinclined to sell the one without the other. The garden was the glory of

the place in the summer. It had a charm even on the chill afternoon that Ambrose deposited his bag at the white gate. A wintry sun was setting redly, turning to the colour of wine the white face of the fields. In the hollows of the little valley beyond the cottage, the mists were lying in smoky pools. His hands on the top of the gate, he gazed rapturously at such a sunset as England seldom sees. Turquoise... claret... a blue that was almost green... Drawing a long breath he picked up his bag and walked into the house.

"Go down and look after Moropulos. He is weakening on that barley-water diet... he told me himself." Thus Steppe. His servitor obeyed without question, he knew that the shadow of death was upon him. Moropulos was stretched in a deep mission-chair, his slippered feet toward the hearth. And he had begun his libations early. On the floor within reach of his hand was a tumbler, full of milky-white fluid. There was a sugar-basin... a glass jug half filled with water, and a tea strainer. Ambrose need not look for the absinthe bottle. The accessories told the story.

"Come in... shut the door, you big fool... no you don't!" Moropulos snatched up the tumbler from the floor and gulped down its contents. "Ha—a! That is good, my dear... good! Sit down!" He pointed imperiously to a chair.

"You'll have no more of that stuff to—night, Moropulos." Ambrose gathered up the bottle and took it into the kitchen. The Greek chuckled as he heard it smash. He had a store... a little locker in the tool shed; a few bottles in his bedroom.

"Come back!" he roared. "Come, you big pig! Come and talk about Beryl. Ah! What a girl. What a face for that hairy gorilla to kiss!" Sault heard, but went on filling a kettle, and presently the shouts subsided. "When I call you, come!" commanded Moropulos sulkily, as Ambrose returned with a steaming cup of tea in his hand.

"Drink this," said Ambrose. Moropulos took the cup and saucer and flung them and their contents into the fireplace. "For children, for young ladies, but not for a son of the south... an immortal, Sault! For young ladies, yes .. for Beryl the beautiful." A hand gripped him by the beard and jerked his head up. The pain was exquisite—his neck was stretched, a thousand hot needles tortured his chin and cheek where the beard dragged. For the space of a second he looked into the grey eyes, fathomless. Then Ambrose broke his grip and the man staggered to his feet mouthing, grimacing, but silent. Nor did Ambrose speak. His eyes had spoken, and the half-drunken man dropped back into his chair, cowering. When Sault returned to the room after unpacking his bag. Moropulos was still sitting in the same position. "Do you want anything cooked for your dinner?"

"There is... fish... and chops... you'll find them in the kitchen." He sat, breathing quickly, listening to the sizzle and splutter of frying meat. Ambrose Sault shut the door that led into the kitchen, and the Greek stood up, listening. From beneath a locker he produced a bottle, quietly he took up the water-jug and sugar and stole softly up to his room. He locked the door quietly, put down his impedimenta and opened a drawer of an old davenport. Underneath an assortment of handkerchiefs and underwear, he found an ivory- handled revolver, a slender-barrelled, plated thing, that glittered in his hand. It was loaded; he made sure of that. His hatred of Ambrose Sault was an insensate obsession. He had pulled him by the beard, an intolerable insult in any circumstances. But Sault was a nigger... he sat down on the only chair in the room and prepared a drink...

"Are you coming down? I've laid the table, and the food is ready," Ambrose called from the bottom of the stairs.

"Go to hell!"

"Come along, Moropulos. What is the sense of this? I am sorry I touched you."

"You'll be more sorry," screamed the Greek. His voice sounded deafening, near, for he had opened the door. You dog, you..." Mr. Moropulos had a wider range of expletives than most men. Ambrose listened without listening. Pulling out a chair from the table, he sat down and began his dinner. He heard the feet of the drunkard pacing the floor above, heard the rumble of his voice, and then the upper door was flung violently open and the feet of Moropulos clattered down the stairs. He had taken off his coat and his waistcoat. His beard flowed over a coloured silk shirt, beautifully embroidered. But it was the thing in his hand that Ambrose saw, and seeing, rose.

The man's face was while with rage; an artery in his neck was pulsating visibly. "You pulled my beard... you ignorant... negro... you nigger thing... you damned convict! You're going on your knees to lick my boots... my boots, not Beryl's, you old fool!..."

Ambrose did not move from the position he had taken on the other side of the table.

"Down, down, down!" shrieked Moropulos, his pistol waving wildly. Ambrose Sault obeyed, but not as Moropulos had expected. Suddenly he dropped out of view behind the edge of the white cloth and in the same motion he launched himself under the table, toward the man. In a second he had gripped him by the ankles and thrown him... the pistol dropped almost into his hands.

Moropulos stumbled to his feet and glared round at his assailant. "I hope to God you love that woman; I hope to God you love her... you do, you old fool! You love her... Ronald Morelle's mistress! I know! She stayed a night at his flat... other nights, too... but I saw her as she came out... I photographed her!"

"You photographed her as she came out?" repeated Ambrose dully.

A grin of glee parted the bearded lips. "I've hurt you, damn you! I've hurt you! And I'm going to tell Steppe, and tell her father, and everybody!"

"You liar." Sault's voice was gentle. "You filthy man. You saw nothing."

"I didn't, eh? Oh, I didn't! Morelle admitted it... admitted it to me. And I've got the photograph in a safe place, with a full account of what happened!"

"In the safe!" Moropulos had made a mistake, a fatal mistake, he realized it even as he had spoken. "And you... and Morelle... have her in your cruel hands!" So softly did he speak that it seemed to the man that it was a whisper he heard. Sault held in his hands the pistol. He looked at it thoughtfully. "You must not hurt her," he said.

Moropulos stood paralysed for a moment, then made a dart for the door. His hand was on the latch when Ambrose Sault shot him dead.

BOOK THE THIRD

CHAPTER XXIX

AMBROSE looked a very long time at the inert heap by the door. He seemed to be settling some difficulty which had arisen in his mind, for the gloom passed from his face, and, pocketing the revolver slowly, he walked across to where Paul Moropulos lay. He was quite dead.

"I am glad," said Ambrose. Lifting the body, he laid it in the chair; then he took out the pistol again and examined it. There were five live cartridges. He only needed one. In the kitchen he put on the heavy overcoat he had been wearing when he arrived. Returning, he lit the candle of a lantern and went out into the back of the house where Moropulos had erected a small army hut to serve as his garage. He broke the lock and wheeled out the little car. Ambrose

Sault was in no hurry; his every movement was deliberate. He tested the tank, filled it, put water in the radiator, then started the engines and drove the car through the stable gates on to the main road, before, leaving the engines running, he paid another visit to the house and blew out the lamp. As he reached the dark road again he saw a man standing by the car. It proved to be a villager.

"Somebody heard a shot going up this way. I told 'un it was only Mr. Moropuly's old car back-firing."

"It was not that," said Ambrose, as he stepped into the car. "Good night." He drove carefully, because his life was very precious this night. He thought of Christina several times, but without self-pity. Christina would get well... and her love would endure. It was of the quality which did not need the flesh of him. Ronald Morelle must die. There was no other solution. He must die, not because he had led the woman to his way; that was a smaller matter than any, and honestly meant nothing to Ambrose. Ronald's offence was his knowledge. He knew: he had told. He would tell again.

A policeman stopped him as he drove through Woking. He was asked to produce a license, and when none was forthcoming, his name and address were taken. Ambrose gave both truthfully. It was a lucky chance for the policeman. Afterwards he gave evidence and became important: was promoted sergeant on the very day that Steppe sneered at a weeping man. That was seven weeks later... in March, when the primroses were showing in Brother-of-God Farm.

Ambrose knew Ronald's flat. He had gone there once with Moropulos, and he had waited outside the door whilst Moropulos was interviewing Ronnie. Nine o'clock was striking as the car drew up before the flat... Ronnie heard it through the closed casement. Nine o'clock? He dropped his pen and leant back in his chair. What was the cause of that cold trickling sensation? His mouth went dry. He used to feel like that in air raids. A bell rung. "Francois..." Louder—"Francois!"

"Pardon, m'sieur." Francois came out of his pantry half awake.

"The door." Who was it? thought Ronnie... he jumped up.

"What do you want, Sault?"

Ambrose looked round at the waiting servant.

"You," he said. "I want to know the truth... first that man should go."

Ronnie flushed angrily. "I certainly cannot allow you to decide whether my

servant goes or remains. Have you come from Mr. Steppe?" Ambrose hesitated. Perhaps it was a confidential message from Steppe, thought Ronnie. This uncouth fellow often served as a messenger. "Wait outside the door, Francois—no, outside the lobby door."

"I haven't come from Steppe."

Suddenly Ronnie remembered. "Steppe said you had gone to the country with Moropulos—where is he?"

"Dead."

Ronnie staggered back, his pale face working. He had a horror of death. "Dead?" he said hollowly, and Sault nodded.

"I killed him."

A gasp. "God!... Why?"

"He knew... he said you had told him. He knew because he was outside your flat all night and photographed her as she went out."

The blood of the listener froze with horror. "I—I don't know what you're talking about... who is the 'she'?"

"Beryl Merville."

"It is a lie... absurd... Miss Merville!... Here?" He found his breath insufficient for his speech. Something inside him was paralysed: his words were disjointed.

"It is true... she was here. She told me."

"You... you're mad! Told you! It is a damned lie! She was never here. If Moropulos said that, I'm glad you've killed him!"

"He took a photograph and wrote a statement; you know about that because he spoke to you and you admitted it all."

"I swear before God that Moropulos has never spoken to me. I would have killed him if he had. The story of the photograph is a lie... he invented it. That was his way—where is this picture?"

Ambrose did not answer. Was this man speaking the truth? His version was at least plausible. He must go at once to the house in Paddington and get the envelope... it must be destroyed. How would he know if Ronnie was speaking the truth?

Ronald Morelle, his teeth biting into his lip, saw judgement wavering. He was fighting for his life; he knew that Sault had come to kill him and his soul quivered. "Where is that picture?... I tell you it is an invention of that swine. He guessed... Even to you I will not admit that there is a word of truth in the story."

He had won. The hand that was thrust into the overcoat pocket returned empty.

"I will come back," said Sault.

When he reached the street he saw a man looking at the number-plate of his car. He took no notice, but drove off. He had to break a window to get into the house at Paddington. He had forgotten to bring his keys. That delayed his entrance for some while. He was in the room, and his fingers on the dial of the combination, when three men walked through the door. He knew who they were.

"I have a revolver in my pocket, gentlemen," he said. "I have killed Paul Moropulos, the owner of this house."

They snapped handcuffs upon his wrists. "Do you know the combination of this safe, Sault?" asked the tall inspector in charge. He had been reading a typewritten notice affixed to the top.

"Yes, sir," said Ambrose Sault.

"What is it?"

"I am not at liberty to say."

"What is in it... money?" No answer. The officer beckoned forward one of the uniformed men who seemed to fill the hall. "This safe is not to be touched, you understand? By anybody. If you allow the handle to be turned there will be trouble. Come along. Sault."

The handcuffs were unnecessary. They were also inadequate. In the darkness of the car: "I am very sorry, inspector... I have broken these things... I was feeling for a handkerchief and forgot." They did not believe him, but at the police station they found that be had spoken the truth. The bar of the cuff had been wrenched open, the steel catch of the lock torn away. "I did it absent-mindedly," said Ambrose, shame-faced. They put him into a cell where he went instantly to sleep.

The handcuffs became a famous exhibit which generations of young policemen will look upon with awe and wonder.

CHAPTER XXX

SUNDAY morning, and the bells of the churches calling to worship. Fog, thin and yellow, covered the streets. All the lamps in Jan Steppe's study were blazing, he had the African's hatred of dim lights and there was usually one lamp burning in the room he might be using, unless the sun shone. He paced up and down the carpet, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his mind busy. He was too well equipped a man to see danger in any other direction than where it lay. In moments of peril, he was ice. He could not be cajoled or stampeded into facing imaginary troubles, nor yet to turn his back upon the real threat. All his life he had been a fighter and had grown rich from his victories. Struggle was a normal condition of existence. Nothing had come to him that he had not planned and worked for, or to gain which he had not taken considerable risks.

The risks now were confined to Ambrose Sault and his fidelity to the trust which had been forced upon him by circumstances. He was satisfied that Ambrose would not speak. If he did... Steppe chewed on an unlighted cigar. The removal of Moropulos meant an inconvenience; Sault scarcely counted. The Greek was a nuisance and a danger, whilst his extravagance and folly had brought his associates to the verge of ruin. When the police arrested Ambrose Sault they took possession of the house in which he had been found. Amongst other things seized was the safe upon which Moropulos had pasted a typewritten notice in his whimsical language:

TO BURGLARS

AND ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

CAUTION

ANY ATTEMPT TO OPEN THIS SAFE,

EXCEPT BY THE EMPLOYMENT OF THE CORRECT CODEWORD,

WILL RESULT IN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SAFE'S CONTENTS.

DON'T TURN THE HANDLE

Steppe had seen the notice but had not read it. If it had not been affixed! One turn of the handle and every paper would have been reduced to a black pulp. He tried to remember what was stored in the cursed thing. There were drafts,

memoranda, letters from illicit agents, a record of certain transactions which would not look well... the Mackenzie Report! Later he remembered the photograph in the sealed envelope. Why had Sault gone to the safe? The report he had had from the police—they had been with him for the best part of the morning—was to the effect that Sault had been arrested at the moment he was swinging the dials. What was Sault after? He could not read: only documents were in the safe.

A footman appeared. "Who?... Morelle... show him in."

Ronnie was looking wan and tired. He had not recovered from his fright. "Well? I got your 'phone call. Don't 'phone me, d'ye hear... never! You get people listening-in at any time; just now the exchanges will be stiff with detectives. What were you trying to tell me when I shut you up?"

"About Sault... he came to me last night."

"Huh! Fine thing to talk about on the 'phone! Did you tell the police?"

"No, and I've ordered Francois to say nothing. After Sault went, I sent Francois to... to Moropulos' house. I knew Sault was going there."

"How did you know? And why did he come to you, anyway?"

The answer Ronnie had decided upon after much cogitation. "Oh... a rambling statement about Moropulos. I couldn't make head or tail of it. He said he was going to the house; I was afraid there would be trouble, so I sent Francois."

"You knew Moropulos was in Hampshire—I told you they were both there."

"I'd forgotten that. I don't want to come into this, Steppe—"

"What you want matters as much to me as what your Francois wants. If Sault says he came to your flat... but he won't. He'll say nothing... nothing." He looked keenly at the other. "That was all he said, huh? Just a rambling statement? Not like Sault that, he never rambles. Did he tell you that he'd killed Moropulos?" Ronnie hesitated. "He did! Try to speak the truth, will you? So he told you he had killed the Greco?"

"I didn't take him seriously. I thought he must be joking..."

"Fine joke, huh? Did Sault ever pull that kind of joke? You're not telling me the truth, Morelle... you'd better. I'm speaking as a friend. What did he come to talk to you about, huh? He never even knew you... had no dealings with you. Why should he come to you, after he'd committed a murder?"

"I've told you what happened," said Ronnie desperately. Again the quick

scrutiny. "Well... we shall see."

Ronald waited for a dismissal. "That sounds like the doctor's voice," he said suddenly.

Steppe strode to the door and opened it. "Why, Beryl, what brings you out? Good morning, doctor... yes, very bad news." Beryl came past him and went straight to Ronald. "Did you see him, Ronnie... did he come to you?"

"To me—of course not. I hardly knew him."

"Don't lie," said Steppe impatiently, "we're all friends here. What makes you think he went to Morelle, Beryl?"

"I wondered."

"But you must have had some reason?"

She met the big man's eyes coldly. "Must I be cross-examined? I had a feeling that he had been to Ronnie. I don't know why... why does one have these intuitions?"

"We saw it in the morning papers," explained the doctor. "I am fearfully worried; poor Moropulos, it is dreadful."

Steppe smiled unpleasantly. "He is the least troubled of any of us," he said callously, "and the next least is Sault. I saw the detective who arrested him. He said Sault went straight to sleep the moment they put him into the cell, and woke this morning cheerful. He must have nerves of iron."

"Can anything be done for him, Mr. Steppe?"

"He shall have the best lawyer—that Maxton fellow. He ought to be retained. As far as money can help, I'll do everything possible. I don't think it will make a scrap of difference."

"Mr. Steppe, you know what an evil man Moropulos was: you know the provocation he offered to Ambrose Sault, isn't it possible that the same cause that made him kill this man also sent him to the safe?"

"What safe is this... was that in the newspapers too?"

"Yes: he was not a thief, was he? He would not be trying to open the safe for the sake of getting money? He came to get something that Moropulos had."

"I wonder..." Steppe was impressed. "It may have been the photograph."

Ronnie checked the exclamation that terror wrung. He was livid.

"Do you know nothing about a photograph?" asked Steppe, with growing suspicion.

"No."

Here Beryl came to the rescue. When he saw her lips move, Ronnie expected worse. "Whatever it was, I am sure that the safe holds the secret. Ambrose would not kill a man unless... unless there was no other solution. Won't you open the safe, Mr. Steppe?"

"I'll be damned if I do!" he vociferated violently, "there is nothing there which would save him."

"Or justify him... or show the Greek as being what be was?"

Steppe could not answer this: he had another comment to offer. His attitude toward her had changed slightly since the big diamond had blazed upon her engagement finger: a reminder of obligations past and to come. "You're taking a hell of an interest in this fellow, Beryl?"

"I shall always take a hell of an interest in every matter I please," she said, eyeing him steadily. "Unless you satisfy me that nothing has been left undone that can be done for Ambrose, I shall go into the witness-box and swear to all that I know."

"My dear..." Her father's expostulation she did not hear.

Steppe broke into it. "There is something about this business which I don't understand. You and Moropulos and this fellow dined together once... or didn't you? Sounds mighty queer, but I won't inquire—now."

"You'll open the safe?"

"No!" Steppe's jaw set like a trap. "Not to save Sault or any other man! There is nothing there to save him, I tell you. But if there was... I wouldn't open it. Get that into your mind, all of you."

She regarded him thoughtfully, and then Ronnie. He looked in another direction. "I am taking the car, father."

Even Steppe did not ask her where she was going.

CHAPTER XXXI

CHRISTINA had known in the middle of the night when the police came to search Sault's room. A detective of high rank had been communicative; she heard the story with a serenity which filled the quaking Evie with wonder. If her face grew of a sudden peaked, a new glory glowed in her eyes.

Mrs. Colebrook wept noisily and continued to weep throughout the night. (Christina meditated upon an old suspicion of hers; that her mother regarded Ambrose Sault as being near enough the age of a lonely widow woman to make possible a second matrimonial venture. This view Evie held definitely.

"Oh, Chris... my dear, I am so sorry," whimpered the younger girl, when the police had taken their departure. "And I've said such horrid things about him. Chris, poor darling, aren't you feeling awful?... I am."

"Am I feeling sorry for Ambrose?" No." Christine searched her heart before she went on. "I'm not sorry. Ambrose was so inevitably big. Something tremendous must come to him; it couldn't be otherwise."

"I was afraid something might happen." Evie shook her head wisely. "This Greek man was very insulting. Ronnie told me that. And if poor Ambrose lost his temper..."

"Ambrose did not lose his temper." Christina's interrupted brusquely. "If Ambrose killed him, he did it because he intended doing it."

"In cold blood!" Evie was horrified.

"Yes! Ambrose must have had a reason. He tells me so... Don't gape, Evie, I'm not delirious. Ambrose is here. If I were blind and deaf and he sat on this bed he would be here, wouldn't he? Presence doesn't depend on seeing or hearing, or even feeling. He'd be here if he was not allowed to touch me, Go back to bed, Evie. I'm sleepy and I want to dream."

Beryl arrived soon after eleven. Evie was out, and Mrs, Colebrook, red- eyed, brought her up to the bedroom. Christina was sure the girl would come and had got up and dressed in readiness. Some time went by before they were alone. Mrs. Colebrook had her own grief to express, her own memories to retail. She left them at last singultient in her woe.

"Do you think you are strong enough to come to the house?" asked Beryl. "I could call for you this afternoon. Perhaps you would stay with me for a few days. I feel that I want you near to me." This without preliminary. They were too close to the elementals to pick nice paths to their objectives. They recognized and acknowledged their supreme interests as being common to

both.

"Mother would be glad to get rid of me for a day or two," said Christina.

"And I am sending my father abroad," nodded Beryl, with a faint smile. "When shall I come?"

"At three. You have not seen him?"

Beryl shook her head. "They are taking him into the country. We shall never see him again," she said simply. "He will not send for us. I am trying to approach it in all the proper spirit of detachment. He is a little difficult to live up to... don't you feel that?"

"If I say 'no' you will think I am eaten up with vanity," said Christina, with a quick smile. "I am rather exalted at the moment, but the reaction will come perhaps, in which case I shall want to hang on to your understanding."

At three o'clock the car arrived. Mrs. Colebrook saw her daughter go without regret. Christina was unnatural. She had not shed a tear... Mrs, Colebrook had heard her laughing and had gone up in a hurry to deal with hysteria, only to find her reading Stephen Leacock. She was appalled. "I am surprised at you, Christina! Here is poor... Mr. Sault in prison..." Words failed her, she could only make miserable noises.

"Mother has given me up," said Christina, when she was lying on a big settee in Beryl's room, her thin hand outstretched to the blaze. "Mother is a sort of female Hericletos... she finds her comfort in weeping."

Beryl was toasting a muffin at the fire. "I wish it were a weeping matter," she said, and went straight to the subject uppermost in her mind. "Moropulos took a photograph of me coming from Ronald Morelle's flat. I had spent the night there." She looked at the muffin and turned it. "Moropulos was... nasty. He must have told Ambrose that he knew."

Christina stirred on the sofa. "Did Ambrose know?"

"Yes; I told him. Not the name of the man, but he guessed, I think... I know the photograph was in the safe. He went to Ronnie. Perhaps to kill him. I imagine Ronnie lied for his life. The police were looking for Ambrose. The... the killing of Moropulos was discovered by a man who heard the shot, and the car had just passed through Woking after the police had been warned. A detective saw the car outside Ronnie's flat and followed it. I don't know all the details. Father has seen the inspector in charge of the case. Do you like sugar in your tea?"

"Two large pieces," said Christina; "I am rather a baby in my love of sugar. Do you love Ronnie very much, Beryl... you don't mind?"

"No... please. Love him? I suppose so; in a way. I despise him, I think he is loathsome, but there are times when I have a... wistful feeling. It may be sheer ungovernable... you know. Yet... I would make no sacrifice for Ronnie. I feel that. I have made no sacrifice. Women are hypocrites when they talk of 'giving'; they make martyrdom of their indulgence. Some women. And it pleases them to accept the masculine view of their irresponsibility. They love sympathy. For Ambrose I would sacrifice... everything. It is cheap to say that I would give my life, I have given more than my life. So have you."

Christina was silent.

"I have faced... everything," Beryl went on. She was sitting on a cushion between Christina and the fire, her teacup in her hands. "You have also... haven't you, Christina?"

"About Ambrose? Yes. He has passed. The law will kill him. He expects that. I think he would be uncomfortable if he was spared. He told me once that all the way out to New Caledonia he grieved about the people who had been guillotined for the same offence as he had committed. The unfairness of it! He never posed. Can you imagine him posing? I've seen him blush when I have joked about that funny little trick of his; have you noticed it? Rubbing his chin with the back of his hand?"

Beryl nodded. "He said he had tried to get out of the habit,"

Christina continued. "No, Ambrose couldn't pretend, or do a mean thing, or lie. I'm getting sentimental, my dear. Ambrose was distressed by sentimentality. Mother kissed his hand the day I stood for the first time. He was so bewildered!"

They laughed together.

"Are you marrying Steppe?" asked Christina. She felt no call to excuse the intimacy of the question.

"I suppose so. There are reasons. At present he is rather impersonal. As impersonal as a marriage certificate or a church. I have no imagination, perhaps. I shall not tell him. You don't think I should... about Ronnie, I mean?"

Christina shook her red head. "No. As I see it, no. If you must marry him, you are doing enough without handing him another kind of whip to flog you with."

"I told Ambrose: that was enough," said Beryl. "My conscience was for him.

Steppe wants no more than he gives."

The clock chimed five. Ambrose at that moment was passing through the black gates of Wechester County Prison, and Ronald Morelle was taking tea with Madame Ritti.

CHAPTER XXXII

MADAME lived in a big house at St. John's Wood. A South American minister had lived there, and had spent a fortune on its interior adornment. Reputable artists had embellished its walls and ceilings, and if the decorations were of the heavy florid type, it is a style which makes for grandeur. The vast drawing- room was a place of white and gold, of glittering candelabras and crimson velvet hangings. How Madame had come to be its possessor is a long and complicated story, The minister was recalled from London on the earnest representations of the Foreign Office and a budding scandal was denied its full and fascinating development.

Madame had many friends, and her house was invariably full of guests, Some stayed a long time with her. She liked girls about her, she told the innocent vicar who called regularly.

Her object (confessed Madame) was to give her guests a good time. She succeeded. She gave dances and entertained lavishly. She made one stipulation: that her visitors should not play at cards. There was no gambling at Alemeda House. The

attitude of the police authorities toward Madame Ritti's establishment was one of permanent expectancy. Good people, people with newspaper names, were guests of hers; there was nothing furtive or underhand about her parties. Nobody had ever seen a drunken man come or go. The guests were never noisy, only—Madame's girl guests were many. And none of the people who came to the dances were women.

Madame was bemoaning the scepticisms of the authorities to Ronnie. She was a very stout woman, expensively but tastefully dressed. Her lined face was powdered, her lips vividly red. A duller red was her hair, patently dyed. Dyed hair on elderly women has the effect of making the face below seem more fearfully old. She wore two ropes of pearls, and her hands glittered. Ronnie always went to Madame Ritti in his moments of depression; he had known her

since he was little more than a school-boy. She had a house in Pimlico then, not so big or so finely furnished, but she had girl guests.

"You know, Ronnie, I try to keep my house respectable. Is it not so? One tries and tries and it is hard work. Girls have so little brain. They do not know that men do not really like rowdiness. Is it not so? But these policemen... oh, the dreadful fellows! They question my maids... and it is so difficult to get the right kind of maid. Imagine! And the maids get frightened or impertinent'—she laid the accent on the last syllable. She was inclined to do this, otherwise her English was perfect.

The door opened and a girl lounged in. She was smoking a cigarette through a holder—a fair, slim girl, with a straight fringe of golden hair over her forehead. Ronnie smiled and nodded.

"Hello, Ronnie... where have you been hiding?"

Madame snorted. "Is it thus you speak? 'Hello, Ronnie', my word! And to walk in smoking! Lola, you have to learn."

"I did not know anybody else was here," replied the girl, instantly apologetic. "I'm awfully sorry, Madame." She hid the cigarette behind her and advanced demurely. "Why, it is Mr. Morelle! How do you do?"

"That is better, much better," approved Madame, nodding her huge head. "Always modesty in girls is the best. Is it not, Ronnie? To rush about, fla-fla-fla!" Her representation of gaucherie was inimitable. "That is not good. Men desire modesty. Especially Englishmen. Americans, also. The French are indelicate. Is it not so? Men wish to win; if you give them victory all ready, they do not appreciate it. That will do, Lola." She dismissed the girl with a stately inclination of her head.

"What have you been doing? We have not seen you for a very long time. You have other engagements? You must be careful. I fear for you sometimes."

She patted his arm. "You will come to night! You must dress, of course. I do not receive men who are not in evening dress. Grand habit, you understand? The war made men very careless. The smoking jacket... tuxedo... what do you call it, and the black tie, that is no longer good style. If you are to meet ladies you must wear a white bow and the white waistcoat with the long coat. I insist upon this. I am right, is it not so? All the men wear grand habit nowadays. What do you wish, Ronnie?"

"Nothing in particular; I thought I would come along. I am feeling rather sick of life today."

She nodded. "So you come to see my little friends. That is nice and they will be glad. All of them except Lola; she is going out to dinner tonight with a very great friend. You know your way; they are playing baccarat in the little salon. It amuses them and they play only for pennies."

Ronnie strolled off to seek entertainment in the little salon.

He was rung up at his flat that evening four times. At midnight Steppe called him up again. "M'sieur, he has not returned. No, m'sieur, not even to dress." Madame Ritti, for all the rigidity of her dress regulations, made exceptions seemingly.

Ronald was sleeping soundly when Steppe strode into his room and let up the blind with a crash. "Hullo?" Ronnie struggled up. "What time is it?"

"Where were you last night?" Steppe's voice was harsh, contumelious. "I spent the night ringing you up. Have the police been here?"

"Police, no. Why should they?"

"Why should they?" mimicked the visitor. "Because Saul stopped his car before the entrance of these flats. Luckily, they are not sure whether he went in or not. The detective who saw the car did not notice where Sault had come from. They asked me if there was anybody in Knightsbridge he would be likely to visit, and I said 'no', d'ye hear? I can't have you in their hands, Morelle. A cur like you would squeal and they would find out why he came. And I don't want to know."

The dark eyes bent on Ronnie were glittering.

"You hear? I don't want to know. Moropulos is dead In a week or two Sault will be dead and Beryl will be married. Why in hell do you jump?"

Ronnie affected a yawn and reached out for his dressing gown. "Of course I jumped," he was bold to say, even if he quaked inwardly. "You come thundering into my room when I'm half asleep and talk about police and Moropulos. Ugh, I haven't your nerve. If you want to know, Sault came here to ask me where you were. I thought he was a little mad and told him you were out of town.

"You're a liar... a feeble liar. Get up!"

He stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him, and when Ronnie joined him, he was standing before the mantelpiece, scowling at the Anthony.

"Now listen. They will make inquiries, and it is perfectly certain that they will

trace you as being a friend of Moropulos. I want to keep out of it, and so do you. At present they cannot connect me with the case, except that I had dealings with Moropulos. So had hundreds of others. If they get busy with you they will turn you inside out. I don't want you to get it into your head that I'm trying to save you trouble. I'm not. You could roast in hell and I'd not turn the hose on to you! I'm thinking of myself and all the trouble I should have if the police got you scared. Sault didn't come here, huh? Was anybody here beside you?" he asked quickly.

"Only Francois."

"Your servant!" Steppe frowned. "Can you trust him?"

Ronnie smiled. "Francois is discreet," he said complacently. A shadow passed across Steppe's dark face. "About the women who come here, yes; but with the police? That is different. Bring him in."

"I assure you, my dear fellow—"

"Bring him here!" roared the other.

Ronnie pressed a bell sulkily.

"Francois, you were here in the flat on Saturday night, huh?"

"Yes, m'sieur."

"You had no visitors, huh?" Francois hesitated. "No visitors, Francois; you didn't open the door to Sault—you know Sault? And if detectives come to ask you whether Sault was here, you will tell them the truth... you did not see him. Your master had no visitors at all; you saw nobody and heard nobody." He was looking into a leather pocket-book as he spoke, fingering the notes that filled one compartment.

Francois' eyes were on the note-case too. "Nobody came, m'sieur. I'll swear. I was in the pantry all the evening."

"Good," said Steppe, and slipped out four notes, crushing them into a ball. "Do you want to see me today?" asked Ronnie, and his uncomfortable guest glared.

"Not today. Nor tomorrow, nor any day. Where were you last night?"

Francois retired in his discretion.

"I went to Brighton—"

"You went to Ritti's—that..." He did not attempt any euphemism. Madame

Ritti's elegant establishment he described in two pungent words. "God! You're... what are you? I'm pretty tough, huh? Had my gay times and known a few of the worst. But I've drawn a line somewhere. Sault in prison and Moropulos dead... and you at Ritti's! What a louse you are!"

He stalked into the ball, shouted for Francois and dropped the little paper ball into his hand. Francois closed the door on him respectfully.

"A beast..." said Ronnie, disgusted.

CHAPTER XXXIII

INSTRUCTED by Steppe to defend him, a solicitor interviewed Ambrose Sault in his airy cell. He expected to find a man broken by his awful position. He found instead a cheerful client who, when he was ushered into the cell, was engaged in covering a large sheet of paper with minute figures. A glance at the paper showed wondering office or the law that Sault was working out a problem in mathematics. It was in fact a differential equation of a high and complex character.

"It is very kind of Mr. Steppe, but I don't know what you can do, sir. I killed Moropulos. I killed him deliberately. Poor soul! How glad it must have been to have left that horrible body with all its animal weaknesses! I was thinking about it last night; wondering where it would be. Somewhere in the spaces of the night... between the stars. Don't you often wonder whether a soul has a chemical origin? Some day clever men will discover. Souls have substance, more tenuous than light. Light has substance. You can bend light with a magnet; I have seen it done, The ether has substance; compared with other unknown elements, ether may he as thick as treacle. Supposing some supernatural scientist could examine the ether as we examine a shovel-full of earth? Is it not possible that the soul germ might be discovered? For a soul has no size and no weight and no likeness to man. Some people think of a soul as having the appearance of the body which it inspires. That is stupid. If death can cling to a point of a needle, and life grows from a microscopic organism, how infinitesimal is the cell of the soul! The souls of all men and all women of the world might be brought together and be lost in one atom of down on a butterfly's wing!"

The lawyer listened hopefully. Here was a case for eminent alienists. He saw the Governor of the jail as he went out. "I should very much like this man to

be kept under medical observation," he said. "From my conversation with him, I am satisfied that he isn't normal."

"He seems sane enough," replied the Governor, "but I will speak to the doctor; I suppose you will send specialists down?"

"I imagine we shall: he isn't normal. He practically refused discuss the crime... occupied the time by talking about souls and the size of 'em! If that isn't lunacy, then I'm mad!"

Steppe, to whom he reported, was very thoughtful. "He isn't mad. Sault is a queer fellow, but he isn't mad. He thinks about such things. He is struggling to the light—these are the words he used to me. Yes, you can send doctors down you wish. You have briefed Maxton?"

The lawyer nodded. "He wasn't very keen on the job. It is a little out of his line. Besides, he'll be made a judge in a year or two, and naturally he doesn't want to figure on the losing side. In fact, he turned me down definitely, but I was hardly back in my office—his chambers are less than five minutes' walk away—before he called me up and said he'd take the brief. I was surprised. He is going down to Wechester next week."

Steppe grunted. "You understand that my name doesn't appear in this except to Maxton, of course. I dare say that if I went on to the witness-box and and told all I knew about Moropulos and what kind of a brute he was my evidence might make a difference. But I'm not going, and your job is to keep me out of this, Smith."

Steppe's attitude was definite and logical. Sault, in a measure, he admired without liking. He saw in him a difficult and possibly dangerous man. That he had piqued his employer by his independence and courage did not influence Steppe one way or another. It was, in truth, the cause of his admiration. Sault was a man in possession of a dangerous secret. The folly of entrusting two other men with the combination word of the safe had been apparent from the first. He had been uneasy in his mind, more because of the unknown unreliability of Moropulos, than because e mistrusted Sault, and he had decided that the scheme for the storage of compromising documents possessed too many disadvantages. Without telling either of his associates, he had arranged to transfer the contents of the safe to his own custody when the disaster occurred. The safe was in the hands of the curious police. And the more he thought about the matter, the more undesirable it seemed that the safe should be opened.

It contained, amongst other things, the draft of a prospectus which had since been printed—the shares went to allotment two days before the murder. The

draft was in his own hand, a dozen sheets of pencilled writing, and it described in optimistic language certain valuable assets which were in fact non-existent. The financial press had remarked upon the fact, and not content with remarking once, had industriously continued to remark. Steppe had made a mistake, and it was a bad mistake. The cleverest of company promoters occasionally overstep the line that divides optimistic estimate from misrepresentation.

Fortunately his name did not appear on the prospectus; most unfortunately, he had preserved the draft. He had put it aside after Dr. Merville had copied the document. He had a reason for this. Jan Steppe seldom appeared in such transactions; even his name as vendor was skilfully camouflaged under the title of some stock-holding company. He was a supreme general who issued his orders to his commanders, gave them the rough plan of their operation and left them to lick it into shape. It sometimes happened that they deviated from his instructions, generally to the advantage of the scheme they were working; occasionally they fell short of his requirements, and then his draft proved useful in emphasising their error.

And this was only one of the safe's contents. There were others equally dangerous. Steppe believed that his servant would die. To say that he hoped he would die would be untrue. Belief makes hope superfluous. It was politic to spend money on the defence of a man who, being grateful, would also be loyal. He could accept Sault's death with equanimity, and without regret. With relief almost.

Evidence could be given which would show Moropulos in an unfavourable light. The Greek was a drunkard, his reputation was foul, he was provocative and quarrelsome. The weapon was his own (Sault had once taken it away from him), a plea of self-defence might succeed, but always providing that Mr. Jan Steppe would submit himself to cross-examination, and the reflected odium of acquaintance with the dead man and his killer. And Mr. Jan Steppe was determined to do nothing of the kind.

Sault would carry his secret to the grave unless... suppose this infernal photograph which Moropulos had put into the safe... suppose Sault mentioned this to the lawyers: but he would be loyal. Steppe, having faith in his loyalty, decided to let him die.

Sir John Maxton had changed his mind on the question of defending Sault as a result of an urgent request which ha reached him immediately after the solicitor had left his chamber He called on Beryl Merville on his way home. She was alone. Christina had returned to her mother, and Dr. Merville was a Cannes, mercifully ignorant of the comments which the financial newspapers

were passing upon a company of which he was president.

"I will undertake the defence, Beryl, though I confess it seems to me a hopeless proposition. I had just that moment refused the brief when you rang through. If I remember aright, I have met Sault... wasn't he that strong-looking man who came to Steppe's house the night we were dining there? I thought so. And Moropulos... who was he? Not the drunken fellow who made such a fool of himself? By jove! I hadn't connected them... I have only glanced at the brief, and I am seeing Sault on Friday. Fortunately I am spending the week-end in the country, and I can call in on my way. Smith is attending to the inquest and the lower Court proceedings. I saw Smith (he is the solicitor) this afternoon: he tells me that Steppe is paying for the defence. That is a professional secret, by the way. He also surprised me by expressing the view that Sault is mad."

Beryl smiled. "He is not mad," she said quickly, "why does he think so?"

Sir John humped his thin shoulders: a movement indicative of his contempt for the lawyer's opinion on any subject. "Apparently Sault talked about souls as though they were microbes. Smith, being a God-fearing man, was shocked. To him the soul stands in the same relationship to the body as the inner tube of a tyre to the cover. He is something of a spiritualist, and spiritualism is the most material of the occult sciences—it insists that spirits shall have noses and ears like other respectable ghosts. From what he said, I couldn't make head or tail of Sault's view."

"Ambrose is not mad," said the girl; 'he is the sanest man I have ever met, or will meet. His view is different; he himself is different. You cannot judge him by any ordinary standard."

"You call him 'Ambrose'," said Sir John in surprise, "is he a friend of yours?"

"Yes." She said no more than that, and he did not press the question. It was impossible to explain Ambrose.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A CALL at the Colebrooks' in the afternoon or evening had become a regular practice since Christina had stayed with her. Evie had very carefully avoided being at home when Beryl called.

"I'm sorry I don't like your aristocratic friend, and I know it is a great comfort to have somebody to speak to about poor Mr. Sault, but I simply can't stand her. Ronnie says that he quite understands my dislike. Christina, do you think Miss Merville is a... you won't be offended, will you? Do you think she is a good girl?"

"Good? Do you mean, does she go to church?"

"Don't be silly. Do you think she is a... virtuous girl? Ronnie says that some of these Society women are awfully fast. He says it wouldn't be so bad if there was love in it, because love excuses everything, and the real wicked people are those who marry for money."

"Like Beryl," said Christina, "and love may excuse everything... like you... he hopes."

Evie sighed patiently.

"Do you know what I think about Ronnie?" asked Christina.

"I'm sure I don't want to know," snapped Evie, roused out of her attitude of martyrdom.

"I think he is a damned villain!... Shut up, I'm going to say it. I think he is the very lowest blackguard that walks the earth! He is—"

But Evie had snatched up her coat and fled from the room.

Christina's orders from the osteopath were to go to bed early. She was making extraordinary progress and had walked unassisted down the stairs that very day—she was lying dressed on the bed when Beryl arrived. "I suppose you'll liken me to the squire's good wife visiting the indigent sick," she said, 'but I've brought a basket of things... fruit mostly. Do you mind?"

"I've always wanted to meet Lady Bountiful," said Christina. "I thought she never stepped from the Christmas magazine covers. Did you meet Evie?"

"No, I thought she was out."

"She's hiding in the scullery," said Christina calmly.

"She doesn't like me. Ronnie, I suppose?"

Christina nodded. "Ronnie at first hand may be endurable: as interpreted by Evie he is—there is only one word to describe him—I promised mother that I would never use it again. Any news?"

Beryl nodded. "I had a letter—"

"So did I!" said Christina triumphantly, and drew a blue envelope from her blouse. "Written by the prison chaplain and dictated by Ambrose. Such a typical letter... all about the kindness of everybody, and a minute description of the cell, intended, I think, to show how comfortable he is."

Christina had had a similar letter.

"Sir John Maxton is defending him," said Beryl. "That is what I have come to tell you. He is a very great advocate."

They looked at one another, and each had the same thought. "The best lawyer and the kindest judge and the most sympathetic jury would not save Ambrose," said Christina, and they looked for a long time into one another's eyes, and neither saw fear.

Beryl did not stay long. They ran into a blind alley of conversation after that: a time of long quietness.

Jan Steppe was waiting in the drawing-room when she returned. The maid need not have told her: she sensed his presence before the door was opened. She had seen very little of Steppe, remembering that she had engaged herself to marry him. She did not let herself think more about it: she had not been accurate when she told Christina that she had no imagination. It was simply that she did not allow herself the exercise of her gift. The same idea had occurred to Jan Steppe... he had seen little of her. He was a great believer in clearing up things as he went along. An unpleasant but profitable trait of his.

"Been waiting for you an hour: you might leave word how long you'll be out, huh, Beryl." A foretaste, she thought, of the married man, but she was not offended. That was just how she expected Steppe would talk: probably he would swear at her when he knew her better. Nevertheless—

"I go and I come as I please," she said, without heat. "You must be prepared to put me under lock and key if you expect to find me in any given place, at any given time. And then I should divorce you for cruelty."

He did not often show signs of amusement. He smiled now. "So that's your plan. Sit down by me, Beryl. I want a little talk." She obeyed: he put his arm about her, and looking down, she saw his big hairy hand gripping her waist. "Why are you shaking, Beryl?... You're not frightened of me, huh?" he asked, bending his swarthy face to hers. "I—I don't know." Her teeth were chattering. She was frightened. In a second all her philosophy had failed and her courage had gone out like a blown flame. Every reserve of will was concentrated now

in an effort to prevent herself screaming. Training, education, culture, all that civilisation stood for crashed at the touch of him. She was woman, primitive and unreasoning: woman in contact with savage mastery.

"God! What's the matter, huh? You expect to be kissed, don't you? I'm going to be your husband, huh? Expect to be kissed, then, don't you? What is the matter with you?" She got up from the sofa, her legs sagging beneath her. Looking, he saw her face was colourless: Steppe was alarmed.

He wanted her badly. She had the appeal which other women lacked, qualities which he himself lacked. And he had frightened her. Perhaps she would break off everything. He expected to see the ring torn from her trembling hand and thrown on the floor at his feet. Instead of that: "I am very sorry, Mr. Steppe... foolish of me. I've had rather a trying day." She was breathless, as though she had been running at a great pace.

"Of course, Beryl, I understand. I'm too rough with you, huh? Why, it is I who should be sorry, and I am. Good friends, huh?" He held out his hand, and, shivering, she put her cold palm in his. "Doctor coming back soon? That's fine. You haven't sent him on any newspapers, huh? No, he could not get them there."

Other commonplaces, and he left her to work back to the cause of her fright. With reason again enthroned (this was somewhere near four o'clock in the morning) she could find no other reason than the obvious one. She was afraid of Steppe as a man. Not because he was a man, but because he was the kind of man that he was. He was a better man than Ronnie, she argued. He had principles of sorts. Ronnie had none. Perhaps she would get used to him: up to that moment it did not occur to her to break her engagement, and, curiously enough, she never thought of her father. Steppe was sure in his mind that he held her through Dr. Merville. That was not true. Neither sense of honour nor filial duty bound her to her promise, nor was marriage an expiation. She must wear away her life in some companionship. After, was Ambrose Sault, in what shape she did not know or consider. She never thought of him as an angel.

CHAPTER XXXV

SOMETIMES the brain plays a trick upon you. In the midst of your everyday life you have a vivid yet elusive recollection of a past which is strange to you. You see yourself in circumstances and in a setting wholly unfamiliar. Like a

flash it comes and goes; as swiftly as the shutter of a camera falls. Flick! It is gone and you can recall no incident upon which you can reconstruct the vision of the time-fraction. Beryl saw herself as she had been before she came upon a shabby grey-haired man studying the wallpaper in the hall of Dr. Merville's house. Yet she could never fix an impression. If the change of her outlook had been gradual, she might have traced back step by step. But it had been violent: catastrophic. And this bewildering truth appeared: that there had been no change so far as Ronnie was concerned. He had not altered in any degree her aspect of life. It worried her that it should be so. But there it was.

She had a wire from her father the next morning to say that he was returning at once. Dr. Merville had seen certain comments in the newspaper, and was taking the next train to Paris. She did not go to the station to meet him, and was not in the house when he arrived. Even in the days that followed she saw little of him, for he seemed to have pressing business which kept him either at Steppe's office or at Steppe's house. One night she went to dinner there. It was a meal remarkable for one circumstance. Although Sault was coming up for trial the following week, they did not speak of him. It was as though he were already passed from the world. She was tempted once to raise his name, but refrained. Discussion would be profitless, for they would only expose the old platitudes and present the conventional gestures.

In the car as they drove home the doctor was spuriously cheerful. His lighter manner generally amused Beryl; now her suspicions were aroused, for of late, her father's laborious good humour generally preceded a request for some concession on her part. It was not until she was saying good night that he revealed the nature of his request. "Don't you think it would be a good idea if you cut your engagement as short as possible, dear?" he asked, with an effort to appear casual. "Steppe doesn't want a big wedding—one before the civil authorities with a few close friends to lunch afterwards—"

"You mean he wants to marry at once?"

"Well, not at once, but—er—er—in a week or so. Personally, I think it is an excellent scheme. Say in a month—"

"No, no!"—she was vehement in her objection—"not in a month. I must have more time. I'm very sorry, father, if I am upsetting your plans."

"Not at all," said his lips. His face told another story. Possibly Steppe had issued peremptory instructions. She was certain that if she had accepted his views meekly, the doctor would have named the date and the hour. Steppe may have expressed his desire, also, that she should be married in grey. He was the sort of man who would want his bride to wear grey.

Jan Steppe, for all his wealth and experience, retained in some respects the character of his boer ancestors. His dearest possession was a large family Bible, crudely illustrated, and this he cherished less for its message (printed in the taal) than for its family records that covered four fly-leaves inserted for the purpose. He liked wax fruit under glass shades, and there hung in his library crayon enlargements of his parents, heavily framed in gold. He was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, and maintained a pew in the kirk at Heidelberg where he was born and christened. He believed in the rights of husbands to exact implicit obedience from their wives. The ultimate value of women was their prolificacy; he might forgive unfaithfulness; sterility was an unpardonable offence. Springing, as he did, from a race of cattle farmers, he thought of values in terms of stock breeding. Instinctively Beryl had discovered this: on this discovery her repugnance was based, though she never realized the cause until long afterwards.

The day of the trial was near at hand. Sir John Maxton had had two interviews with his client. After the second, he called on her. "I haven't seen you since I met him, have I? Your Sault! What is he, in the name of heaven? He fascinates me, Beryl, fascinates me! Sometimes I wish I had never taken the brief—not because of the hopelessness of it—it is hopeless, you know—but..."

"But?" she repeated, when he paused, puzzling to express himself clearly.

"He is amazing: I have never met anybody like him. I am not particularly keen on my fellows, perhaps I know them too well and have seen too much of their meannesses, their evilness. But Sault is different. I went to discuss his case and found myself listening to his views on immortality. He says that what we call immortality can be reduced to mathematical formulae. He limited the infinite to a circle, and convinced me. I felt like a fourth-form boy listening to a 'brain', and found myself respectful! But it wasn't that... it was a sweetness, a clearness—something Christlike. Queer thing to say about a man who has committed two murders, both in cold blood, but it is a fact. Beryl, it is impossible to save him, it is only fair to tell you. I cannot help feeling that if we could get at the character of this man Moropulos he would have a chance, but he absolutely refuses to talk of Moropulos. 'I did it', he says, 'what is the use? I shot him deliberately. He was drunk! I was in no danger from him. I shot him because I wanted him to die. When I walked over to where he lay, he was dead. If he had been alive I should have shot him again'. What can one do? If he had been anybody else I should have retired from the case.

"There is a safe in this case, probably you have read about it in the newspapers. It was found in the Greek's house, and is a sort of secret repository. At any rate, it cannot be opened except by somebody who knows the codeword. I suspected Sault of being one who could unlock the door, and

challenged him. He did not deny his knowledge, but declined to give me the word. He never lies: if he says he doesn't know, it is not worth while pressing him, because he really doesn't know. Beryl, would your father have any knowledge of that safe?"

She shook her head. "It is unlikely, but I will ask him. Father says that Ronnie is going to the trial. Is he a witness?"

Sir John had, as it happened, seen Ronnie that day and was able to inform her. "Ronnie is writing the story of the trial for a newspaper. What has Sault done to him? He is particularly vicious about him. In a way I can understand the reason if they had ever met. Sault is the very antithesis of Ronnie. They would 'swear' like violently different colours. I asked him if he would care to stay with me—I have had the Kennivens' house placed at my disposal, they are at Monte Carlo—but he declined with alacrity. Why does he hate Sault? He says that he is looking forward to the trial."

Beryl smiled. "'For la, the wicked bend the bow that they may shoot in darkness at the upright heart'," she quoted.

CHAPTER XXXVI

RONALD MORELLE also found satisfaction in apposite quotations from the scriptures. When he was at school the boys had a game which was known as 'trying the luck'. They put a Bible on the table, inserted a knife between the leaves, and whatever passage the knife-point rested against, was one which solved their temporary difficulties. Ronnie had carried this practice with him, and whenever a problem arose, he would bring down The Book and seek a solution. He utilised for this purpose a miniature sword which he had bought in Toledo, a copy of the Sword of the Constable. It was a tiny thing, a few inches in length. Its handle was of gold, its glittering blade an example of the best that the Fabrica produced.

"It is really wonderful how helpful it is, Christina," said Evie, to whom he had communicated the trick. "The other day, when I was wondering whether you would be better for good, or whether this was only, so to speak, a flash in the pan... because I really don't believe in osteopaths, they aren't proper doctors... I stuck a hatpin in the Bible and what do you think it said?"

"Beware of osteopaths?" suggested Christina lazily.

"No, it said, "Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bone which Thou hast broken may rejoice."

"My bones were never broken," said Christina, and asked with some curiosity: "How do you reconcile your normal holiness with playing monkey tricks with the Bible?"

"It isn't anything of the sort," replied Evie tartly, "the Bible is supposed to help you in your difficulties."

"Anyway, my bones rejoice to hear that Ronnie is such a Bible student," said Christina.

Evie knew that to discuss Ronald Morelle with her sister would be a waste of time. Ronnie was to her the perfect man. She even found, in which Christina described as a 'monkey trick' a piety with which she had never dreamt of crediting him.

Christina was unjust, but she hoped in time to change her opinions. In the meantime, Ronald Morelle was moulding Evie's opinions in certain essentials pertaining to social relationship, and, insensibly, her views were veering to the course he had set. She had definitely accepted his attitude toward matrimony. She felt terribly advanced and superior to her fellows, and had come to the point where she sneered when a wedding procession passed her. So far, her assurance, her complete plerophory of Ronnie's wisdom, rested in the realms of untested theory. But the time was coming when she must practise all that Ronnie preached, and all that she believed. She was no fool, however intense her self-satisfaction. She was narrow, puritanical, in the sense to which that term had been debased, and eminently respectable. He might have converted her to devil worship and she would have remained respectable. Ronnie was going abroad after the trial. He had made money, and although he was not a very rich man, he had in addition to the solid fortune he had acquired through his association with Steppe, a regular income from his father's estate. He intended breaking with Steppe, and was in negotiation for villas in the south of France and in Italy. Evie knew that she would accompany him, if he insisted. She knew equally well, that she would no longer be accounted respectable. That thought horrified her.

To her a wedding ring was adequate compensation for many inconveniences. The fascinations of Ronnie were wearing thin: familiarity, without breeding contempt, had produced a mutation of values. The 'exceedingly marvellous' had become the 'pleasantly habitual'. And she had, by accident, met a boy she had known years before. He had gone out to Canada with his parents and had returned with stories of immense spaces, of snow-clad mountains and cosy

farms; stories that had interested and unsettled her. And he had been so impressed by her, and so humble in the face of her imposing worldliness. Ronnie was, of course, never humble, she did not impress him, or make him blush or fell gauche. She had more of the grand lady feeling with Teddy Williams than she could ever experience in the marble villas of Palermo. And Teddy placed a tremendously high value upon respectability. Still... he could not be compared with Ronnie.

She had consented to pay a visit to Ronnie's flat. She was half-way to losing her respectability when she reluctantly agreed, but the thrill of the projected adventure put Teddy Williams out of her mind. The great event was to be on the day after Ronnie came back from Wechester.

In the meanwhile, Ronnie, anticipating a dull stay at the Assize town, made arrangements to fill in his time pleasantly.

The day before he left London he called on Madame Ritti, and Madame gave a sympathetic hearing to his proposition.

"Yes, it will amuse Lola, but she must travel with her maid. One must be careful, is it not so? One meets people in such unlikely places, and I will not have a word spoken against my dear girls."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE case of the King against Ambrose Sault came on late in the afternoon of the third Assize day. The Assizes opened on the Monday, and the first two and a half days were occupied by the hearing of a complicated case of fraudulent conversion; it was four o'clock in the afternoon when Sault, escorted by three warders, stepped into the pen and listened to the reading of the indictment.

It was charged against him that "He did wilfully kill and murder Paul Dimitros Moropulos by shooting at him with a revolving pistol with intent to kill and murder the aforesaid Paul Dimitros Moropulos".

He pleaded "Guilty", but by the direction of the Court, a technical plea of "Not Guilty" was entered in accordance with the practice of the law. The proceedings were necessarily short, the reading of the indictment, the swearing in of the jury, and the other preliminaries were only disposed of before the Court rose. Wechester Assize Court dates back to the days of antiquity. There is a legend that King Arthur sat in the great outer hall, a hollow cavern of a

place with vaulted stone roof and supporting pillars worn smooth by contact with the backs of thirty generations of litigants waiting their turn to appear in the tiny court-house. "I knew I was going to have a dull time," complained Ronnie. "Why on earth didn't they start the trial on Monday?"

"Partly because I could not arrive until today," said Sir John. "The judge very kindly agreed to postpone the hearing to suit my convenience. I had a big case in town. Partly, so the judge tells me, because he wanted to dispose of the fraud charges before he took the murder case. Are you really very dull, Ronnie?" He looked keenly at the other.

"Wouldn't anybody be dull in a town that offers no other amusement than a decrepit cinema?"

"I thought I caught a glimpse of you as I was coming from the station, and unless I was dreaming, I saw you driving with a lady—it is not like you to be dull when you have feminine society."

"She was the daughter of a very old friend of mine," said Ronnie conventionally.

"You are fortunate in having so many old friends with so many pretty daughters," said Sir John dryly. Ronnie was in court at ten o'clock the following morning. The place was filled, the narrow public gallery packed. The scarlet-robed judge came in, preceded by the High Sheriff, and followed by his chaplain; a few seconds later came the sound of Ambrose Sault's feet on the stairway leading to the lock. He walked to the end of the pen, rested his big hands on the ledge and bowed to the judge. And then his eyes roved round the court. They rested smilingly upon Sir John, bewigged and gowned, passed incuriously over the press table, and stopped at Ronald Morelle. His face was inscrutable: his noughts, whatever they were, found no expression.

Ronald met his eyes and smiled. This man had come to him with murder in his heart: but for Ronnie's ready wit and readier lie, his name too would have appeared in the indictment. That was his thought as he returned the gaze. Here was his enemy: trapped beyond danger. His smile was a taunt and an exultation.

Sault's face was not troubled, his serenity was undisturbed. Rather, it seemed to Sir John, who was watching him, that there was a strange benignity in his countenance, that humanised and transfigured him.

Trials always wearied Ronnie. They were so slow, so tedious: there were so many fiddling details, usually unimportant, to be related and analysed. Why did they take the trouble? Sault was guilty by his own confession, and yet they

were treating him as though he were innocent. What did it matter whether it was eight or nine o'clock when the policeman stopped the car in Woking and asked Sault to produce his licence? Why bother with medical evidence as to the course the bullet took—Moropulos was dead; did it matter whether the bullet was nickel or lead? From time to time sheer ennui drove him out of the Court. He had no work to do—his description of Sault in the dock, his impression of the Court scene, had been written before he left his hotel. The verdict was inevitable. Yet still they droned on, these musty lawyers; still the old man on the bench interjected his questions.

Sir John, in his opening speech, had discounted his client's confession. Sault felt that he was morally guilty. It was for the jury to say whether he was guilty in law. A man in fear of his life had the right to defend himself, even if in his defence he destroyed the life of the attacker. The revolver was the property of Moropulos, was it not fair to suppose that Moropulos had carried the pistol for the purpose of intimidating Sault, that he had actually threatened him with the weapon? And the judge had taken this possibility into account, and his questions were directed to discovering the character and habits of the dead man. Steppe, had he been in the box, would have saved the prisoner's life. Ronnie Morelle knew enough to enlighten the judge. Steppe had not come, Ronnie would have been amused if it were suggested that he should speak.

The end of the trial came with startling suddenness. Ronnie was out of Court when the jury retired, and he hurried back as they returned. The white- headed associate rose from behind his book-covered table, and the jury answered to their names. "Gentlemen of the jury, have you considered your verdict?"

"We have." The voice of the foreman was weak and almost inaudible.

"Do you find the prisoner at the Bar guilty or not guilty?"

A pause. "Guilty."

There was a sound like a staccato whisper. A quick explosion of soft sound, and then silence.

"Ambrose Sault, what have you to say that my lord should not condemn you to die?"

Ambrose stood easily in the dock: both hands were on the ledge before him, and his head was bent in a listening posture. "Nothing."

His cheerful voice rang through the Court. Ronnie saw him look down to the place where Sir John was sitting, and smile, such a smile of encouragement and sympathy as a defending lawyer might give to his condemned client;

coming from the condemned to the advocate, it was unique. The judge was sitting stiffly erect. He was a man of seventy, thin and furrowed of face. Over his wig lay a square of black silk, a corner drooped to his forehead. "Prisoner at the Bar, the jury have found the only verdict which it was possible for them to return after hearing the evidence."

He stopped here, and Ronnie expected to hear the usual admonition which precedes the formal sentence, but the judge went on to the performance of his dread duty. "The sentence of this Court is, and this Court doth ordain, that you be taken to the place from whence you came, and from thence to a place of execution and there you shall be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and your body shall afterwards be buried within the precincts of the prison in which you were last confined. And may God have mercy upon your soul."

Ambrose listened, his lips moving. He was repeating to himself word by word the sentence of the law. He had the appearance of a man who was intensely interested. A warder touched his arm and awoke him from his absorption. He started, smiled apologetically, and turning, walked down the stairs and out of sight.

"Goodbye, my friend—I shall see you once again,' said Ronnie. He had decided to leave nothing undone that would authorise his presence at the execution. Going into the hall to see the procession of the judge with his halberdiers and his trumpet-men, he saw Sir John passing, and his eyes were red. Ronnie was amused.

"Are you travelling back to town to-night, Ronnie?"

"No, Sir John. I leave in the morning."

Sir John wrinkled his brows in thought. "You saw him? Did you ever see a man like him; I am bewildered and baffled. Poor Sault, and yet why 'poor'? Poor world, I think, to lose a soul as great as his."

"He is also a murderer," said Ronnie, with gentle sarcasm. "He has brutally killed two men—"

"There is nothing brutal in Ambrose Sault." Sir John checked himself. "I go back by the last train. I am dining with the judge in his lodgings, and he told me I might bring you along."

"Thank you, I've a lot of work to do," said Ronnie, so hastily that the other searched his face.

"I suppose you are alone here?"

"Quite ,... the truth is, I promised to drive with a friend of mine."

"A man?"

Lola came through the big doors at that moment.

"I was looking for you, Ronnie... my dear, I am bored to tears..."

Sir John looked after them and shook his head. "Rotten," he said. That a man could bring his light o' love to this grim carnival of pain!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

In the afternoon Christina received a note delivered by hand. "Mother, would you mind if I spent the night with Miss Merville?" Mrs. Colebrook shook her head without speaking. In these days she lived in an atmosphere of gloom, for she had adopted the right of chief griever.

"Nobody else seems to care about poor Mr. Sault," she had said many times. "I really can't understand you, Christina, after all he has done for you. I won't say that you're heartless, because I will never believe that about a child of mine. You're young."

"Do you think Mr. Sault would like to know that you go weeping about the house for his sake?" asked Christina patiently.

"Of course he would. I should like somebody to grieve over me, and I'm sure he'd like to know that somebody was dropping a silent tear over him." On the whole, Mrs. Colebrook preferred to be alone that night. The late editions would have the result of the trial. Evie would be out. She was going to a theatre with Teddy Williams. That, Mrs. Colebrook thought, was heartless, but Evie had an excuse. Mr. Sault had done nothing for her: had even quarrelled with her.

So Christina went gladly to her new friend. She saw the doctor for a minute in the hall, and in his professional mood, Dr. Merville was charming. "You open up vistas of a new career for me, Miss Colebrook," he laughed, "With you as a shining example, I am almost inclined to take up osteopathy in my old age! Really, you have mended wonderfully."

In Beryl's little room she heard the news... "We expected it, of course," she

said. "Did Sir John wire anything about Ambrose... how he bore it?"

"Yes, here is the telegram."

Christina read: Sault sentenced to death. He showed splendid courage and calmness.

"Naturally he would," said Christina quietly. "I am glad the strain is over, not that I think it was a strain for him. Beryl, I hope we are going to be worthy disciples of our friend. There are times when I am very afraid. It is a heavy burden for a badly equipped mind like mine. But I think I shall go though without making a weak fool of myself. I almost wish that I was marrying Jan Steppe. The prospect would take my mind off... no, it wouldn't. And it doesn't in your case."

"I don't want to have my mind relieved of Ambrose," said Beryl. "We can do nothing, Christina. We never have been able to do anything. Ambrose could appeal, but, of course, he won't do anything of the sort. I had a mad idea of going to see him. But I don't think I could endure that."

Christina shook her head. She saw him every day. He never left her, he was sitting there now with his hands folded, silent, thoughtful. She avoided saying anything that would hurt him. In moments when Evie annoyed her, as she did lately, the thought that Ambrose would not approve cut short her tart retort. She confessed this much, and Beryl agreed. She felt the same way.

Beryl had had another bed put in her own room, and they talked far into the night There was nothing that Ambrose had ever said which they did not recall. He had said surprisingly little. "Did he ever tell you in so many words that he loved you, Beryl?"

Only for a second did Beryl hesitate. "Yes," she said.

"You didn't want to tell me that, did you? You were afraid that I should be hurt. I'm not. I love his loving you. I don't grudge you a thought. He ought to love sane body humanly. I always think that the one incompleteness of Christ was His austerity. That doesn't sound blasphemous or irreverent, does it? But He missed so much experience because He was not a father with a father's feelings. Or a husband with a husband's love. I suppose theological people can explain this satisfactorily. I am taking an unlearned view... '

Evie was very nervous, thought Christina, when she saw her the next afternoon. Usually she was self-possession itself. She snapped at the girl when she asked her how she had enjoyed the play, although she was penitent immediately. "Mother has been going on at me for daring to see a play the

night poor Ambrose was sentenced," she said. "I'm sure nobody feels more sorry than I do. You're different to mother. I ought to have known that you weren't being sarcastic."

"How is Teddy? I remember him when he was a tiny boy. Do you like him, Evie?"

Evie pursed her red lips. "He's not bad," she granted. "He's very young and... well, simple."

"You worldly old woman!" smiled Christina. "You make me feel a hundred!" Yes, Evie was nervous. And she took an unusual amount of trouble in dressing. "Where are you going tonight—all dolled up?"

Evie was pained. "That is an awfully vulgar expression, Chris: it makes me feel like one of those street women. I am going to meet a girl friend."

"Where are you going, Evie?" asked Christina, quietly insistent.

"I am going to see Ronnie, if you want to know. You make me tell lies when I don't want to," snapped Evie. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

Christina sighed. "Why don't I, indeed," she agreed wearily. "What is to be will be: I can't be responsible for your life, and it is stupid of me to try. Go ahead, Evie, and good luck!" a remark which considerably mystified Evie Colebrook. But, as she told herself, she had quite enough to try her without worrying about Christina and her morbid talk.

The principal cause of her worry was an exasperating lapse of memory. In the agitation of the proposal, she had forgotten whether Ronnie had asked her to meet him in the park at the usual place, or whether she had agreed to go straight to the flat. An arrangement had been made one way or the other, she was sure. She decided to go to the flat.

Beryl came to the same decision. "Steppe and I are going to Ronnie's place tonight," said Dr. Merville. "It will be a sort of—er—board—meeting as Jan is leaving London tomorrow. I haven't had a chance of asking him about a matter which affects me personally. You do not read the financial newspapers, do you, Beryl? You haven't heard from the Fennings, or any of the people you know—er—any unpleasant comment?"

She shook her head again.

"Jan was asking me again about... you, Beryl. I can't get him to talk about anything else. I think you will have to decide one way or the other," he was pulling on his gloves, an operation which gave him an excuse for looking

elsewhere than at her. "It struck me that he was growing impatient. You are to please yourself... but the suspense is rather getting on my nerves." She made no answer until, accompanying him to the door, she made a sudden resolve. "How long will you be at Ronnie's?" she asked. "An hour, no longer, I think, why?"

"I wondered," she said. It was lamentably, wickedly weak in her; a servile surrender to expediency. She knew it, but in her desperation she seized the one straw that floated upon the inexorable current which was carrying her to physical and moral damnation. Ronnie must save her: Ronnie, to whom she had the best right of appeal. It was a bitter, hateful confession, that, despising him, she loved him. She loved the two halves of the perfect man. Sault and Ronnie Morelle were the very soul and body of love. She loathed herself—yet she knew it was the truth. Ronnie must help. He might not be so bad as she believed him to be; there might be a spirit in him, a something to which she could reach. The instinct of honour, some spark of courage and justice transmitted to him by his ancestors.

Anything was better than Steppe, she told herself wildly, anything! She dreamt of him, terrible dreams: by day she kept him from her mind. And then came night and the dreams that made her very soul writhe in agony, lest, in dreaming, she had exposed a wickedness which consciously she had seen in herself. If Ronnie failed—

"Ronnie will fail; you know he will fail," whispered the voice of reason. She could but try.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A FOREIGN-LOOKING servant opened the door to Evie Colebrook. "Mr. Morelle is out, mademoiselle; is he expecting you?"

She was in a flutter, ready to fly on the least excuse. "Yes... but I will come back again."

Francois opened the door wide. "If mademoiselle will wait a little... perhaps Mr. Morelle will return very soon." Francois was an ugly, bullet-headed little man and his name was a war creation. It was in fact 'Otto', and he was a German Swiss.

She came timidly into the big room and was impressed by the solid luxury of it. She would not sit, preferring to walk about, delighted with the opportunity of making so leisurely an inspection of a room hallowed by such associations. So this was where Ronnie worked so hard. She laid her hand affectionately upon the big black table. Francois watched her a little sadly. He had a sister of her age, and in his eyes at least, as pretty. Moreover, Francois had grown tired of his employer. Menservants were in demand and he would have no difficulty in finding another job. Except for this: Ronald paid extraordinarily good wages. He saw her pick up a framed photograph. "This is Mr. Morelle's portrait, isn't it? I don't like it."

Evie felt on terms with the man. It seemed natural that she should. She had wondered if Francois would be at Palermo too.

"Yes, mademoiselle, that is his portrait."

Evie frowned critically at the picture. "It is not half good—looking enough."

"That is possible, mademoiselle," said Francois, without enthusiasm. He had never done such a thing before. He marvelled at his own temerity, even now. "Mademoiselle, you will not angry if I say some things?" he asked, and as he grew more and more agitated his English took a quainter turn. Evie opened her eyes in astonishment. "No, of course not."

"And you must promise not to tell Mr. Morelle."

"It depends," hesitated the girl, and then, "I promise."

"Mademoiselle," said Francois a little huskily. "I have a little sister so big as you in Switzerland. Her name is Freda, and, mademoiselle, when I see you here, I think of her, and I say I will speak to this good, good young lady. Mademoiselle, I do not like to see you here!"

He said this dramatically. Evie went crimson. "I don't know what you mean."

"I have make you cross," said Francois, in an agony of self-reproach. "You think I am silly, but I speak with a good heart."

There was only one way out of this awkward conversation. Evie became easily confidential. She spoke as a woman of the world to a man of the world. "Of course you did," she said. "I appreciate what you say, Francois. If I saw a girl... well... compromising herself, I mean a girl who hadn't my experience of the world, I'd say the same as you, but—"

A knock at the outer door interrupted her. Francois shot an imploring glance in her direction, and she nodded. "There you are, Ronnie... didn't you say I was

to come straight here?"

"Hello, Evie." He seemed a little annoyed. "I told you I would meet you at the Statue."

Evie was abashed. "Oh, I am sorry," she began, but he went on "Any letter, Francois?"

"Yes, m'sieur, on the desk."

"All right, clear out."

But Francois lingered. "M'sieur."

"Well?" asked Ronnie, turning with a scowl.

Francois was ill at ease. "Tomorrow my brother is coming from Interlaken; may I have an evening for myself, m'sieur?"

Ronald was angry for many reasons; he was not in the mood to grant favours. "You have Sundays and you have your holidays. That's enough," he said. Francois went out, crestfallen. "I suppose you think I'm unkind," said Ronnie, with a laugh as he helped take off her coat. "But if you give those sort of people an inch they'll take the earth." He dropped his hands upon her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "It is lovely to have you here. You're two hours too soon."

"Am I?" she asked in alarm. "I was so upset last night that I don't know what you said."

"I said ten o'clock, but it doesn't matter. Only Francois would have been gone by then. How lovely you are, Evie! How slim and straight and delightful!" Suddenly she was in his arms, her face against his.

She struggled, pushing him away, escaping at last, too breathless for speech. "You smother me," she gasped. "Don't kiss me like that, Ronnie. Let's talk. You know I oughtn't to be here," she urged. "But I did so want to see your beautiful house."

He did not take his eyes from her. "You are going to do what I asked you?"

She nodded, shook her head, her heart going furiously. "I don't know—Ronald, I do love you, but I'm so—so frightened."

He drew her down to him and she sat demurely on the edge of the deep lounge chair he occupied. "And I'll take you to—where shall I take you?" he asked.

"Somewhere in Italy, you said."

"Palermo! Glorious Palermo... darling, think of what it will be, just you and I. No more snatched meetings and disagreeable sisters, eh?"

Evie was thinking: he did not break in upon her thoughts. She was good to see. More attractive in her silence, for she had he slightest of cockney twangs. "I wish Christina could come," she said at last; a note of defiance was in her tone. "A change like that would be splendid for her, and I've always planned to give her one."

"Christina? Good lord! Come with us? You mad little thing, I'm not running a sanatorium." He laughed, leaning back in the chair to look up at her.

"Ronnie, I know it is awful nerve on my part... but if you love me..." He expected this. The philosophies he imparted seldom survived the acid test which opportunity applied. "I suppose," she went on nervously, 'it would be too much of a come-down to think of—of marrying me?"

"Marriage!" His voice was reproving, his manner that of a man grievously hurt. "You know what I think—what we both think about marriage, Evie?"

"It is—it is respectable, anyway,"

"Respectable!" he scoffed. "Who respects you? Who thinks any worse of you if you aren't married? People respect you for your independence. Marriage! It is a form of bondage invented by people who make a jolly good living out of it."

"Well, religion is something. And the Bible—"

Ronnie jumped up. "We'll try the luck, Evie!" He went to a shelf and took down a book. Evie was a dubious spectator. The fallibility of the method seemed open to question when such enormous issues were at stake. Yet she accepted a trifle reluctantly, the little sword he handed to her, and thrust it between the pages of the closed book. She opened it at the passage the sword had found.

"'Woe unto you—'" she began, but he snatched the book from her hands.

"No, silly," he said, and read glibly. "'There is no fear in love: perfect love casteth out fear!'"

Evie was sceptical. "You made it up!" she accused. "I mean, you only pretended it was there. I know that passage. I learnt it at school—it is in John."

He chuckled, delighted at her astuteness. "You little bishop," he said, and

kissed her. "Now sit and amuse yourself. I want to speak to Francois,"

He was on his way to the pantry to dismiss Francois to his home when the bell sounded. He stopped Francois with a gesture.

CHAPTER XL

"Don't open the door for a minute," he said in a low voice. "Evie, will you come tomorrow night—no not tomorrow. Today is Monday, come on Friday."

"Yes, dear." She was glad to escape.

"Through there," he pointed. "Francois, let mademoiselle out by the pantry door after you have answered the bell."

Who was the visitor? People did not call upon him except by invitation—except Steppe. And Jan Steppe came slowly and suspiciously into the hall. Ronnie scarcely noticed the doctor who followed him. "Why were you keeping me waiting?" he growled.

"Francois could not have heard the bell," answered Ronnie easily.

"That's a lie." He looked round the room and sniffed. "You had a woman here, as usual, I suppose?"

Ronnie looked injured. "M'm. Some shop-girl," insisted the big man. "One of your pickups, huh?"

"I tell you I have been alone all the evening," said Ronnie, resigned. "Francois, isn't that so?"

Jan Steppe saved the servant from needless perjury. "He's as big a liar as you are. You'll burn your fingers one of these days." He had a deep harsh laugh, entirely without merriment. "You had a little trouble about one last year, didn't you?"

Merville, impatient and fretful, broke in. "Let him alone, Steppe. I want to get this business over."

Steppe stared at him. "Oh, you want to get it over, do you? We'll hurry things up for you, doctor!"

Ronnie was interested. He had never heard Steppe speak to Merville in that tone. There had been a marked change in Jan's attitude, even in the past few days. However, Ronnie was chiefly concerned in considering all the possible reasons for this call. The doctor explained and Ronnie breathed again.

"We'll sit here," said Steppe. He sat down in Ronnie's library chair, and taking a bundle of documents from his inside pocket, he threw them on the table. "Here are the papers you want, Merville—and by the way—" He turned in his chair and glowered at Ronnie. "Do you remember we pooled the Midwell Traction Shares, Morelle?" His voice was ominous.

"Er—yes—of course," said Ronnie, quaking.

"We undertook to hold the stock until we mutually agreed as to the moment we should unload, huh?" Steppe demanded deliberately. Ronald made an ineffectual attempt to appear unconcerned. "And we undertook not to part with a share until the stock reached forty—three. Do you remember, huh?"

"Yes," said Ronnie, and the big man's fist crashed down on the table.

"You're sure you remember?" he shouted "You sold at thirty-five. Do that again, and d'ye know what I'll do?"

"I'm sure Ronald wouldn't—" began Merville, but was silenced. "You shut up! It didn't matter so much that Traction jumped. But you broke faith with me, you rat!"

"Don't lose your temper, Steppe," said the other sulkily, "it was a mistake, I tell you. My broker sold without authority."

"Whilst we are on the subject of the Traction Shares, I want to ask about the statement I filed in regard to the assets of the company. Was it right?" For a week the doctor had been trying to put this question. "Of we three, I'm the only director—you're not in it and Ronnie isn't in it, if there is anything wrong, I should be the goat?"

Steppe's voice was milder. Here was a topic to be avoided. "Huh! You're all right. What are you frightened about?"

"I'm not frightened, but you had the draft?"

"It is in the safe," said Steppe, with some satisfaction.

"Steppe, how do we stand there?" asked the doctor urgently. "I know Moropulos was doing work for you of a sort. What was his position and Sault's? Is that the safe which Sault made? He told me about it some time

ago."

Steppe turned his head again in Ronald's direction. "You went to the trial! You saw him! You've seen him before—what do you think of him—clever, huh?"

"Well I don't know—"

"Of course, he's clever, you fool," said the other contemptuously. "If you had his brains and his principles you'd be a big man. Remember that—a big man."

"I am attending the execution," said Ronnie, "the under-Sheriff is admitting three Press reporters, and I am to be one of them."

Steppe eyed him gloomily, groping after the mind of the man who could fear him, yet he did not fear to see a man done to death. "I'll tell you men all about Moropulos and Sault because you're all tarred with the same brush. This is the big pull of Sault. A pull he's never used. Moropulos and I had business together. He was on one side of a wall called 'Law', huh. I was on the other. The comfortable side. And he used to hand things over. That put me a bit on his side. There were letters and certain other documents which we had to keep, yet were dangerous to keep. But you might always want 'em. I was scared over some share that—well, I oughtn't have had them. And that's how Sault came to make the Destroying Angel, that's a good name! I christened it. There was a combination lock, the word being known only to Moropulos, Sault, and myself. If you used the wrong combination—any combination but the right one, the acids are released and the contents of the safe are destroyed. If you try to cut through the sides—the water runs out, down drops a plunger with the same result. When Moropulos was killed I tried to get at it, but the police were there before me. There was a typewritten note pasted on the top of the safe, telling exactly what would happen if they monkeyed with it. They haven't dared to touch it. It's in the Black Museum today with enough inside to send me—well, a hell of a long way."

"Suppose this man tells?" asked Merville fearfully.

"He won't tell. That kind of a man doesn't squeal. If it had been Ronald Morelle, I'd have been on my way to South America by now. A word from Sault and I'm—" he snapped his fingers "but do you think it worries me? I can sleep and go about my work without a second's fear. That's the kind of it man I am No nerves—look at my hand." He thrust out his heavy paw stiffly "Steady as a rock, huh? Good boy, Sault!"

"I met him once—" began Ronnie.

"I've met him more than once," said the grim Steppe. "A man with strange

compelling eyes, the only fellow that ever frightened me!" He looked at Ronald curiously. "It is unbelievable that a white-livered devil like you can see him die. It would make me sick. And yet you, whose nerves ought to be rags considering the filthy life you live, can stand calmly by—ugh! I don't know how you can do it. To see a man's soul go out!"

Ronnie laughed quickly. "Sault's rather keen on his soul. Boyle, the Governor, says he recited Henley's poem on his way to the cells."

But Steppe did not laugh. "Soul? H'm. He made me believe in something... soul or spirit or... or something. He dominated me. Do you—"

"Yes, I do. A transient X that only abides in the body at: he will of its host."

Ronnie groaned wearily. "Oh God, are you going to lecture?" he asked, and Jan Steppe roared at him.

"Shut up! Go on, Merville. Do you mean that it leaves the body before... death?"

"I think so," said Merville thoughtfully. "I've often stood by the side of a patient desperately sick, and suddenly felt in my body his despair and weakness, and seen him brighten and flush with my strength."

"Really?" Steppe's voice was intense. "Do you mean that your spirits have exchanged themselves?"

Dr. Merville flicked the ash of his cigar into the fireplace. "Call it 'spirit', 'soul', 'X', anything you like—call it individuality. There has been a momentary exchange."

"How do you explain it?"

"Science doesn't explain everything," said Merville. "Science accepts a whole lot of what we call 'incommensurables'."

"H'm." Steppe pushed away the papers and rose. "H'm. that'll do for the night. Keep those papers, you fellows, and digest them. You going out, Morelle?"

"No, would you like me to go anywhere with you?" Ronnie was eager to serve.

"No"—shortly. "Merville, I'm dining with you tomorrow, and I hope Beryl won't have a headache this time. I've got a box at the Pantheon."

The doctor was obviously embarrassed. "She—well, she isn't very bright just now."

"Let her be bright enough to come to dinner to—morrow night," said Steppe.

The door banged and Ronnie drew a long breath. "Thank God," he said piously.

CHAPTER XLI

Francois went after them, not unhappy to detach himself from the tense and threatening atmosphere, his resentment against his employer somewhat modified when he reached home, by a letter from his visiting brother announcing the postponement of his departure from Switzerland.

Therefore it was Ronnie who answered the sharp ring of the bell. When he saw the girl his jaw dropped. "Really, Beryl! You place me in a most awkward position. Whatever made you come? Steppe was here... suppose he came back? Why didn't you bring somebody with you?" He was flustered and scared. Steppe might return at any moment.

"I'm sorry I have outraged the proprieties," said Beryl, with a little smile. "Did that child from the druggist's have a chaperon?"

"Eh?" Ronnie was startled.

"I saw her coming in and I saw her go out. I've been waiting for an opportunity of seeing you. She's pretty, but oh, Ronald she's only a baby!"

Ronnie made a quick recovery from his surprise. If she had seen Evie, she had also seen Steppe and must be sure that he had gone. She would probably know from her father what were their plans for the night. "I give you my word of honour, Beryl," said he earnestly 'that she merely came to see me about her sister—you know her, Christina I think she is called. Evie is very anxious that I should help send her abroad. As far as Evie is concerned, you can put your mind at rest. I give you my solemn word of honour that I have never as much as held her hand."

She knew he was lying, but tonight of all nights she must accept his word. She was in a fever: it was almost painful to hold fast to the last shreds of her failing reserve. "Ronald." Her voice was tremulous and he braced himself for a scene. "You don't want me to marry Steppe?" So that was it. And he had thought she had accepted the position so admirably. "Ronald, you know it would be—death to me... worse than death to me. Can't you... can't you use

your imagination?"

Her eyes avoided his: that alone helped to restore a little of his poise. She had come as a suppliant, and would not be difficult to handle. The old Beryl, polished, cynical, mistress of herself and her emotions, might have beaten him down; induced God knows what extravagant promises. "I don't want to talk about what has happened. I am not reproaching you or appealing to any sense of duty, but—" She stood there, her eyes downcast, twisting her gloves into tight spirals. He said nothing, holding his arguments in reserve against her exhaustion. "You make it hard, awfully hard for me, Ronnie. You do know... Steppe wants to marry me?" He nodded. "Do you realize what that means... to me, Ronnie?"

"He's not a bad fellow," protested Ronnie. "Really, Beryl I never dreamt you were going to take this line. Is it decent?"

"He's... he's awful, Ronnie; you know he's awful. He's hideous, he's just animal all through. Animal with reasoning powers, gross... horrible. You liked me, Ronnie," she was pleading now. "Why... why don't you marry me? I love you—I must have loved you. I could learn to respect you; so easily. They say you're rotten but you're of my own kind. Ronnie, don't you know what it means to me to say this—don't you know?"

She was gripping his arm with an intensity which made him wince. Hysteria... suppose Steppe did come back? He went moist at the thought. "Ronnie, why don't you?" she breathed. "It would save me. It would save father, too. He would accept the accomplished fact, and be relieved. Ronnie, it would save my soul and my body. I'd serve you as dutifully as any woman ever served a man. I would, Ronnie. I'd be... I'd be as light as the lightest women you know —don't you realize what I am saying?..."

"My dear girl," he said, thoroughly alarmed. "I couldn't oppose Steppe, he's a good fellow, really he is. I'm sure you'd be happy. I'm awfully fond of you—"

"Then take me away! I'll go with you tonight... now, now! Take me, Ronnie, I'll go... now... this very minute, and I'll bless you. He wouldn't want me then. I know him."

"I—I wish you wouldn't talk such rot," he quavered.

"Take me," she urged desperately. "There is a train tonight for Ostend, take me. Take me, Ronald, I could love you... I could love you in gratitude... save me from this gross man."

Ronnie, in a flurry of fear, pushed her away. "You don't know what you're

talking about," he said shrilly. "Steppe would kill me... Beryl, I'm fond of you, but I can't cross Steppe."

That was the end. Her last throw in the game. Ronnie was Ronnie. That was all. She was very calm now; but for her pallor and the uncontrollable tremor of her hands, her old self. That she had humiliated herself did not bring her a moment's regret. Stampeded... she had been stampeded by sheer physical fear. "I think I'll go," she said, taking up her furs. "You need not get me a cab—this time. And Moropulos cannot photograph me. I might have forced you to do what I wished, playing on your fears. I couldn't do that. What a coward... but I won't reproach you, Ronnie."

She held out her hand and he held it reluctantly. This time he took no risks. He gave her a minute's start, and then he, too, went out. Madame Ritti's was ever a place of refuge to Ronnie when his nerves were jangled.

CHAPTER XLII

How quickly the days flew past! Beryl had a letter from Sir John Maxton one Saturday.

"I have seen our friend for the third time since the sentence, and you know that on Tuesday he 'goes the way'—those are his own words. What can I tell you of him, Beryl, that you do not know? He has become one of my dearest friends. How strange that seems, written! Yet it is true, and when he asked me if I would come and see him on the morning, I agreed. In France it is the custom of the defending advocate to be present—I am glad it is not necessary in England. Yet I shall go and I pray that I may be as fearless as he.

"He spoke of you yesterday and of 'Christina'—that is Miss Colebrook, isn't it? But so cheerfully!

"The officers of the prison are fond of him, and even the chief warder, a hard-bitten Guardsman, who was the principal flogger at Pentonville for many years, speaks of him affectionately. Completely untroubled—that is how I should describe Ambrose. He has been allowed the privilege of a reader, one of the warders, an educated man who acts as librarian to the prison. He has chosen Gibbon's 'Roman Empire', and on my suggestion he is concentrating on the chapters dealing with the creation of the Byzantine Empire. The story of Belesarius fascinates him; Belesarius is a character after his own heart, as I

knew would be the case. The chaplain sees him frequently, and Ambrose is politely attentive. It is rather like a village schoolmaster instructing Newton in astronomy. Ambrose is so far advanced that the good man's efforts to bring him to an understanding is just a little pathetic. "I can't understand Mr. Pinley's God', he said to me when I called immediately after the clergyman's visit. "He is a slave's conception of a super-master—the superstition of a fighting tribe." Ambrose holds to his own faith, which is comprehended in Henley's poem "Out of the dark which covers me'. He recites this continuously.

"I said that he spoke of you and Christina. I asked him if he would like to see you both, knowing that if he did, you would face the ordeal. But he said that it was unnecessary."

On the Monday evening Christina came to the house. They did not sleep that night. "I suppose we're neurotic, but I never felt saner," said Beryl, "or more peacefully-minded. And yet if it were somebody I did not know, some servant with whom I was just on nodding terms, I should be a bundle of nerves. And it is Ambrose! Christina, are we just keyed up, overstrained... shall we collapse? I have wondered."

"I shall not break," said Christina. "I have been worrying about you..." Yet it was Christina on whom the chimes of the little French clock on the mantelpiece fell like the knell of doom. "... Six... seven... eight... nine!" counted Beryl, tense, exalted.

It was over. Ambrose Sault had gone the way.

"Good-bye, Ambrose!" Christina's voice was a wail.

Before Beryl could reach her, she had slipped to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XLIII

RONALD MORELLE came down the carpeted stairs of the House of Shame, and there was a half smile on his lips, as though the echoes of laughter were still vibrating through this silent mansion and he must respond. The hall was in darkness except for the light admitted by a semicircular transom. Turning his head, he saw that the door of the saloon was ajar, and he hesitated. He had never seen the saloon by daylight, only at night, when the soft lights were burning and the silver chandelier glowed with tiny yellow globes. He pushed

open the door. The darkness here had been relieved by somebody who had opened one window and unshuttered two others. The room was in disorder, chairs remained where the sitters had left them, and the cold grey light of morning looked upon tarnished gilding and faded damask, and the tawdry litter of the night before. Merciless, pitiless, contemptuous was the sneer of the clean dawn.

Ronald's smile deepened. And then he caught a reflection of himself in one of the long mirrors. He looked pale and drawn. He shivered. Not because the mirror gave back the illusion of a sick man—he knew well enough he was healthy—but because he glimpsed the something in his eyes, the leering devil that sat behind the levers and turned the switches of desire.

A car was waiting for him at the end of the slumbering street—Madame did not like cars at the door in the early hours of the morning—and he stepped in, wrapping his coat about him. The sun had not yet risen and Wechester was a two hours' run with a clear road. Sault was in Wechester Gaol awaiting the dread hour, and from somewhere in Lancashire a gaunt-faced barber, who had marked in his diary the date of an engagement, had taken train to Ronald's destination, carrying with him the supple straps that would bind the wrists of the living and be slipped from the wrists of the dead.

The clear sky gave promises of a perfect winter day, but the morning air was cold. He pulled up the windows of the car and wished he had bought a newspaper or book to while away the time. In two hours the soul of Ambrose Sault... The soul! What was the soul? Was it Driesh's "Entelechy'; that 'innermost secret' of animation? Was there substance of the soul? Was it material? A flame, Merville had once called it, a flame from a common fire. Could the flame leap at will from a man's body and leave him... what? A lunatic, a madman, a beast without reason? Ronald shrugged away the speculation, but the scholar in him was uneasy, and insensibly he came back to the problem.

The promises of fair weather were belied as the car drew to Wechester. A mist, thin and white, lay like a blanket on the streets, and Ronald's car 'hawked' its way into the still thicker mist which lay all Wechester Common. The car drew up at the prison gates, and he looked at his watch. It wanted a quarter of nine.

Ronnie saw a thin man, thinly clad, walking up and down outside. His hair was long and fell over his coat collar, his nose was red with the cold, and now and again he stopped to stamp his feet. Ronnie wondered who he was.

A wicket opened at his ring, and he showed his authority through the bars before, with a clang and a clatter of turning locks and the thud of many bolts,

the door swung open and he found himself in a square stone room furnished with a desk, a high stool and one chair.

The warder took his authority and read it, made an entry in the book, and rang a bell. It was a cheerless room, in spite of the fire, thought Ronald. Three sets of handcuffs garlanded above the chimney-piece; a suggestive truncheon lay on brackets near the warder's desk and within reach of his hand, and a framed copy of Prison Regulations only served to emphasise the bareness of the remaining wall.

Again the clatter and clink of the lock and another warder came in.

"Take this gentleman to the Governor's room," said the door-keeper. Ronald was amused because the second warder put his hand on his arm as though he were a prisoner, and did not remove his hand even when he was unlocking the innumerable gates, doors, and grilles which stood between liberty and the prisoners.

The Governor's room was scarcely more cheerful than the gatekeeper's lodge. There was a desk piled with papers, a worn leather armchair and an office smell which was agreeable and human. The Governor shook hands with the visitor, whom he had met before, and Ronald nodded to the two other pressmen who were waiting. Then they took him out into the yard. The warder led the way, and the doctor followed, then came the Governor, and last, save for the warder who brought up the rear, went Ronald Morelle, without a single tremor of heart to the house of doom.

To a great glass-roofed hall with tier upon tier of galleries and yellow cell doors, and near at hand—that which was nearest to them as they came in—one cell door ajar. Outside three blankets neatly folded were stacked one on each other. They were the blankets in which the condemned man had slept. Here was a wait. A nerve-racking wait to those with nerves. Ronald had none. A small door opened into the yard and he strolled through it and found himself in a small black courtyard. Twenty paces away was a little building which looked like a tool-house. There were two grey-black sliding doors and these were open. All he could see was a plain, clean interior with a scrubbed floor, and a yellow rope that hung from somewhere in the roof. He was joined by an officer whom he took to be the chief warder.

Physically Ronald was a coward. He admitted as much to himself. He feared pain, he shrank from danger. In his questionable business transactions he guarded himself in every way from unpleasant consequences, employing two lawyers who checked one another's conclusions.

Yet he could watch the pain of others and never turn a hair. He had witnessed

capital operations and had found stimulus in the experience which the hospital theatre brings to the enthusiastic scientist. He had seen death administered by the law in England, America, and France. Once he stood by the side of a guillotine in a little northern town of France and watched three shrieking men dragged to 'the widow', and was the least affected of the spectators, until the blood of one splashed his hand. And then it was only disgust he felt. He himself was incapable of violent action. He might torture the helpless, but he would have to be sure they were helpless.

"Chilly this morning, sir," said the chief warder conversationally, and said that he did not know what was happening to the weather nowadays. "It this the first time you've been inside?"

"In a prison? Oh, lord, no," said Ronnie.

"Ah!" The warder jerked his hand towards the door. "On this kind of job?"

"Yes, twice before."

The officer looked glum. "Not very pleasant. It upsets all the routine of the establishment. Can't get the men out for exercise till after it is over. They sit in their cells and brood—we always have a lot of trouble afterwards."

"How is he going to take it?" asked Ronald.

"Who, the prisoner?" Mr. Marsden smiled. "Oh, he's going to take it all right. They never give any trouble—and he—he'll go laughing, you mark my words. We like him, here—that's a funny thing to say, isn't it? But I assure you, I've had to take three men off observation duty—they are the warders who sit in the cell with him—they got so upset. It is a fact. Old fellows who'd been in the prison service for years. Here's the deputy."

A tall man in a trench coat had come through the grille. "Good morning, Morelle, have you see the Governor?" Ronnie nodded. "He won't be here for the—er—event," said Major Boyle. "Between ourselves, he said he couldn't stand it. An extraordinary thing. Have you seen Sir John Maxton?"

"No, is he here?" asked Ronnie, interested.

"He's in the cell with the man—there he is."

Sir John's face was grey; he seemed to have shrunken. He had not expected to see Ronnie, but he made no comment on his presence. "Good morning, Boyle. Good morning, Ronnie. I have just said goodbye to him."

"Aren't you staying?"

"No—he understands," said Sir John briefly. Then he seemed to be conscious of Ronnie's presence. The deputy had gone back to the hall. "Ronnie, how could you come here this morning—and meet the eyes of this man so soon to face God?" he asked in a hushed voice.

Ronnie's lips curled. "I suppose you feel in your heart that it is a great injustice, that your noble-minded murderer should go to a shameful death, whilst a leprous but respectable member of society like myself walks free through that gate!"

"I would wish no man this morning's agony," said the other.

"Suppose you were God..."

"Ronnie, have you no decency!"

"Oh yes—but suppose you were; would you transfer the soul of the individuality of us two, Ambrose Sault and Ronnie Morelle?"

"God forgive me, I would, for you are altogether beastly!"

Ronnie laughed again. There was the sound of a slamming door and a man came into the yard, squat, unshaven, a little nervous. A derby hat was on the back of his head, and in his hands, clasped behind him, was a leathern strap. "There's the hangman," said Ronnie. "Ask him what he thinks of murderers' souls! What is death, Sir John? Look at those tablets on the wall—just a few initials. Yet they sleep as soundly as the great in the Abbey under their splendid monuments. Though they were hanged by the neck until they were dead. You would like God to change us. One of those changes which Merville talked about the other night—it was a pity you weren't there."

Sir John said nothing; he walked to the grille and a warder unlocked the steel door. For a second he stood and then, as the hangman went into the hall, he passed out through the opened gate.

Presently two warders came from the hall and then another: two walking solemnly in slow step, and then a bound man; a great rugged figure who overshadowed the clergyman by his side. The drone of the burial service came to Ronald Morelle, and he took off his hat.

Sault was reciting something. His powerful voice drowned the thin voice of the minister:

"It matters not how straight the Gate..."

He paced in time to the metre.

"How charged with punishment the scroll,

I am the master of my fate..."

Nearer, and yet more near, and then their eyes met!

The debonair worldling, silk hat in hand, his hair brushed and pomaded, his immaculate cravat set faultlessly—and the other! That big grey-faced man with the mane of hair, his rough clothes and his collarless shirt!

They looked at one another for a fraction of a second, eye to eye, and Ronald felt something was drawing at him, tugging at his very heartstrings. The eyes of the man were luminous, appealing, terrible. And then with a crash the world stood still—all animate creation was frozen stiff, petrified, motionless, and Ronald swayed for a moment.

Then a firm hand on his arm pushed him forward. He stepped forth mechanically. He had a curious, almost painful feeling of restriction. And then he realized, with a half—sob, that his hands were bound behind him, strapped so tightly that they were swollen and tingling, and warders were holding his arms. He tried to speak, but no sound came, and looking up he saw... !

Once more he was looking into eyes, but they were the eyes of himself! Ronald Morelle was standing watching him with sorrow and pity. Ronald Morelle was watching himself! And then the urgent hand pressed him forward, and he paced mechanically.

"... I know that my Redeemer liveth..."

The little clergyman was walking by his side, reading tremulously. Ronald looked down at himself, his shoe was hurting him, somebody had left a nail there, and he cursed Francois; but those were not his shoes he was looking at, they were great rough boots, and his trousers were old and frayed, and there was a shiny patch on his knee.

"... Man that is born of a woman hath but little time upon this earth, and that time is filled with misery..."

He walked like one in a dream into the shed and felt the trap sag under him. The executioner—it must be the executioner he thought—stooped and strapped his legs tightly. Ronald wondered what would happen. It was an absurd mistake, of course, rather amusing in a way... Francois had not been paid his monthly salary, and Francois was meeting his brother today from Interlaken, Interlaken in the Oberland.

The man put a cloth over his face—it was linen, unbleached and pungent.

When the executioner passed the elastic loops behind his ears, he released one too quickly and it stung. "It is not me, it is not me," said Ronald numbly, 'it is the body of Ambrose Sault—the gross body of Ambrose Sault. I'm standing outside watching! It is Sault who is being hanged—Sault! I am Morelle... Morelle of Balliol... Major Boyle," he screamed aloud. "Major Boyle... you know me... I am Morelle..."

Yet his body was huge—he felt its grossness, its size, the strength of the corded muscles of the arm; the roaring fury of the life which surged within him. He heard a squeak—the lever was being pulled... !

With a crash the trap gave way and the body of Ambrose Sault swung for a second and was dead, but it was the soul of Ronald Morelle that went forth to the eternal spaces of infinity.

The prison clock struck nine.

BOOK THE FOURTH

CHAPTER XLIV

A WARDER came round the edge of the pit with his arms extended as the executioner, reaching out his hand, steadied the quivering rope. The prison doctor looked down the pit. "He's all right," he said vaguely. The tremulous clergyman was the last to go backing out of the death chamber he watched the warders close and lock the doors. The body of Ronald Morelle settled its top hat firmly on its shapely head and looked down at the little parson. There were tears in that good man's eyes. "He was not bad, he was not bad," he murmured shakily. "I wish he had repented the murder."

"There was nothing to repent," said Ronald quietly, "if repentance were possible the murder was unnecessary." His voice was strangely deep and rich. Hearing himself, he wondered. The minister looked up at him in surprise. "He said exactly the same thing to me this morning," he said, "and in almost identical words; the poor fellow expressed his thoughts in language which seemed unnatural, remembering his illiteracy."

"Poor soul," said Ronnie thoughtfully. "Poor lonely, lonely soul!"

He took the minister's arm in his and they walked back to the prison hall. There was a surplice to be shed, devotional books to be packed in a little black bag.

The condemned cell was being turned out by two men in convict's garb. One was using a broom, sweeping with long leisurely strokes, and his face had a suggestion of sadness. The other was carrying out the remainder of the bedding and washing the utensils which the dead man had used. All this Ronald noticed with a curiously detached interest.

Shepherded back again to the Governor's office, there was a form to be signed, testifying that he had witnessed the execution which had been carried out in a proper and decorous manner. Ronald took the pen and hesitated a second before he signed. The appearance of his signature on paper interested him—it was unfamiliar.

"You've seen these executions before, Mr. Morelle?" said the under sheriff.

"Oh, yes," said Ronald quietly. "I do not think I shall come again. The waste of it, the malice of it!"

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," said the under-sheriff gruffly, and Ronald smiled sadly.

"The Old Testament is excellent as literature, but in parts diabolical as a code of morals," he said, and went through the porter's lodge to the world.

There was a small crowd, some twenty or thirty people, grouped at a distance from the gate. Their interest was concentrated upon the kneeling figure that confronted Ronnie as he walked out of the lodge. "He comes here very time we have a hanging," said the gate-man in Ronnie's ear. It was the thin man in the threadbare coat; he knelt bare-headed, his blue hands clasped, his voice hoarse with a cold.

"... let him be the child of Thy mercies... pardon we beseech Thee, O Lord our God, this our brother who comes before Thy Seat of Judgement..."

Ronnie listened to the husky voice. Presently, and with a final supplication, the man got up and dusted his knees.

"For whom are you praying?" asked Ronnie gently.

"For Ambrose Sault, brother," answered the man.

"For Ambrose Sault?" repeated Ronnie absently. "That is very sweet." He looked thoughtfully at the man, and then walked away. Following the

Common road that would have taken him to Wechester, he heard a car coming behind him, and presently the, glittering bonnet moved past him and stopped.

"Excuse me, Sir." Ronnie looked round. He did not know the chauffeur who was touching his cap. And yet he had seen his face. "I thought you may have missed the car—I had to park away from the prison."

Of course! He breathed a heavy sigh as the problem was solved. It was his own car and the chauffeur's name was Parker. "I haven't the slightest idea where I was going," he laughed. "You look cold, Parker. We had better stop in Wechester and get breakfast."

Parker could only gape. "Yes, sir," he stammered, 'but don't worry about me, sir. I shall be all right."

Ronnie was puzzling again. Then he had it. The Red Lion! There was an inn just outside of Wechester; he had stopped there before. Apparently Parker expected some such directions.

They left the mists behind them at Wechester and came to the Red Lion. A pretty girl waitress at the hotel saw Ronnie and tossed her head. Her manner was cold. He couldn't remember... That was the oddness of it. He had lost some of his memories. They were completely blotted out from his mind. Why was this pretty girl so cross?

He was to learn. Finishing his breakfast he strolled out into the big yard where the car was garaged. The chauffeur was at his breakfast.

"Hi! I want to have a talk with you!"

A man was approaching. He looked like a groom, wearing gaiters as he did, and he was in his shirt-sleeves. Moreover, his style and appearance were hostile. "You're the man who was staying here for the trial!" challenged the newcomer.

"Was I?... I suppose so."

"Was you?" sneered the groom savagely. "Yes, you was! Staying here with a young woman, and you went and interfered with my young woman. Yes, interfered... said things to her."

His voice went up the scale until he was shouting. There was a stir of feet, and men and women came to the doors of outhouses and kitchens.

"Doesn't it strike you that you are making the young lady feel very uncomfortable... if she is here?" said Ronnie seriously. "You are shouting what

should be whispered... no, no, Parker, please do not interfere."

"I'll tell you what does strike me," bellowed the groom, rolling up his sleeves, "that I'm going to give you the damnedest lacing you ever had... put 'em up!"

He lunged forward, but his blow did not get home. A hand gripped him by one shoulder and swung him round... crash! He fell against a stable door. Happily there was a wall for Parker to lean against. He was open- mouthed... incredulous. Phew! Morelle, who was ready to drop from terror at a threat, was standing hands on hips, surveying the bewildered fire-eater.

"I'm extremely sorry you made me do that," he said almost apologetically, "but you really must not shout... especially about unpleasant things. If I... if I behaved disgracefully to the lady, I am sorry."

All this in a voice that did not reach beyond his adversary. Parker heard the low music of it and scratched his head. Morelle's voice had changed.

Later, when Ronnie was preparing to depart, Parker ventured to offer his felicitations. "I never saw a man go through it like that fellow did—and they think something of him as a fighter in these parts."

"It was nothing," said Ronnie hastily, "a trick... I learnt it in New Caledonia from a Japanese who was in the same prison."

Parker blinked. "Yes, sir," he said, and then Ronnie laughed.

"What on earth am I talking about? I think we will go home, Parker."

"Yes, sir," said Parker, breathing hard. He had never seen his master drunk before, and drunk he undoubtedly was, for not only had he fought, but he was civil. Parker hoped he would keep drunk.

In his pocket Ronnie found a gold cigarette-case, a pocket-book, a watch and chain, a small bill-case and a gold pencil. In his trousers pocket were a few silver coins and some keys. He found them literally; the seat of the car was strewn with his discoveries.

Whose were they? The cigarette-case was inscribed: "To Ronnie, from Beryl'. Ronnie... Beryl? Of course they were his own properties. He chuckled gleefully at his amusing lapse...

"No, I shan't want you again, Parker... how do I get into touch with you if... ? Yes, of course, I 'phone you at the garage. Good morning."

"Good morning." Parker was too dazed to return the politeness.

Ronnie shook his head smilingly when the porter opened the gate of the automatic elevator. He would walk, he said, and went up the stairs two at a time. This exercise tired him slightly. And usually he felt so strong, nothing tired him. That day he lifted Moropulos and flung him on his bed. Moropulos had hated him ever since...

CHAPTER XLV

"WHAT am I thinking about?" said Ronnie Morelle aloud.

Francois was not in. Ronnie had expected him to be there and yet would have been surprised had he seen him. There was a letter lying on the table. Ronnie saw it when he entered the room. He did not look at it again for some time. Strolling aimlessly round the library, hands in pockets, he stopped before the Anthony over the mantelpiece—ugly and a little unpleasant. He made a little grimace of disgust. Out of the tail of his eye he saw the letter.

Why did people write to him? he wondered, troubled. They knew that he couldn't read, he made no secret of his ignorance. Yet picking up the envelope, he read his own name and was unaware of his inconsistency. The letter was from Francois. His brother had arrived. He had gone to the station to meet him and would return instantly. Would monsieur excuse? It was unlikely that monsieur would return before him, but if he did, would he be pleased to excuse? He wrote 'excuse' three times and in three different ways, and they were all wrong. Ronald laughed softly. Poor Francois! Poor...

His face became grave, and slowly his eyes went back to the Anthony, that lewd painting. Poor soul! His eyes filled with tears. They rolled with the curious leisure of tears down his face, and dropped on the grey suede waistcoat.

Poor soul! Poor, weak, undeveloped soul!

Ronnie was sitting on the chesterfield to read the letter. Francois, coming in hurriedly, saw a man crying into the crook of his arm and stood petrified. "M'sieur!"

Ronnie looked up. His eyes were swollen, his smooth skin blotchily red in patches.

"Hello, Francois. I'm being stupid. Get me a glass of water, please."

His hand was shaking so that he could hardly hold the glass to his chattering teeth.

Francois watched and marvelled.

"Did you meet your brother?" Ronnie was drying his eyes and smiling faintly at the valet's grotesque dismay.

"Yes, m'sieur. I hope that m'sieur was not inconvenienced."

Ronnie shook his head. "No... make me something. Coffee or tea anything. Have you brought your brother here?"

"No, no, m'sieur."

"You will want to see him, Francois. You may take the rest of the day off."

"Certainly, m'sieur," said Francois, recovering himself. His services were seldom dispensed with until later in the day. Possibly his employer had excellent reason.

Ronnie did not hear the bell ring, and until he caught the click of the lock and the sound of voices in the lobby he had no idea that he had a caller.

Francois came in alone, secretive, low-voiced.

"It is Mr. East, m'sieur. Yesterday was the day, but m'sieur forgot," he said mysteriously.

"Yesterday was—what day?" Ronnie rubbed his chin with a knuckle. How stupid of him to forget! "Ask him to come in, please."

Francois hesitated, but went, returning with a thin young man whose face seemed all angles and bosses. He was well-dressed, a little too well-dressed. His plastered hair was parted, and one fringe curled like a wave of black ink that had been petrified just as it was in the act of breaking on the yellow beach of his forehead. He had a way of holding back his head so that he looked down his nose in whatever direction his gaze was turned.

" 'Morning," he said coldly, and cleared his throat.

"Good morning?" Ronnie's tone was polite but inquisitive.

"I called yesterday but nobody was in," said Mr. East, gently stern.

"Why did you call at all?" asked Ronnie.

A look of amazement toning to righteous anger from Mr. East. "Why did I call

at all?" he repeated. "To give you a chance of actin' the man; to collect what was due to a poor girl that was—"

"To commit blackmail, in fact?" smiled Ronnie. He was quick to smile today.

"Eh?"

"I remember... I have given you money every week, ostensibly for your sister. Tell her to come and see me."

"What! Her come to see you? In this, what I might term, den of iniquity? No! I don't allow you to see the poor girl. And as for blackmail, didn't you, of your own free will, offer to pay?"

Mr. East had grown red in the face; he was indignant, hurt, and soon would be pugnacious.

Ronnie got to his feet, and the listening Francois heard the door open. "Get out, please," said Ronnie pleasantly. "I don't wish to hurt you... but get out."

The man was speechless. "I am going to a lawyer," he blustered. "I won't soil my hands with you."

"I think you are very wise," said Ronnie, and closed the door on him. On the mat outside, Mr. East stood for at least five minutes thinking, or trying to think. "He's been drinking!" he said hollowly, and, had he consulted Parker, his suspicions would have received support.

Francois heard his employer's summons and came from his tiny compartment. "I am going out," said Ronnie.

"I will telephone for the car, m'sieur."

But Ronnie shook his head. "I will walk," he said. "You need not wait, Francois. Have I a key?"

"Yes, m'sieur"—wonderingly, "it is on the chain of m'sieurs."

Ronnie pulled a bunch from his pocket. "Which is it—this?"

"Certainly, m'sieur."

"You need not wait," said Ronnie again. "I do not know when I shall be in."

"Good, m'sieur."

Well might Francois wonder, for Ronnie was speaking in French, the French of a man who had lived with French people. And Ronald Morelle, though he

had a knowledge of that language, never spoke it, or if he did, his accent was bad and his vocabulary limited.

It was eight o'clock at night when Ronnie returned. The flat was in darkness and was chilly. He turned on the lights before he closed the door and had a difficulty in finding the switch. It took him a longer time to locate the controls of the electric stove in the fireplace. They were skilfully hidden. In the kitchenette he lit a gas-ring, and, filling a copper kettle, set the water to boil.

Francois, in his hurry to meet his brother that morning, had forgotten to dust the black writing-table. Ronnie searched for and found a duster and remedied his man's neglect. By the time he had finished, the kettle was boiling. The tea was in a little wooden box; the sugar he found on another shelf... there was no milk.

Ronnie put on his coat, and with a jug in his hand, went out to find a dairy. The hall porter saw a man in a silk hat and wasp-waisted overcoat passing his lodge, and came out hurriedly. "Excuse me, Mr. Morelle, is there anything I can do for you?"

"I want some milk," said Ronnie simply, "but please don't trouble; there is a dairy in the Brompton Road. I remember seeing the place."

"They will be closed now, sir," said the porter. "If you give me the jug I'll get some for you." He took the vessel and made a flat-to-flat canvass and was successful in his quest.

When he opened the door to the porter, Ronnie was in his shirt-sleeves and he had a broom in his hand. He explained pleasantly that he had upset a can of flour. Francois occasionally prepared an omelette for his master...

"If you'll let me sweep it up..." began the porter, but Ronnie declined the offer. With a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter he made a meal, cleared away the remnants of the feast and washed and dried the utensils. Then he sat down to pass the evening. The bookshelves were bewilderingly interesting. He took out a book. Greek! Of course, he read Greek and this was the Memorabilia; its margin covered with pencil notes in his own handwriting!

Presently he replaced the book and tried to reduce the events of the day to some sort of order. The execution!

What happened outside the execution shed?

He had looked into the eyes of the condemned man, and suddenly the placid current of his mind had been disturbed as by a mighty wind. And standing there he had watched something being taken into the death house; whose

uncouth body was it that hung strapped and strangled in the brick pit? Ambrose Sault's?

He remembered a second of painful experience when he had a confused memory of strange people and places, queer earthquake memories. He recollected having being flogged by a red-haired brute of a man who wielded a strap; he recalled a dim-lit cell and the pale blue eyes of a clergyman who was pleading with him; of a woman, dark-faced and thick-lipped... his mother?... he remembered the past of Ambrose Sault! He had been Ambrose Sault in those ten seconds, with all the consciousness of Sault's life, all the passion of Sault's faith. And then the weighted traps had fallen with a thunderous clap and he was Ronald Morelle again—only different.

Yet he was not wholly conscious of the difference. What a strange business it was! How was humanity served by that ritual of death? His heart melted within him as in a vivid flash he saw the blank despair of the trussed victim of the law shuffling forward to annihilation. He was being weak... but oh, God, how sad, how unutterably sad! He sobbed into his hands and was pained at the futility of his grief. Poor soul! Poor, mean, smirched soul! How vilely it had served the beautiful body which was its habitation.

He looked up, frowning, his tear-stained face puckered in perplexity. Beautiful body? Ambrose Sault was gross, uncouth. And by all accounts a good man. Even Steppe admired his principles. Why should principles be admired? It was natural to be honest and clean...

He had left the door of the pantry ajar; the shrill sound of the bell brought him to his feet. He waited to wipe his face, and the bell rang again impatiently. "My friend, you must wait," said Ronnie.

A third time the bell rang before he opened the door. Steppe filled the doorway, the expanse of his shirt-front showed like a great white heart against the gloom of his evening dress.

"Hello! You're in, huh? Long time in answering the bell—I suppose you've got somebody here."

He looked around. The only light in the room was the shaded table-lamp. Ronnie had extinguished the others before he sat down.

"The wicked love the darkness, huh, huh!" Steppe chuckled, and then, looking past him, Ronnie saw that he was not alone. Beryl waited at the door, and behind her was Dr. Merville.

"Get dressed and come out," commanded Steppe noisily. "What's the matter

with all you people, huh? Come along. We're going to a theatre. You're as bad as Beryl, sitting in the dark. You over-bred people think too much."

"May we come in, Ronnie?" asked Beryl.

It was very likely that Steppe's crude suggestion was justified. She had no illusions about Ronnie.

"Come in. Of course you can come in," said Steppe scornfully. "Now, hurry, Morelle. We'll give you ten minutes—and put some lights on."

"There is enough light."

Ronnie's voice was calm and deep. Steppe, turning to find the switch, swung back again and peered at his face. "What's that?" he asked sharply. "I said there wasn't—what have you done to your voice? Here!"

He walked across the room and ran his hand down the three switches.

Ronnie screwed up his eyes to meet the painful brilliance. He saw Beryl's look of surprise, met the stare of the big man.

"He's been crying!" bellowed Steppe in delight. "Huh, huh! Look at him, Beryl, snivelling!"

"Mr. Steppe—Jan! How can you!"

"How can I? By God, he's been snivelling! Look at his face, look at his eyes!" Steppe slapped his thigh in an ecstasy of joy. "So it got you, huh? I couldn't understand how a fellow like you could see it without curling up!"

His coarseness, the malignity, the heartlessness of the man sickened Beryl Merville. But Ronnie... He was serene, unmoved by the other's taunts, meeting his eyes steadily.

"It was dreadful... so dreadful, Steppe. To see that poor shrieking thing thrust forward, struggling..."

"What!" shouted Steppe, and the girl gasped. "Ambrose Sault... shrieking in fear..."

"You lie!" snarled Steppe. "Sault wasn't that kind. I've seen Maxton and he says he was without fear. You're dreaming, you fool. If it had been you... yes. You'd have squealed... by God! You would have raised Cain! But Ambrose Sault... he was a man. D'ye hear, a man. He's dead and I'm glad. But he was a man."

He held himself in with an effort.

"Get dressed and come out," he ordered roughly.

"I'm so sorry, Ronnie." The girl had come to him, pity and sympathy in her sad face. "It was dreadful for you."

He nodded. "Yes. It was dreadful. I am not coming out tonight, Beryl."

She squeezed his arm gently. "Poor Ronnie!"

"Poor fiddlesticks!" sneered Steppe. "Hurry, cry-baby. I'm not going to wait here all night. What are you afraid of? You shouldn't have seen the damned thing if you were going to snivel about it. You should have 'Tried the Luck'!" He chuckled as at a joke as he saw the swollen eyes of his victim wander to the bookshelf.

"The Luck!" said Ronnie. He was speaking to himself, as he moved to the bookcase.

Beryl saw him take down a worn volume and lay it on the table. He seemed like a man walking in his sleep. Mechanically he took up a miniature sword from a pin tray and held it for a moment in his hand.

"Try the Luck!" scoffed Steppe. "Shall I go to the play, shan't I go to the play... dear Lord!"

For the space of a second their eyes met and Beryl, watching, saw the big man start. Then the sword was thrust between the pages and the book opened. Ronnie looked gloomily at the close-set type... frowned. Then he read slowly, sonorously:

"I will take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke; yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep; neither shall thy tears fall down."

The clock on the mantelpiece struck nine. A silence, painful and intense, so profound that Beryl's quick breathings were audible."

I will take away the desire of thine eyes with a stroke..."

"Don't read it again!" cried Steppe harshly. "I'm going... listening to this fool... come on, Beryl!"

Turning at the door she saw him still standing at the table. His face was in shadow, his hands, white and shapely, outspread upon the leather-covered top, the open book between them.

"He's drunk," said Steppe, and she made no reply.

Jan Steppe was very preoccupied all that evening, but not so completely oblivious of realities that he did not bargain with the doctor for certain shares in the Klein River Mine. Just before he had left his house Steppe had received a code cable from Johannesburg.

CHAPTER XLVI

ON the morning of Ambrose Sault's execution, Evie found a letter awaiting her at the drug-store. Whatever natural unhappiness of feeling she may have had when she left her weeping mother, vanished in the perusal of Ronnie's long epistle. The envelope bore the St. John's Wood postmark, but this she would not have regarded as significant, even if she had noticed it, which she did not. Not a love-letter in the strictest sense; it was too precise and businesslike for that. It gave her certain dates to be cherished, certain instructions to be observed. It went to the length of naming Parisian dressmakers where she might be expeditiously fitted. She was to bring nothing, only a suitcase with bare necessities. A week's stay in Paris would give her all the time she needed to equip herself. It was a trial to her that she would not see Ronnie for a month, not until the great day... She caught her breath at the thought. But he had stipulated this.

Ronnie was too keen a student of women to give her the opportunity of changing her mind. His letters could not be argued with, or questioned. And the month would quickly pass. Teddy Williams was a faithful attendant, and although he could not be compared in any respect with Ronnie, it was pleasant and flattering to extend her patronage to one who hung upon her words and regarded her as an authority upon most subjects. She had imparted her views on marriage to Teddy, and that young man had been impressed without being convinced. Ronnie's letter was to be read and re-read. She expected another the next day, and when it did not come, she was disappointed. Yet he had not promised to write; in his letter he had said: "Until you are my very own, I shall live the life of an anchorite'. She looked up 'anchorite' and found that it meant 'one who retires from society to a desert or solitary place to avoid the temptations of the world and to devote himself to religious exercises', and accepted this as a satisfactory explanation, though she couldn't imagine Ronnie engaging himself in religious exercises.

Life ran normally at home, now that Mr. Sault was dead. Evie had felt very keenly the disgrace of having a lodger who was a murderer. Only the fact that Ronnie knew him, too, and to some extent shared in the general odium, prevented her from enlarging upon the scandal to her mother and Christina. Beyond her comprehension, was her sister's remarkable cheerfulness. Christina didn't seem to care whether Mr. Sault was alive or dead. She was her own caustic self, and the shadow of her proper woe failed to soften or sadden her.

A week of her waiting had passed before Christina even mentioned the name of Ambrose Sault, and then it was in connection with the disposal of his room. Apparently he had paid his rent for a long period in advance, and Mrs. Colebrook refused to let the room again until the tenancy had expired. "Mother is being sentimental over Ambrose and his room," said Christina, "but there is no reason why you should not have the room, Evie. You've been aching for privacy as long as I can remember."

Evie shuddered. "I couldn't sleep there. I'd be afraid he'd haunt me."

"I should be afraid he wouldn't," said Christina, with a little smile. "If you don't like the idea, I will have my bed put in there."

"No, no, please don't, Christina," begged the girl urgently. "I—I prefer to sleep here if you don't mind. I want to be with you as much as I can, and I'm out all day."

"And home much earlier. Is it Ronnie or Teddy?"

"I'm seeing a lot of Teddy," replied Evie primly; "he is quite a nice boy."

"And Ronnie?"

"Leave Ronnie alone." Evie turned a good-humoured smile to her. "He is too busy to meet me so often."

"Loud cheers," said the ironical Christina. "Evie, why don't you ask him to call here? I should enjoy a chat with him."

"Here?" Evie was incredulous. "How absurd! Ronnie wouldn't dream of coming here."

Christina laughed. "I won't tease you any more, Evie. Does he ever say anything about Ambrose? He was in the prison when Ambrose was executed."

Evie writhed. "I wish you wouldn't talk about it, Christina... in such a cold-blooded way—ugh!"

"Does he?"

"I haven't seen him since that... that awful day," she said, "and I'm sure he wouldn't talk about it." Evie hesitated. "Do you think much about Mr. Sault, Chris?"

Christina put down her knitting in her lap and nodded. "All the time," she said. "He isn't out of my thoughts for a second. Not his face, I mean, or his awkward-looking body, but the real. Do you remember, Evie, how embarrassed I used to make him sometimes, and how he'd rub his chin with the back of his hand? I always knew when Ambrose was troubled. And how he used to sit on my bed and listen so seriously to all my wails and whines?"

Evie looked for some evidence of emotion, but Christina's eyes were dry... she appeared to be happy.

"Yes... Chris, do you think I ought to take these stockings back to the store? They laddered the first time I put them on, and I paid a terrible price for them." Christina took the stockings from the girl and there all talk of Ambrose Sault came to an end.

A few afternoons later, returning from her early walk, she was met at the door by her agitated mother. "There's a gentleman called to see you, Christina; he's in the kitchen."

"A gentleman?"

'A gentleman' might mean anything by Mrs. Colebrook's elastic description. "He's a friend of Miss Merville's, named Mr. Morelle."

"What?" Christina could hardly believe her ears. Ronnie Morelle? Had Evie conveyed her joking request to him? Even if she had, it was not likely he would call for the pleasure of seeing her. Mrs. Colebrook hustled her into the kitchen and closed the door on them. She had all the respect of her class for the sanctity of private conversation.

Ronnie was sitting in the chair where Ambrose had so often sat, as Mrs. Colebrook reminded her at least three times a day. He rose as she entered and stood surveying her. It was the first time she had seen him close at hand, and her first impression was one of admiration. She had never met so good-looking a man, and instantly she absolved Evie for her infatuation. He did not offer his hand at first, and it was not until she was about to speak that it came out to her shyly. It was a strong hand, and the warmth of the grip surprised her. "Christina!" he said softly, and she felt herself go red.

"That is my name. You are Ronnie Morelle? I have heard a great deal about

you from Evie."

"From Evie?... yes, why of course! Your mother is looking well. She works very hard—too hard I think. Women ought not to do such heavy work." She sat, tongue-tied, could only point to the chair from which he had risen. "I had to come to see you... but I have been rather occupied and selfish. I have been reading a great deal... a sheer delight. You will understand that? And poor Francois has had a lot of trouble—his brother developed appendicitis. We have had an anxious time."

Ronnie Morelle! And he was talking gravely of the anxious time he had had because the brother of his servant—it was incredible. She never dreamt that he was this kind of man; all her preconceived ideas and more than half of her prejudice against him were swept away in a second. He was sincere; she knew it. Absolutely sincere. This was no pose of his. "You haven't seen Evie... oh yes, you have! She told you I wanted to see you, Mr. Morelle. I do, although I was only joking when I suggested your coming. Are you very fond of Evie?"

"Yes, she is a nice child. A little thoughtless and perhaps a little selfish. Young girls are that way, especially if they are pretty. I am fond of young people, all young things have an appeal for me. Kittens, puppies chicks... I can watch them for hours."

This was Ronnie Morelle. She had to tell herself all the time. He was the man whom Ambrose Sault had described as 'foul', and Ambrose was so charitable in his judgments; the man who had taken Beryl Merville..."I am glad you spoke of Evie," he went on. "She must not be hurt. At her age men make a profound impression and colour the whole of after-life. It is so easy to sour the young. It is hard to improve on the old texts"—he smiled. "I wonder why I try. 'As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined.' I never think that it is wise to reason with a girl in love... fascinate is a better word. Aegrescit medendo! The disease thrives on remedies. I don't know where I picked up that phrase—it is Latin, isn't it?"

He went red again, was painfully embarrassed. She fell back against the wall, white as death. Only by an effort of will did she arrest the scream that arose in her throat. In his distress he was rubbing his chin with his knuckle!

"Oh, my God!" cried Christina, wide-eyed. Springing up she took both his hands and looked into his face. "Don't you know?" she breathed.

A smile dawned slowly in the handsome face of Ronnie Morelle. "I know it is very good to see you, Christina," he said.

Then as suddenly she released his hands and held on to the table. "Get me

some water, please."

She watched him as he went unerringly into the scullery. There were two taps, one connected with a rainwater cistern that her father had made; the other was the drinking water. He turned the right tap, found a glass where it was invariably hidden on a shelf behind a cretonne curtain, and brought it back to her. She drank greedily. "Sit down... Ronnie. I want you to tell me something. You went to the execution... I know it hurts you, my dear, but you must tell me. How did he die?"

She waited, holding her breath. "It was... terrible," he said in a low voice; 'he was so... afraid!"

"Afraid!" she whispered.

"I don't remember much. Every thought seemed to have gone out of my mind. Afterwards I was so numbed... why, I didn't even recognise my own car or know that I had a car."

"Did you touch him... look at him, then? Did you, Ronnie?" Ronald Morelle answered with a gesture. "Did you... ?"

"I looked at him, but only for a second. He was reciting a poem. Henley's. I was reading it today, trying to recall things. That was all. I just looked into his eyes, and I was feeling hateful toward him, Christina. And that was all. He began to moan and cry out. I was terribly distressed."

She said no more. She wanted to be alone with her mad thoughts. When he rose to go, she was glad. "I'll come again on Wednesday," he said, but corrected his promise. "No, Wednesday is wash-day. Your mother will not want me here."

"How do you know, Ronnie, that it is mother's wash-day?" She was addressing him as if he were a child from whom information must be coaxed.

"I don't know... Evie may have told me... of course it is Wednesday, Christina!"

She nodded. "Yes, it is Wednesday."

Mrs. Colebrook, consonant with her principles, had effaced herself so effectively that Christina had to seek her in her hiding-place. She was sitting in Sault's room, and sniffed suspiciously when the girl called her. "Mother, you have often told me about something Ambrose did when you were very ill. Will you tell me again?" Mrs. Colebrook was happy to tell, embellishing the story with footnotes and interpolations descriptive of her own impressions on that

occasion.

"Thank you, mother."

"What did he want? I didn't like to come down whilst he was here... not in this old skirt. Did he know poor Mr. Sault? A la-di-da sort of fellow, but very polite. He quite flustered me, he was so friendly." She relieved the girl from the necessity for replying by supplying her own answers.

At the foot of the stairs Mrs. Colebrook heard the snick of a key as Christina locked the door of her room. Mrs. Colebrook sighed. Christina was getting more and more unsociable.

CHAPTER XLVII

DID Beryl know... should she know? Suppose she went to her and told her the crazy theory she had. Beryl would doubt her sanity. No, no good would come of precipitancy. She must be sure, thought Christina, lying on her bed, her hand a her mouth as though she feared that she might involuntarily cry her news aloud. No particulars of Ambrose Sault's death had appeared in the press. The longest notice was one which after a brief reference, to the execution, went on to give details concerning the crime Practically the references to the execution were similar:

'Ambrose Sault was executed at Wechester Jail yesterday morning for the murder of Paul Moropulos. The condemned man walked with a firm step to the gallows, and death was instantaneous. He made no statement. Billet was the executioner.'

The hangman always received his puff.

When she had been staying with Beryl she had met Sir John Maxton; he had returned on the morning of the execution and had come straight to the house. He had said nothing that gave her any impression except that Ambrose had died bravely. Would he have heard anything later? She made up her mind, dressed, and went out.

There was a telephone a block away and she got through to Sir John's chambers in the Temple. To her relief he answered the telephone himself. "Is that you, Sir John? It is Christina Colebrook... yes... I'm very well. Can I see you, Sir John? Any time now if you wish. I could be with you in twenty

minutes... oh, thank you... thank you so much."

A bus dropped her in Fleet Street, and she walked through the Temple grounds to the ugly and dreary buildings where he rented chambers. They were on the ground floor happily; Christina was still a semi-invalid. "You've come to ask me about Sault?" he said, as soon as she was announced.

"Why do you think that?" she smiled.

"I guessed. I suppose Ronnie has told everybody about the ghastly business. It seems impossible, impossible that he could have shown the white feather as he did," said Sir John. "I can hardly believe it is true, and yet when I got into touch with the deputy governor, he told me very much the same story—that one moment Sault was calm and literally smiling at death, the very next instant he was... pitiful, blubbering like a child. I hate telling you this, because I know you were such dear friends, but... you want to know?"

She inclined her head. "Nothing else happened?"

"Nothing... oh yes, there was one curious circumstance. In the midst of his amazing outburst Sault cried, 'Ronald Morelle of Balliol!' Did he know that Ronnie was at Balliol? I can only imagine that by this time he hadn't any idea at all what he was talking about."

She rose. "Thank you, Sir John," she said quietly, "you have saved my reason."

"In what way?" His curiosity was piqued. "There was something I had to believe—or go mad. That is cryptic, isn't it? But I can't be plain, for fear you think I've lost my reason already!"

Sir John was too polite to press her, too much of a lawyer to reveal his curiosity. He went on to talk of Sault. "He was certainly the best man I have met in my life. By 'best' I particularly refer to his moral character, his ideal, his sense of divinity. His courage humbled me, his philosophy left me feeling like a child of six. I must believe what I am told, so I accept the story about his having made a scene on the scaffold without question. But there is an explanation for it, that I'll swear, and an explanation creditable to Ambrose Sault."

Christina went home with a light heart, convinced. She had begun a letter to Beryl and was debating half-way through whether she would as much as hint her peculiar theory, when Evie burst into the room cyclonically, her eyes blazing. "He's been here! Mother said so... you were talking to him for a long time! Oh, Chris, what did he say? Wasn't it wonderful of him to come? Don't

you think he is handsome, Chris? Own up—isn't he a gorgeous man? Did he ask after me? Was he very disappointed when he found I was out?"

"I'll take your questions in order," said Christina, solemnly ticking them off on her finger. "He has been here, if He is Ronnie; he said a lot of things. It was certainly wonderful for me that he came. He asked after you, but didn't seem to be cast down to find you were out. Was that the lot? I hope so."

"But, Christina!" She was quivering with excitement. "What do you think of him?"

"I think he is sublime!"

Evie glanced at her resentfully, suspecting sarcasm; saw that her sister was in earnest, and, seeing this, was confounded. "He is very nice," she said, less enthusiastic. "Yes... a dear. Did you really get on with him, Chris? How queer! And after all that you've said about him! Didn't your conscience prick you?"

Christina sent her red locks flying in a vigorous headshake. "No, it wasn't conscience," she said. Evie, from being boisterously interested, became quietly distrait. "Of one thing I am certain," volunteered Christina, "and it is that he will never behave dishonourably or give you, or for the matter of that, mother and me, one hour's real pain."

"No... I'm sure he won't," said Evie awkwardly, the more awkward because she was trying so hard not to be.

"Such a man couldn't be mean. I am certain of that," Christina went on. "Evie, I am not scared about you any more... and I was, you know. Just scared! Sometimes when you came back from seeing Ronnie, I feared not look at you for fear... I didn't exactly know what I feared. Now... well, I feel that you are in good hands, darling, and I shall not be thinking every time you go out: 'I wonder if she will come back again?'"

Evie's face was burning. If she had spoken she would have betrayed herself. She became interested in the contents of a hanging cupboard, and hummed a careless tune, shakily. "Are you singing or is it the hinge?" asked Christina.

"You're very rude... I was singing... humming."

"There must be music in the family somewhere," said Christina; 'probably it goes back to our lordly ancestor—"

"I told Teddy about that, about Lord Fransham—"

"Did you tell Ronnie?"

Evie wondered if she should stay. Christina was so excellently disposed towards him that it would be a pity to excite her resentment. "Yes... he laughed. He said everybody has a lord in his family if he only goes back far enough. Teddy thought it was wonderful and he said... you'll laugh?"

"I swear I won't."

"Well... he said that he knew that I had aristocratic blood by my instep, it is so arched. And it is, you know, Chris—just look!"

"Shurrup!" said Christina vulgarly.

"Well... he did. Teddy isn't half the fool you think him... I don't exactly mean you, Chris, but people. His father has a tremendous farm, miles and miles of it. He sent Teddy over here for six months. What do you think for?" Christina couldn't think. "To find a wife!" said Evie. "Isn't it quaint? And do you know that Teddy is staying at the Carlton Grand? I thought he was living with his aunt in Tenton Street, and I only discovered by accident that he was staying at a swagger hotel. He said he would write and tell his father about our lord." She sighed heavily. "I like Teddy awfully. He is so grateful or... well, for anything I can do for him, such as putting his tie straight and telling him about things."

"Why don't you marry Teddy?"

A few weeks ago Evie would have snorted scornfully. Now she was silent for a long time. She sighed again. "That is impossible. I'm too fond of Ronnie, and I believe in keeping... in keeping my word. Teddy's father is building a beautiful little house for him. And Teddy says that he has a quiet horse that a girl could ride. He believes in riding astride; so do I. I've never ridden, but that is the way I should: ride... through the corn for miles and miles. You can see the mountains from Teddy's farm. They are covered with snow, even in the summer. There is a place called Banff where you can have a perfectly jolly time—dances and all that. In the winter, when it is freezingly cold, Teddy goes to Vancouver, where it is quite warm. He has an orange-farm somewhere." For the third time she sighed.

Christina, in her wisdom, made no comment.

CHAPTER XLVIII

EVIE usually had her breakfast alone. Christina was late, and Mrs. Colebrook

breakfasted before her family came down, and was, moreover, so completely occupied in supplying the needs of her youngest daughter that it would have been impossible to settle herself down to a meal. Evie was generally down by a quarter to eight; the postman came at eight o'clock. Until recently, Evie had no interest in the movements of that official. Very few letters came to the house in any circumstances, and of these Evie's share was negligible. Teddy brought a new interest to the morning, for he was a faithful correspondent, and the girl would have known long before that he was an inmate of a superior caravanserai had not the youth, in his modesty, written on the plainest of notepaper.

Not then, nor at any other time, did the mail have any thrill for Mrs. Colebrook. She had a well—to-do sister living in the north who wrote to her regularly every six months. These letters might have been published as a supplement to the Nomenclature of Diseases, for they constituted a record of the obscure ailments which afflicted the writer's family. She had a sister-in-law living within a mile of her whom she seldom saw and never heard from. Whatever letters came to the house were either for Christina or Evie, generally for Christina.

Ambrose Sault had once presented Christina with five hundred postal cards. It was one of the freakish things that Ambrose did, but behind it there was a solid reason. Christina enjoyed a constant supply of old magazines and out-of-date periodicals. Evie collected them for her from her friends. And in these publications were alluring advertisements, the majority of which begged the reader, italically, to send for Illustrated Catalogue No. 74, or to write to Desk H for a beautiful handbook describing at greater length the wonders of the articles advertised. Sometimes samples were offered, samples of baby's food, samples of fabric, samples of soap and patent medicine, and other delectable products. Christina had expressed a wish that she could write, and Ambrose had supplied the means.

Thereafter, Christina's letter-bag was a considerable one. She knew more about motor-cars—their advantages over one another, their super—excellent speeds and economies—than the average dealer. If you asked her what car ran the longest distance on a can of petrol, she would not only tell you, but would specify which was the better of the gases supplied. She knew the relative nutritive qualities of every breakfast food on the market; the longest—wearing boots and the cheapest furniture.

Evie had finished her meal when the postman knocked. "A letter from Teddy and a sample for Christina, I suppose," speculated Mrs. Colebrook, hurrying to the door. She invariably ran to meet the postman, having a confused idea that it was an offence punishable under the penal code to keep him waiting.

There was no mail for Christina. "Here's your letter..." Evie took the stout and expensive-looking envelope embossed redly with the name of the hotel.

"Who's writing to me?" asked Mrs. Colebrook. She turned the letter over, examined the handwriting critically, deciphered the postmark... finally tore open the flap of the envelope. "Well I never!" said Mrs. Colebrook. She looked at the heading again. "Who is Johnson and Kennet?" she asked.

"The house-agents? There is a firm of that name in Knightsbridge. What is it, mother?"

Mrs. Colebrook read aloud:

Dear Madam,

"We have been requested to approach you in regard to work which we feel you would care to undertake. A client of ours has a small house on the Continent, for which he is anxious to secure a housekeeper. Knowing, through Dr. Merville, that you have a daughter who is recovering from an illness, he asks me to state that he would be glad if your daughter accompanied you. There is practically no work—three servants, all of whom speak English, are kept—and our client wishes us to state that the grounds are extensive and pretty, and hopes that you will make the freest use of them and the small car which he will leave there. He himself does not expect to occupy the house, so that you will be practically free from any kind of supervision.

The salary was named. It was generous.

Mrs. Colebrook looked over her glasses at the wondering Evie. "Mother! How perfectly splendid!"

Mrs. Colebrook was not so enthusiastic. Change of any kind was anathema. She had acted as housekeeper in her younger days, so that the work had no terrors for her, but—abroad! Foreign countries meant peril. Foreigners to her were sinister men who carried knives and were possessed of homicidal tendencies. They spoke a language expressly designed to conceal their evil intentions, and they found their recreation in plotting n underground chambers. There was a cinema at the end of Walter Street.

"There is something written on the other side," said Evie suddenly.

Mrs. Colebrook turned the sheet. "The invitation extends to your younger daughter, if she would care to accompany you."

"Well!" said Evie, and flew up the stairs to Christina's room. "Christina! What do you think? Mother has a letter from a house-agent offering—"

"Don't tell me!" Christina interrupted. "Let me guess! They've offered her a beautiful house in the country rent free... no? Then they've offered... let me think... a house in a nice warm climate where I can bask in the sunshine and watch the butterflies flirting with the roses!"

Evie's jaw dropped. "Whatever made you think... ?"

Christina snatched the letter and read, her eyes bright with excitement. "Oh, golly!" she said, and laughed so long that Evie grew alarmed. "No, I'm not mad, and I'm not clairvoyant. Mother, what do you think of it?"

Mrs. Colebrook had followed her daughter upstairs. "I don't know what to think," she said. She was one of those people who welcome an opportunity to show their indecision. Mrs. Colebrook liked to be 'persuaded'. Though she might make up her mind irrevocably, it was necessary that argument around and about should be offered before she yielded her tentative agreement.

Nobody knew this better than Christina. She drew a long sigh of relief, recognising the signs. "We'll talk it over after Evie has gone to her pill- shop," she said, and for once Evie did not contest a description of her place of business, which usually provoked her to retort. "I only want to say, mother, that you need not worry about me. I can get lodgings at one of the girls' hostels. I don't think I want to go abroad. In fact, I know that I don't. But it would be fine for Christina. It is my dream come true. I've always had that plan for her—a place where she could sit in the sunshine and watch the flowers grow."

Christina's smile was all loving kindness; she took the girl's fingers in her hand and pinched them softly. "Off to your workshop, woman," she ordered. "Mother and I want to talk about the sunny south."

"I'm not sure that I can take it," said Mrs. Colebrook dismally. "I don't like the idea of living in a foreign place—"

"We'll discuss that," said Christina in her businesslike way. "Did those linoleum patterns come?"

CHAPTER XLIX

THERE was no letter for Evie when she arrived at the store. Curiously enough she was not as disappointed as she expected to be. There was a chance that

Ronnie would have written after his visit to the house, but when she found her desk bare, she accepted his neglect with equanimity. Her love for Ronnie was undiminished. She faced, with a coolness which was unnatural in her, the future he had sketched, and if at times she felt a twinge of uneasiness, she put the less pleasant aspect away from her. It would not be honourable to go back on her word, even if she wanted to do so. And she did not. As to the more agreeable prospect, she did not think about that either. It was easier to dismiss the whole thing from her mind. She told herself she was being philosophical. In reality, she was solving her problem by the simple process of forgetting it.

Leaving the store at midday to get her lunch, she saw Ronnie. He was driving past in his big Rolls, and apparently he did not see her. Why was she glad?—for glad she was. That thought had to be puzzled out in the afternoon, with disastrous consequences to her cash balance, for when she made her return that night she was short the price of a hot-water bottle.

But Ronnie had seen her, long before she had seen him. He was on his way to lunch with a man he knew, but toward whom he had for some reason conceived a dislike. It was rather strange, because Jerry Talbot was the one acquaintance he possessed who might be called 'friend'. They had known one another at Oxford; they had for some time hunted in pairs; they shared memories of a common shame. Yet when Jerry's excited voice tad called him on the telephone that morning and had begged him to meet his erstwhile partner at Vivaldi's, Ronnie experienced a sense of nausea. He would have refused the invitation, but before he could frame the words, Jerry had rung off.

Vivaldi's is a smart but not too smart restaurant, and had been a favourite lunching-place of Ronnie's. It was all the more unreasonable in him that he should descend beneath the glass-roofed portico with a feeling of revulsion. Mr. Talbot had not arrived, said the beaming maitre-d'hotel. Yes, he had booked a table. Ronnie seated himself in the lounge, and a bellboy brought him an evening newspaper which he did not read. Had he done so, he would not have waited.

Half an hour passed and Ronnie was feeling hungry. Another quarter of an hour. "I am going into the restaurant. When Mr. Talbot comes, tell him I have begun my lunch." He was shown to the table and chose a simple meal from the card. At any rate Jerry's unpardonable rudeness gave him an excuse for declining further invitations.

He had finished his lunch and had signalled for his bill when, looking round, he recognized two men at one of the window tables. He would not have approached them, but Sir John Maxton beckoned. Dr. Merville would gladly have dispensed with his presence, thought Ronnie, and wondered why he had

intruded into an important conference. "Come and sit down, Ronnie. Lunching alone? That is rather unusual, isn't it?"

"My friend disappointed me," said Ronnie, and he saw the doctor's lip curl. "Did she—too bad," said Maxton. "It was a 'he' ," corrected Ronnie, and knew that neither man believed him. He noticed Sir John glancing at his companion.

"Ronnie, I wonder if you can help us. Do you remember the flotation of that Traction Company of Steppe's?"

"I don't think it is much good asking Ronnie," the doctor broke in with a touch of impatience. "Ronnie's memory is a little too convenient."

"I remember the flotation... in a way," admitted Ronnie.

"Do you remember the meeting that was held at Steppe's house when he produced the draft of the prospectus?" Ronnie nodded.

"Before we go any farther, John," interrupted Merville, "I think it will be fair to Ronnie if we tell him that there is trouble over the prospectus. Some of the financial papers are accusing us of faking the assets. The question is, was I responsible, by including properties which I should not have included, or did Steppe, in his draft, give me the facts as I published them; I don't think Ronnie will remember quite so vividly if he knows that he may be running counter to Steppe." Ronnie did not answer.

"You see what I am driving at," Sir John went on. "There may be bad trouble if the Public Prosecutor takes these accusations seriously—which, so far, he hasn't. We want to be prepared if he does."

"I cannot remember very clearly," said Ronnie. "I am not a member of the Board. But I do recall very clearly Steppe showing a draft, and not only showing it, but reading it."

"Do you remember whether in that draft he referred to the Woodside Repairing Shops; and if he did, whether he spoke of those as being the absolute property or leased property of the company?"

"The absolute property," said Ronnie. "I remember distinctly, because the Woodside Repair Shops are on the edge of a little estate which my father left me—you remember, John? And naturally I was interested."

Merville was dumbfounded. Never in his most sanguine moments did he suppose that Ronnie would assist him in this respect. Ronnie, who shivered at a word from Steppe, whose sycophantic servant he had been! "This may come to a fight," said Sir John, "and that would mean putting you in the box to

testify against Steppe. Have you quarrelled with him?"

"Good gracious, no!" said Ronnie in surprise. "Why should I quarrel with him? He doesn't worry me. In a way he is amusing, in another way pathetic. I feel sometimes sorry for him. A man with such attainments, such powers and yet so paltry! I often wonder why he prefers the mean way to the big way. He uses his power outrageously, his strength brutally. Perhaps he didn't start right... got all his proportions wrong. I was working it out last night... the beginnings of Steppe... and concluded that he must have had an unhappy childhood. If a child is treated meanly, and is the victim of mean tyrannies, he grows up to regard the triumph of meanness as the supreme end in life. His whole outlook is coloured that way, and methods which we normal people look upon as despicable, are perfectly legitimate in his eyes."

"Good God!" said Sir John, aghast. It was the man, not the arguments, which startled him.

"Children ought not to be left to the chance training which their parents give them," Ronnie went on, full of his subject. "But here, I admit, I am postulating a condition of society which will never be realized. Some day I will start my Mother College. It is a queer-sounding title," he said apologetically, 'but you will understand. I want a great institution where we can take the illegitimate children of the country, the unwanted children. They go to baby farmers and beasts of that kind now. I want a college of babies where we will teach them and train them from their babyhood up to think and feel goodly, not piously. That doesn't matter. But bigly and generously. To have high ideals and broad visions; to..."

He stopped and blushed, conscious of their interest and stupefaction; squirmed unhappily in his chair, and rubbed his chin nervously with the knuckles of his hand. Sir John Maxton leant back in his chair, his face twitching. A waiter was passing. "Bring me a brandy," he said hoarsely "a double brandy." Christina had only wanted water.

CHAPTER L

"What flabbergasts me is Ronnie's willingness to go against Steppe," said the doctor, just before he dropped Sir John at his chambers. He had done most of the talking since they left Vivaldi's, and Maxton had been content that he should. "I can only suppose that Ronnie has had a row with Jan."

"Tell me this, Merville," said Sir John, leaning his arms on the edge of the door and speaking into the car. "If you believe that Steppe is the rascal I pretty well know him to be, why are you allowing Beryl to marry him?"

An awkward question for the doctor. "Oh well... one isn't sure. I may be in error after all. Steppe is quite a good fellow..."

"Do you owe him money?" asked Maxton quietly. Close friendship has its privileges.

"A little—nothing to speak of. You don't think I would sacrifice Beryl... ?"

"I don't know, Bertram... I don't know. Why ever you took up with that crowd is beyond me."

"By the way," said the doctor, anxious to switch to another subject, "that isn't an original idea of Ronnie's... the Mother College, or whatever he calls it. Poor Ambrose Sault had exactly the same dream. I never heard the details from him, but he has mentioned it. Funny that Ronnie is taking it up!"

"Yes." Sir John waved his hand and went into the building. He rang for his clerk. "Do you remember a young lady coming to see me a few days ago—a Miss Colebrook? Have we any record of her address?"

"No, Sir John."

"H'm... put me through to Dr. Merville's house in Park Place... I want to speak to Miss Merville." A minute later: "Yes... John Maxton speaking. Is that you, Beryl? I want to know Miss Colebrook's address... thank you." He scribbled on his blotting-pad. "Thank you... no, my dear, only I may have to get in touch with her." He remembered, after he had hung up the telephone, that Ambrose Sault had propounded a will in which the address had appeared, but the will was in the hands of Sir John's own lawyers. Ambrose had left very little, so little that it was hardly worth while taking probate. But the recollection of the will gave him the excuse he wanted...

"Sir John rang me up, father; he asked for Christina's address. Do you know why?"

"No, dear. I wonder he didn't ask me. I have been lunching with him—and Ronnie. Rather, Ronnie joined us after lunch was through... he was loquacious and strange. H'm..."

"How strange?"

"Beryl, did you notice the other night—I agree with you, Steppe was brutal—

how deep his voice had grown? Boys' voices change that way when they reach an age, but Ronnie isn't a boy. Changed... and his views on affairs. He held John spellbound whilst he delivered himself volubly on illegitimate children and the future of the race. And the curious thing is that Ronnie hates children. Loathes them; he makes no secret of that. Says that they are irresponsible animals that should be kept on the leash."

"He said that today?"

"No... oh, a long time ago. Now he wants a big institution where they can be trained... maybe it is a variation of his leash and cage theory. How did you get on?"

Steppe had been to lunch and was in the hall about to take his departure when Sir John rang. "He came," she said indifferently. "It was a pleasant lunch. I think he enjoyed it. I had mealies for him and he wrestled with them happily."

"Did you discuss anything?"

"The happy day?" she asked ironically. "Yes—next Tuesday. Quietly. We go to Paris the same night. He wants the honeymoon to be spent in the Bavarian Alps and he is sending his car on to Paris. I think that is all the news."

Her indifference bothered him. "Steppe, I am sure, is a man who improves on acquaintance," he said encouragingly.

"I am sure he does," she agreed politely. "Will you tell Ronnie, or shall I write to him?"

"I will tell Ronnie," said the doctor hastily. "I don't think I should encourage a correspondence with him if I were you, Beryl. Jan doesn't like it. He was furious about you insisting upon Ronnie coming out with us the other night."

"Very well," said Beryl.

"I think... I only think, you understand, that Steppe is under the impression that you were once very fond of Ronnie, or that you had an affair with him. He is a very jealous man. You must remember that, Beryl."

"It almost seems that I am going to be happily married," she said, with a queer smile.

She did not write to Ronnie. There was nothing to be gained by encouraging a correspondence—she agreed entirely with her father on that point. Steppe she dismissed from her thoughts just as quickly as she could. Why had Sir John asked for Christina's address? There was no reason why he should not.

Perhaps Ambrose left a message... but that would have been delivered long ago. And... if Ambrose had left any message, it would be to her. The will perhaps. The doctor had told them both that Ambrose had left his few possessions to Christina. She was glad of that. Yes, it must be the will. This served at any rate to explain Sir John's call.

The appearance of a title at her front door caused Mrs. Colebrook considerable qualms. It was her fate never to be wearing a skirt appropriate to the social standing of distinguished visitors. Christina was lying down. She had had an interview with the osteopath in the morning and he had insisted upon twenty-four hours in bed. "Show him up, mother. He won't faint at the sight of a girl in bed... lawyers have a special training in that sort of thing."

"He doesn't look like a lawyer," demurred Mrs. Colebrook; "he's a sir."

She conducted the counsel upstairs with many warnings as to the lowness of roof and trickiness of tread. Mrs. Colebrook was resigned to the character and number of Christina's visitors and in that spirit of resignation left them.

"We have met," said Sir John, and looked round for a chair.

"Sit on the bed, Sir John," she laughed. "Evie broke the leg of the chair last night."

He obeyed her, looking at her quizzically. "I saw Ronald Morelle at lunch today," he said. "I thought it best to see you—first. And let me get the will off my mind. It has been proved and there is a hundred or so to come to you. Ambrose was not well off, his salary in fact was ridiculously small. That, however, is by the way. I saw Ronnie."

She returned his steady, searching gaze. "Did you talk to Ronnie?"

"I talked to Ronnie," he nodded, "and Ronnie talked to me. Have you ever seen a man who had the odd habit of rubbing his chin with the back of his hand? I see that you have. Ronnie for example? Yes, I thought you would have noticed it."

"How did you know that he had been to see me?"

His thin hard face softened in a smile. "Who else would he have come to see?"

"Beryl," she answered promptly, and he looked surprised. "Beryl? I know nothing of how he felt in that quarter. Beryl! How remarkable! I knew he would come here; if you had told me that you had not seen him, I should have thought I was..."

She nodded. "That is how I felt, Sir John. I had to shake myself hard. It was like the kind of dream one has where you see somebody you know with somebody else's face. Yes, he came here. I had to have a glass of water."

"I had brandy," said Sir John gravely. "As a rule I avoid stimulants—brandy produces a distressing palpitation of heart. Perhaps water would have been better for me. That is all, I think, Miss Christina." He picked up his hat. "I had to see you."

"Do you think anybody knows or ought to know?" she asked. It was the question that had disturbed her.

"They must find out. I have a reputation for being a hard-headed Scotsman. Why the heads of Scotsmen should be harder than any other kind of heads I do not know. What I mean is, that I cannot risk my credit as a man of truth, or my judgement as a man of law, or my status as one capable of conducting his own affairs without the assistance of a Commissioner in Lunacy—people must find out. I think they will, the interested people. Beryl, you say. Was he... fond of her? How astounding! She is to be married very soon, you know that?"

"Should she be told? She may not have an opportunity of discovering for herself, Sir John."

"What can you tell her?" he asked bluntly. She was silent. She had been asking herself that.

Having ushered the visitor from the premises, Mrs. Colebrook joined her daughter, for immediately following Sir John had come a grimy little boy with a grimy little package. Mrs. Colebrook had spent an ecstatic five minutes in her kitchen revelling in the fruits of authorship. "I have got something to show you, Christina." She held the 'something' coyly under her apron. "It was my own idea. I didn't expect them so soon... came just after I'd left you and Sir What's-his-name."

"What is it, mother?"

Mrs. Colebrook drew from its place of concealment a double-leafed card. It was edged with black, and heavy Gothic type was its most conspicuous feature.

Christina read: 'In loving memory of AMBROSE SAULT, Who departed this life on March 17th, 19—At the age of 53. Mourned by all who knew him. "We ne'er shall see his gentle smile, Or hear his voice again, Yet in a very little while, We'll meet him once again." Christina put down the card.

"I made that up myself," said Mrs. Colebrook proudly—"all except the poetry,

which I copied from poor Aunt Elizabeth's funeral card. I think that verse is beautiful."

"I think it is prophetic," said Christina, and added inconsequently, as Mrs. Colebrook thought, "I wonder if Ronnie is coming to—day?"

CHAPTER LI

RONNIE had some such idea when he parted from Maxton and the doctor. He went home to collect the bundle of books he had packed ready to take to Christina, and there discovered the reason why his absent-minded host had forgotten to put in an appearance. Mr. Jerry Talbot was stretched exhaustedly in a lounge-chair. He was a sallow young man with a large nose and a microscopic moustache. He had bushy eyebrows, arched inquiringly. Only one eyebrow was now visible. The other and the greater part of his slick head was hidden under black silk bandages. Looking at him, Ronnie wondered what he had ever seen in the man. "'Lo, Ronnie," he greeted the other feebly. "I tried to 'phone you but you were gone. I had a sort of faint after I spoke to you this morning, that's why I didn't turn up; so sorry. But look at me, old boy, look at me!"

"How did this happen?" asked Ronnie.

"Lola!" Ronnie frowned. Lola? Who... Yes, yes, Lola. He remembered. "We had rather a difficult time at my house last night, and Madame sent some of the girls along. Lola got excited, and after some argument about a brooch that one of my guests had lost, Lola picked up a champagne bottle and—there you are!"

"Where is she?"

"In quod," said Mr. Jerry Talbot viciously. "I gave her in charge, and Ronnie, she had the brooch! They found it at the police station. So I was right when I called her a thieving little—whatever it was I called her. It is an awkward business for me, old thing, but of course I'm swearing blue-blind that I never invited her and that she came in without... sort of drifted in from the street. Madame put me up to that. She's fed up with Lola, and so are the other girls."

"Just wait a moment," said Ronnie, frowning. "Do I understand that Madame is going to disown this girl—this, what is her name... ?"

"Lola," scoffed Mr. Talbot. "Good heavens, you're not pretending that you don't know her! And you took her to Wechester with you—"

"Yes, of course I did," agreed Ronnie "It is rather terrible work... straightening out the ravel of life... Yes, I know her."

"Madame is disowning her, and so are the other girls. Between ourselves, Ritti has cleared out everything of Lola's and sent her trunks to a baggage office. None of her maids will talk, and naturally none of the people who go to Ritti's. Lola has had a tip to shut up about Madame's, and if she is wise, she'll admit she's a street girl who had the cheek to walk into the party. I had to tell you, Ronnie, in case this infernal girl mentions you. She is being brought before the magistrate this afternoon."

And so came Lola from the dingy cells with her evening finery looking somewhat bedraggled, and standing in the pen, pale and defiant, heard the charge of assault preferred against her. "Have you any witnesses to call?"

"None. All my witnesses have been standing on the box committing perjury," sobbed the girl, broken at last. "I was invited... Mr. Talbot sent for me... he sent to Madame Ritti's..."

"Madame Ritti says that she hardly knows you. That with the exception of a few days last year, when you were staying with her, you have never been to the house," said the patient magistrate. "She made you leave her, because she found you were an undesirable."

"Your worship, there is a gentleman here who wishes to give evidence," said the usher. Ronald Morelle stepped to the stand, smiled faintly at the open-mouthed surprise of Jerry Talbot, at the shocked amazement of Madame Ritti, and bowed to the magistrate. He gave his name, place of living, and occupation.

"Now, Mr. Morelle, what can you tell us?" demanded the magistrate benevolently.

"I know this girl"—he indicated the interested prisoner—"her name is Lola Prandeaux, or rather that is the name by which she is known. She is an inmate of a house"—he did not say 'house' and Madame Ritti almost jumped from her seat at his description—"maintained by Madame Ritti. I can also assure your worship that she is very well known to the prosecutor, Mr. Talbot, and to me. I have taken her away into the country on more than one occasion. To my knowledge she was invited last night to Mr. Talbot's house. There is no reason why she should steal a trumpery brooch. She has jewels of her own. I myself gave her the solitaire ring she is now wearing."

The magistrate glared at Jerry Talbot. "Are you pressing this charge?" The man of law wrote furiously upon a paper.

"N—no, your honour—worship," stammered Jerry.

"You may go away, Prandeaux, you are discharged. I have heard a considerable amount of perjury in this case and I have heard the truth... not very pleasant truth, I admit. Mr. Morelle has testified for the accused with great frankness which I can admire... His habits and behaviour are less admirable. Next case!"

Ronnie was the last of the party to leave the court. Lola came hurriedly across the waiting-room to clasp his hand. "Oh, Ronnie, you... pal! How lovely of you! I never thought you were such a brick! Madame looked like hell—she's pinched all my jewellery and now she'll have to give it up... Ronnie, how can I thank you?"

"Lola... come to my flat, I want to talk to you." Francois, who opened the door to them, was not surprised. After all, one could not expect Ronald Morelle to improve in every respect. It was a pleasure to work for him, he was so considerate. Lola settled herself in the most comfortable corner of the settee and waited for Francois to go.

"You will have some tea?" Ronnie gave the order to a servant who was no less surprised than Lola.

"What have you done with that picture that was over the mantelpiece?" asked the girl, seeing a blankness of wall. "I've burnt it," said Ronnie.

"But it was worth thousands, Ronnie! You told me so."

"It was worth a few hundreds. If it had been a Titian I would not have destroyed it—it had its use in a gallery. But it was not. Worth a few hundreds perhaps... I burnt it. Francois cut it into strips and we burnt it in the furnace fire. Francois and I had a great day. He did not think the picture was pretty."

"It was your favourite."

"Was it?" He was astonished. "Well, it is burnt. It is too ugly. The subject... no, the figures were a little ugly. Now Lola, what are you going to do?"

She had half made up her mind. "I shall take a flat—" He shook his head.

"In a way, I have a recollection that you told me you had relations in Cornwall. Was I dreaming? And you said that when you had saved enough money you were going to buy a farm in Cornwall and raise hackneys. Wail that a dream?"

She shook her head. "No, that is my dream," she said, 'but what is the use of talking about that, Ronnie. It would cost a small fortune."

"Could you do it on five thousand?" he asked.

"With my money and five thousand... yes."

"I will lend you three thousand free of all interest, and I will give you two thousand. I won't give it all to you, because I want a hold on you. Easy money spends itself. Will you go to Cornwall, Lola?"

Francois, entering, saved him from her hectic embrace. "You're just... wonderful." She dabbed her eyes. "I know you think I'm dirt and I am—"

"Don't be silly. Why should I think that? I am not even sorry for you. Are you sorry for the train that is derailed? You put it back on the track. That is what I am doing. I am one of the derailers. It amused me, it hurt you... oh yes, it did... I know I was not 'the first', there would be an excuse for me in that event. We are all dirt if it comes to that—dirt is matter in the wrong place. I want to put you where you belong."

She was incoherent in her gratitude, awed a little by his seriousness and detachment, prodigiously surprised that Francois remained on duty. When, on her way to the hotel which was to shelter her, she read the evening newspaper, she could appreciate more fully just what Ronnie had done...

"Read this!" said Evie tragically.

Christina took the newspaper from her hands. "'A curious case'... is that what you mean?" The report was a full one, remembering how late in the day the charge had come up for hearing. "Well?" said Christina, when she had finished reading.

"I shall write to Ronald." Evie was very stiff, very determined, sourly virginal. "Of course, you can't believe all that you read in the newspapers, but there is no smoke without fire."

"And every cloud has its silver lining," said Christina. "Let us all be trite! What is worrying you, Evie? I think it was fine of Ronnie to look after the girl."

"And they drove away from the court together!" wailed Evie.

"Why not? It is much better to go together than by taking separate routes and pretending they weren't meeting when all the time they were."

"I shall write to Ronnie. I must have an explanation." Evie was firm on this

point. Christina read the account again. "I don't see what other explanation you can ask," she said. "He has said all that is fit for publication."

"What is this woman Lola to him?" demanded Evie furiously. "How dare he stand up... shamelessly... and admit... oh, Chris, it is awful!"

"It must be pretty awful for Lola, too," said Christina.

"That sort of girl doesn't mind... she likes to have her name in the paper."

"You don't know," said Christina. "I won't descend to slopping over her poor mother, and her innocent sisters, and I'd die before I'd remind you that once she was like the beautiful snow. Ambrose always said that there was a lot of sympathy wasted over sinners. It is conceivable that she was quite a decent sort until somebody came along who held artistic views about marriage; most of these girls start that way, their minds go first. They get full of that advanced stuff. Some of 'em go vegetarian and wear sandals; some of 'em do worse. But that is how they start: they reach the streets in their own way. Some get into the studio party set. They bob their hair and hate washing. They know people who have black wallpaper and scarlet ceilings and one white rose rising from a jade vase. Evie, I have been lying on the flat of my back ever since I can remember, and I've had a procession of sinners marching around my bed—literally. Mother let people come because I was dull. I don't know Lola. She is a little above us, but Lola's kind are bred around here by the score, pigging four and five in a room; they have no reticences, there are no mysteries. All the processes of life are familiar to them as children. Then one fine day along comes Mrs. So-and-So and sits on the end of this bed and weeps and weeps until mother turns her out. There was a woman in this road who broke her heart over her daughter's disgrace. And when they came to bury the good lady they found she had never been married herself! All this weeping and wailing and talking about 'disgrace' doesn't mean anything in this neighbourhood. It is conventional, expected of them, like deep mourning for widows and half mourning for aunts. We haven't produced many celebrities... We had a chorus girl who was in a divorce case, and there is a legend that Tota Belindo, the great Spanish dancer, came from the streets. We turn out the tired old-looking girls that you never see up West. The Lolas come from families that care. Nice speaking people who haven't been taught to write by a sign-writer. I've heard about them and met one. She used to drink, that is how she came to Walter Street. That kind of girl only pretends she doesn't care. She isn't like the hardy race of prostitutes we raise in Walter Street."

"I think your language is terrible, Christina! I ought to know you would defend this perfectly awful girl. You take a very lax view, Chris; it is a good thing I have a well-balanced mind..."

"You haven't," said Christina. "It isn't a month ago that you were sneering about marriage. I believe in marriage: I'm old-fashioned. Marriage is a wonderful bridge, it carries you over the time when, if you're not married, you are getting used to a strange man and comparing him unfavourably with your last. Besides, it is easier to divorce a man than to run away from him. Divorce is so easy that there is no excuse for remaining single."

"I don't know whether you're being decent or not, Christina. But there are some people who have never married all their lives, and they've been perfectly happy... of course, I can't tell you who they are, it is absurd to ask me. Only I know that there have been such people... in history, I mean. I believe in marriage, but it is much worse to be married to somebody you don't love than to be living with a man you do love."

"There are times when you remind me of Uncle Tom's Cabin," mused Christina. "I wonder why... oh yes, little Eva who said such damnably true things so very truly. She died. The book had to have a happy ending, anyway. Eva—Evie, I mean, I should write to your slave-master and demand an explanation. I'll bet you won't, though!"

"Won't I?" Evie stiffened. "I have my self-respect to consider, Christina, and my friends... I hope Teddy hasn't read the case."

She wrote a letter, many words of which were underlined, and notes of exclamation stood up on each page like the masts of docked shipping. Ronnie's answer was waiting for her next night. 'Will you come to the flat, Evie?'

Evie did not consult her sister; she took a lank young man into her confidence. Would he escort her and wait in the vestibule of the flats until she came out? Evie had discovered the need for a chaperon.

CHAPTER LII

Francois opened the door and Evie walked hesitatingly into the lobby. Ronnie was at his table and he was writing. He got up at once and came to meet her with outstretched hand. "It was good of you to come, Evie." She started. His voice was so changed—his expression, too. Something had come into his face that was not there before. A vitality, an eagerness, a good humour. She was startled into, beginning on a personal note. "Why, Ronnie dear, you have

changed!" She did not recognise how far she had departed from a certain programme and agenda she had drawn up. Item number one was not to call Ronnie 'dear'.

"Have I?" He flashed a smile at her as he pushed a chair forward and put a cushion at her back. "Your voice even—have you had a cold?"

"No. I am getting old." He chuckled at the jest. Ronnie did not as a rule laugh at himself. "I had your letter about Lola. I thought it best that you should come. Yes, Evie, all that as in the paper was true. I know Lola."

"And she has been... all that you said, to you?"

"Yes." His voice was a little dreary. "Yes, all that." She sat tight- lipped, trying to feel more angry than she did. ('Be very angry' was item two on the agenda.) "I'm sorry that you had to know; you are so young, and these things are very shocking to a good woman. Lola has gone back to her people. Naturally I did not wish to appear in a police court, but there was a conspiracy to send this girl to prison. A late friend of mine was in it. I had to go to the court and tell the truth."

"I think it was very fine of you." She echoed Christina's words, but was wanting in Christina's enthusiasm.

"Fine? I don't know. It was a great nuisance. I have an unpleasant feeling about courts." He rubbed his chin: Evie saw nothing remarkable in the gesture.

"Of course, Ronnie," she began, labouring under the disadvantage of calmness, for she could not feel angry, "this makes a difference. I was prepared to sacrifice everything... my good name; and what people thought about me... It was horrible of you, Ronnie... to take that girl into the country when... when you knew me. I can't forgive that, Ronnie."

He stood by his table, his white hand drumming silently. "Did you come alone?" he asked.

She hesitated. "No, I brought a friend. A gentleman. I used to know him when I was a child."

Ronnie looked at her searchingly. His eyes were soft and kind. "Evie, I will tell you something. From the day I first met you I intended no good to you. When I arranged that we should go to Italy, to Palermo, I knew in my wicked mind that you would grow tired of me." He put it that way, though he was loath to tell even so small a lie. "Since... since I saw you last, I have been thinking of you, thinking very tenderly of you, Evie. I have always liked you; Christina and I have discussed you by the hour."

"But... you have never seen Christina until this week, Ronnie!"

Ronnie's hand went to his chin. "Haven't I?" He was troubled. "I thought... let me say I have dreamt of those discussions. I dream a great deal nowadays. Queer, ugly dreams... I woke this morning when the clock was striking nine... I felt so sad."

He seemed to forget her presence, for he did not speak for a time. He had seated himself on the edge of the desk, one polished boot swinging, and he was looking past her with an intensity of gaze that made her turn to see the thing that attracted him.

Her movement roused him, and he stammered his apologies. Taking courage from his confusion, Evie delivered herself of the predication which she had not had courage to rehearse. "Ronnie, I think we've both made a great mistake. I like you awfully. I don't think I could like a friend more. But I don't feel... well, you can see for yourself that we're not the same way of thinking. Don't imagine I'm a prude. I'm very broad-minded about that sort of thing, but you can see for yourself..."

He saw very clearly for himself, and held out his hand. "Friends?" he asked,

She experienced a thrill of one who creditably performs a great renunciation without any distress to herself. "Friends!" she said solemnly.

Ronnie walked round to his writing-chair and sat down. She found satisfaction in the tremor of the hand that opened a portfolio on his desk. "And you're not hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No, Ronnie."

"Thank God for that," said Ronald Morelle. He was looking in the black case. Presently he pulled out half a dozen photographs and passed them across to her. "How perfectly lovely!" she said.

"Yes; in some respects more lovely than Palermo. And there are no earthquakes and no rumblings from old Etna." She was looking at the photographs of a white villa that seemed to be built in the side of a hill. One picture showed a riotous garden, another a lawn with great shady trees and deep basket- chairs. "That is my house at Beaulieu," said Ronnie. "I want you to help me with that." She looked at him, ready to reprove. "Your mother is the very woman to run that house, and the garden was made for Christina."

Her mouth opened. "Not you!" she gasped. "You aren't the man who wants a housekeeper! Oh, Ronnie!"

"I haven't photographs of the Palermo villa. I have sent for some. An ideal place for a honeymoon, Evie." He came round to the back of her chair and dropped his hand on her shoulder lightly. "When you marry a nice man you shall go there for your honeymoon. God love you!"

She took his hand and laid it against her cheek. For the fraction of a second..."I like Beaulieu, Ronnie, the house is a beauty... perhaps if I hurried I could go there before mother."

In the hall below Mr. Teddy Williams discussed Canada with the hall porter. It was one of the two subjects in which he was completely interested. The other came down by the elevator importantly, and they went out into Knightsbridge together. "I've been a long time, Teddy'—she snuggled her arm in his—"but... well, first of all, my answer is 'Yes'." He paused, and in the view of revolted passers-by, kissed her. "And... Teddy, we'll go to Beaulieu afterwards... Mr. Morelle has promised to let us have his house."

"Isn't that grand!" said Teddy. "We've got a town called Beaulieu in Saskatchewan..."

CHAPTER LIII

WASN'T it just like Christina not to get excited with the great news? But really Evie was to blame, because she kept the greater news to the last. "I can't believe it! That young man who called on Christina? I really can't believe it," said Mrs. Colebrook, who could, and did, believe it.

"Why don't you yell, Chris?" demanded her indignant sister.

"I am yelling," said Christina placidly. "I've been yelling longer than you, for I knew that it was Ronnie's house when the letter came." But the announcement of Evie's engagement had an electrifying effect.

"That is the first time I have ever seen Christina cry," said Mrs. Colebrook, with melancholy satisfaction. "There's a lot more in Christina than people think. If she'd only showed a little more nice feeling over poor Mr. Sault, I'd have liked it better. But you can't expect anything in these days, girls being what they are. Well, Evie, you're the first to go... I don't suppose Christina will ever marry. She's too hard. Canada won't seem so far if I'm in Bolo, Boole .. whatever they call it."

Evie was sitting with her mother in the kitchen; from Christina's room came crooning: "My dear, oh, my dear. Have ye come from the west... ?"

"Why Christina sings those old-fashioned songs when she knows 'Swanee' and 'The Bull Dog Patrol'... 'Bull Frog', is it?... I can't understand." A rat- tat at the door made Evie jump. Mrs. Colebrook's eyes went to the faded face of a clock on the mantelshelf. Allowing for day to day variation, to which the timepiece was subject, she made it out to be past eleven. "Don't open the door," she said. "It may be those Haggins—they've been fighting all day."

Evie went to the door. "Who is there?"

"Beryl Merville." Evie opened the door and admitted the girl. Outside she glimpsed the tail-lamps of a car. "You are Evie, aren't you?" Beryl was breathless. "Have you any idea where I can find Ronnie?"

"Is that Beryl?" It was Christina's voice; she had come down in her dressing-gown.

"I want to find Ronnie—I have been to his flat, he is not at home. I must see him." She was wild with fear, Christina saw that; something had happened which had thrown her off her balance and had driven her, frantic, to Ronnie Morelle.

"Come up to my room, Beryl," she said gently.

Mrs. Colebrook looked at Evie as the sound of a closing door came down. "It looks to me like a scandal," she said profoundly. Evie said nothing. She was wondering whether she ought not to have been indignant at the suggestion that she knew the whereabouts of Ronnie Morelle, She wished she knew Beryl better... then she might have been asked upstairs to share the secret. After all, she knew Ronnie better than anybody.

"Perhaps I am better out of it, mother," she said. "I am not sure that Teddy would like me to be mixed up in other people's affairs..."

Christina pushed the trembling girl on to the bed. "Sit down, Beryl. What is wrong?"

Beryl's lips were quivering. "I must see Ronnie... oh, Christina, I'm just cornered. That man... Talbot, I think his name is, he is a friend of Ronnie's, has written to father... the letter came by hand, marked 'Urgent', whilst daddy was out, and I opened it."

She fumbled in her bag and produced a folded sheet, and Christina read:

Dear Dr. Merville, I think it is only right that you should know that your daughter spent a night at Ronald Morelle's flat. Miss Merville, at Morelle's suggestion, told you that she had been to a ball at Albert Hall. I can prove that she was never at the Albert Hall that night. I feel it is my duty to tell you this, and I expect you to inform Mr. Steppe, who, I understand, is engaged to your daughter.

"How did he know?"

Beryl shook her head wearily. "Ronald told him... about the ball. When the elevator was going down, the morning I left the flat, I saw a man walking up the stairs. He must have seen me. Ronnie told me the night before that Jeremiah Talbot was coming to breakfast with him. I just saw him as the lift passed him—he had stopped on the landing below Ronnie's and probably recognized me. Christina. what am I to do? Father mustn't know. It seems ever so much more important to me now."

"When do you marry, Beryl?"

"The day after tomorrow. I know Ronnie has quarrelled with the man. I read that story in the newspapers. It was splendid of Ronnie, splendid. It was a revelation to me."

Christina bit her lip in thought. "I will see Ronnie—tonight. No, I will go alone. I have been resting all day. You must go home. Have you brought your car? Good. I will borrow it. Give me the letter." Beryl protested, but the girl was firm. "You must not go... perhaps I am wrong about Ronnie, but I don't think so. Sir John Maxton has the same mad dream."

"What do you mean?"

Christina smiled. "One day I will tell you."

The vision of her daughter dressed for going out temporarily deprived Mrs. Colebrook of speech. Before she could frame adequate comment, Christina was gone. She dropped Beryl at her house and drove to Knightsbridge. The porter was not sure whether Mr. Morelle was in or out. It was his duty to be uncertain. He took her up to Ronnie's floor and waited until the door opened.

"My dear, what brings you here at this hour?" He had been out, he told her. A Royal Society lecture on Einstein's Theory had been absorbing. He was so full of the subject, so alive, so boyish in his interest, that for a while he forgot the hour and the obvious urgency of her call. "I love lectures," he laughed, "but you know that. Do you remember how I was so late last night that your mother locked me out... no, not your mother... it must have been Francois." He

frowned heavily. "How curious that I should confuse Francois with your dear mother."

She listened eagerly, delightedly, forgetting, too, the matter that brought her. The phenomenon had no terror for her, tremendous though it was. He was the first to recall himself to the present. "From Beryl?" he said quickly. "What is wrong?"

She handed him the letter and he read it carefully. "How terrible!" he said in a hushed voice. "How appallingly terrible! He says she is marrying Steppe! That can't be true, either. It would be grotesque..."

She was on the point of telling him that the marriage was due for the second day, when he went abruptly into his room. He returned carrying his overcoat, which he put on as he talked. "The past can only be patched," he said, "and seldom patched to look like new. Omar crystallizes its irrevocability in his great stanza. We can no more 'shatter it to bits' than 'remould it nearer to our heart's desire'."

"Ronnie, Beryl is to be married the day after tomorrow."

"Indeed?" He looked at her with a half-smile, and then at the clock. It was a minute past midnight. "Tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Where are you going?"

"To see Talbot. He acted according to his lights. You can't expect a cockerel to sing like a lark. There is no sense in getting angry because things do not behave unnaturally. I made him feel very badly towards me yesterday. I think he can be adjusted. Some problems can be solved; some must be scrapped. Have you a car?... Beryl's, good! Will you drop me in Curzon Street?"

She asked him no further questions, and when in the car he held her hand in his, she felt beautifully peaceful and content. "Good night, Christina... I will see Beryl tomorrow."

He closed the car door softly and she saw him knocking at No. 703 as she drove away.

The door was opened almost immediately. "Is Mr. Talbot in, Brien?" The butler stared. "Why—why, yes, Mr. Morelle," he stammered. He had not waited at table these past two days without discovering that Ronald Morelle was a name to be mentioned to the accompaniment of blasphemous etceteras. "He is in bed... I was just locking up. Does he expect you, Mr. Morelle?"

"No," said Ronnie. "All right, Brien, I know my way up." He left an

apprehensive servant standing irresolutely in the hall.

Jeremiah was not in bed. He was in his dressing-gown before a mirror, and his face was mottled with patches of grey mud—a cosmetic designed to remove wrinkles from tired eyes. Ronnie he saw reflected in the mirror. "What... what the devil do you want?" he demanded hollowly. "What are you doing?"

"Locking the door," said Ronnie, and threw the key on to the pillow of a four-poster bed.

"Damn you—open that door... you sneaking cad!" Mr. Talbot experienced a difficulty in breathing, his voice was a little beyond his control. Also the plaster at the corner of his mouth made articulation difficult.

"I've come to see you on rather a pressing matter," said Ronnie evenly. "You wrote a letter to Dr. Merville, making a very serious charge against my friend, Miss Merville. I do not complain and I certainly do not intend abusing you. I may kill you; that is very likely. I hope it will not be necessary. If you shout or make a noise I shall certainly kill you, because, as you will see, being an intelligent man, I cannot afford to let you live until your servants come."

Mr. Talbot sat down suddenly, a comical figure, the more so since the dried mud about his eyes and the corner of his mouth made it impossible that he should express his intense fear. As it was, he spoke with difficulty and without opening his mouth wider than the mud allowed. "You shall pay for this, Morelle... by God!"

"I want you to write me a letter which I shall give to Miss Merville apologising for your insulting note to the doctor..." With a gurgle of rage, Talbot sprang at him. Ronnie half-turned and struck twice. The butler heard the thud of a falling body; it shook the house. Still he hesitated. "Get up," said Ronnie. "I am afraid I have dislocated your beauty spots, Jerry, but you'll be able to talk more freely."

Mr. Talbot nursed his jaw but continued to sit on the floor. His jaw was aching and his head was going round and round. But he was an intelligent man. When he did get up he opened a writing-bureau and, at Ronnie's dictation, wrote.

"Thank you, Jerry." Ronnie pocketed the letter. "Perhaps when I have gone you will regret having written and will complain to the police; you may even write a worse letter to the doctor—who hasn't seen your first epistle, by the way. I must risk that. If you do, I shall certainly destroy you. I shall be sorry because... well, because I don't think you deserve death. You can be adjusted. Most people can. Will you put a stamp on the envelope, Jerry?"

At the street door: "Perhaps you will lose your job because you have admitted me, Brien. If that happens, will you come to me, please?" The dazed butler said he would.

Ronnie stopped at a pillar-box to post the letter and walked home.

CHAPTER LIV

JAN STEPPE was an early riser. He was up at six; at seven o'clock he was at his desk with the contents of the morning newspapers completely digested. By the time most people were sleepily inquiring the state of the weather, he had dealt with his correspondence and had prepared his daily plan. In view of his early departure from London he had cleared off such arrears of work as there was. It was very little, for his method did not admit of an accumulation of unsettled affairs. A man not easily troubled, he bad been of late considerably perturbed by the erratic behaviour of certain stocks. He had every reason to be satisfied, on the whole, because a miracle had happened. Klein River Diamonds had soared to an unbelievable price. A new pipe had been discovered on the property and the shares had jumped to one hundred and twelve, which would have been a fortunate development for Dr. Merville, who once held a large parcel, had not Steppe purchased his entire holding at fifteen. He did this before the news was made public that the pipe had been located; before Steppe himself knew—as he swore, sitting within a yard of the code telegram from his South African agent that had brought him the news twenty-four lours before it was published.

So that the doctor was in this position: he owed money to Steppe on shares which had brought his associate a fortune. Ronnie had had a large holding. He was deputy chairman of the company. The day following the execution of Ambrose Sault, Steppe sent him a peremptory note enclosing a transfer and a cheque. Ronnie put cheque and transfer away in a drawer and did not read the letter. For some extraordinary reason on that day he could not read easily. Letters frightened him and he had to summon all his will-power to examine them. Nearly a week passed before he got over this strange repugnance to the written word.

In the meantime Jan Steppe had not seen his lieutenant. He never doubted that that transfer, signed and sealed, was registered in the books of the company. Ronnie was obedient; had signed transfers by the score without question. On

this morning of March, Mr. Steppe was delayed in the conduct of his business by the tardy arrival of the mail. There had been a heavy fog in the early hours and letter distribution had been delayed, so that it was well after half-past eight before the mail came to him. Almost the first letter he opened was one from the secretary of Klein River. He read and growled.

The writer was sorry that he could not carry out the definite instructions which he had received. Apparently Mr. Steppe was under a misapprehension. No shares held by Mr. Morelle had been transferred. There was a postscript in the secretary's handwriting: 'I have reason to believe that Mr. Morelle had been selling your stocks very heavily. He is certainly the principal operator in the attack upon Midwell Tractions which you complained about yesterday...'

Jan Steppe, dropping the letter, pushed his chair back from the desk. A thousand shares in Klein River were at issue; he could not afford to tear bull-headed at Ronnie Morelle. So this was the bear... the seller of stock! Ronnie had done something like this before, and had been warned. Steppe let his fury cool before he got Merville on the wire. When, in answer to the summons, Merville arrived, Steppe was pacing the floor, his hands deep in his trousers pockets. "Huh, Merville? Seen Ronald Morelle lately?"

"No; he hasn't been to the house for a very long time."

"Hasn't, huh? Like him?"

The doctor hesitated. "Not particularly; he is a distant cousin of mine. You know that."

Steppe nodded. He was holding himself in check and the effort was a strain. "He's selling Midwell Tractions; you know that?" he mimicked savagely. "I'll break him, Merville! Smash him! The cur, the crafty cur!" He gained the upper hand of his tumultuous rage after a while. "That doesn't matter. But I sent him a cheque and a transfer—one minute!" He seized the telephone and shouted a number. "Yes, Steppe. Has a cheque been passed through payable to Ronald Morelle... I'll give you the number if you wait." He jerked out a drawer, found the stub of the cheque-book and turned the counterfoil. "There? March 17th. Cheque number L.V. 971842." He waited at the telephone, scowling absent-mindedly at the doctor. "Huh? It hasn't been presented... all right." He smashed the receiver down on the hook. "If he had paid in the cheque I would have got him—the swine! But he hasn't. I sent orders to transfer his Klein Rivers. I thought I was doing him a good turn—just as I thought I was doing one for you, Merville."

"And he refused to allow you to make the sacrifice," said the doctor dryly.

"I don't like that kind of talk, Merville." Steppe's face was dark with anger. "I want you to come with me. I'm going to see this... this Thing. And I'm going to get the transfer! Make no mistake about that! Call up the filthy hound and tell him you are coming round. Don't mention me. It will give him a chance of getting rid of his women." He listened to the telephone conversation that followed. "What was he saying?"

"He asked me if there was anything wrong. It struck me that he was anxious—he asked me twice."

"That fellow has an instinct for trouble," said Steppe.

Ronnie was dressed, which was unusual for him, at this early hour. And the doctor noticed, could hardly help noticing, that the library was gay with flowers. This also was remarkable, for Ronnie disliked to have flowers in a room. There were daffodils, perce-neige, bowls of violets, and through the open casement with its curtains fluttering in the stiff breeze, Merville saw new window-boxes ablaze with tulips.

"You're admiring my flowers, Bertram," smiled Ronnie. "I had to buy them ready-grown, and the gentleman who owns the flat has misgivings as to the wisdom of flower-boxes... he thinks they may fall on to somebody's head. Good morning, Steppe, you look happy." Mr. Steppe was looking and feeling quite the reverse. He forced his face into a contortion intended to be a smile. "Good morning, Ronnie. I thought I'd come along and see you about the transfer I sent to you. You forgot to fill it up."

"Did I?" Ronnie was genuinely surprised. "I remember I had a letter from you..." He took a heap of papers from a drawer, and as he turned them over, Steppe's eyes lit up. "That's it," he said, and off-handedly, "put your name against the seal." Ronnie took up a pen... and paused. "I am transferring a thousand shares in the Klein River Diamond Mining Corporation... at twelve. They are worth more than that, surely? I thought I saw them quoted at a hundred and something?"

"They were twelve when I sent you the transfer," said Steppe.

"Why did you send it?... I don't remember expressing a wish to sell?"

Here Steppe made a fatal mistake. He had but to say 'You agreed to sell' and Ronnie would have signed. There were some incidents in his past life that he could not remember. But the temper of the big man got the better of him. "You're not expected to ask!" he roared, bringing his big fist down on the table with a crash. "You're expected to do as you're told! Get that, Morelle! I sent you the transfer and a cheque..."

"This must be the cheque," said Ronnie. He looked at the oblong slip and tore it into four pieces before he dropped the scraps into the waste-basket. Steppe was purple with rage, inarticulate. Then the transfer followed the cheque. "Don't let us have a scene," said Dr. Merville nervously. "You must meet Steppe in this, Ronnie."

"I'll meet him with pleasure. I have a thousand shares apparently; he wants them—good! He can pay me the market price."

"You dog!" howled Steppe, his face thrust across the table until it was within a few inches of Ronnie's. "You damned swindler! You're going straight to the office of the Klein River Company and sign another transfer. D'ye hear?"

"How could I not hear?" said Ronnie, getting up. "As to signing the transfer, I will do so, on terms—if you are civil."

"If I'm civil, huh? If I'm civil? I'll break you, Morelle! I'll break you! There's a little document in my safe that would get you five years. That makes you look foolish!"

"Take it out of your safe," said Ronnie coolly, "which I understand the police have. They will be glad to see it opened. I could open it myself if... if I could only remember. I've tried. When I saw a paragraph in the paper about Moropulos it made me shiver... because I knew I could open the safe. I sat up all one night trying to get the word."

"You're a liar... the same damned liar that you've always been! I want that transfer, Morelle. I'm through with you—after your appearance in the police court. You're a damned fine asset to a company, you and your Lola! You will resign from the board of my companies. Get that? And whilst I'm dealing with you, I'd like to tell you that if you attack my stocks I'll attack you in a way that will make hell a cosy corner, huh?" His hand shot out and he gripped Ronnie. "Come here—you! D'ye hear me? I'll..."

Ronnie took the hand that grasped his collar and prised loose the fingers; he did this without apparent effort. The fingers had to release their hold or be broken. Then with a twist of his wrist he flung the hand away. "Don't do that, please," he said calmly.

Steppe stood panting, grimacing... afraid. Merville felt the fear before he saw its evidence. "How did you do that?" panted Steppe. It was the resentful curiosity of the beaten animal.

Ronnie opened his mouth and laughed long and joyously. He was, thought the doctor, like a boy conjurer who had mystified his elders and was enjoying the

joke of it. Then, without warning, he became serious again and pressed a bell on his table. "Francois, open the door... must you go, Bertram? I wanted to see you rather pressingly. Steppe can find his way home, can't you, Steppe? One can't imagine him getting lost... and he can ask a policeman."

"I'll settle with you later, Morelle. Come on, Merville." The doctor vacillated. "Come on!'" roared Steppe.

"I'll see you this afternoon... I have an engagement now." Merville went hastily after the big man. Ronnie followed, overtaking them as they were getting into the elevator. "Will you tell Beryl that I am coming to see her tonight?"

"She'll not see you '" exploded Steppe. "No decent woman would see you..."

"What an ape you are!" said Ronnie reproachfully. "Don't you realize that I'm not talking to you?"

CHAPTER LV

JAN STEPPE'S solitary lunch was served at midday, an hour which ensured his solitude, for he was a man who liked his meals alone. He was nearing the finish of his repast, his enormous appetite unimpaired by his unhappy experience of the morning, when two men mounted the steps of his Berkeley Square residence. They were unknown to one another; one had walked, the other had descended from a taxi, and they stood aside politely. "You are first, sir," said the taller and healthier of the two. Their cards went in to Jan Steppe together.

He saw the tall man first, jumping up from the table and wiping his fingers on his serviette. "In the library, huh?" He looked at himself in the glass, pulled his cravat straight, and smoothed his black hair before he made his way to where the tall man, hat in hand, was waiting his pleasure. "Well, inspector, what do you want?" Steppe jerked open the lid of a box and presented its contents for approval.

"Thank you, sir." The inspector of police chose a cigar with care. "It is about this Traction Company of your friends—I think I remember you saying that you were not in the flotation yourself?"

"No—I bought shares. I have a large number. What about it?"

"Well, sir," said the inspector, speaking slowly, "I am afraid that matters are very serious—very serious indeed. The Public Prosecutor had taken action and a warrant has been issued."

Steppe was prepared for this. "Have you the warrant?" The officer nodded. "Can it be put off until tomorrow?"

"Absolutely impossible, sir. The best I can do is to defer its execution until late tonight. Even then I am taking a risk."

Steppe tugged at his little beard. "Make it tonight," he said. "I'll undertake that he doesn't leave the country—you won't let him know, of course?"

"No, sir." If Steppe had offered as much money as he could command to secure the escape of his victim, the bribe would have been rejected. But a postponement of arrest—that was another matter.

"Thank you, inspector."

"Thank you, sir; I shall put a couple of men on to watch him. I must do that; he will never know." Steppe went back to the dining-room very much occupied. "No, I can't see anybody else... order the car. Who is he?" He took up the second card. "Mr. Jeremiah Talbot." The man who was concerned in the case where Ronald Morelle had figured so ingloriously. Perhaps he could tell him something about Ronnie? Something to his further discredit. "Bring him in." And when the dapper Mr. Talbot appeared: "I can give you two minutes, Mr.—er—Talbot."

"I've come from a sense of duty," began the injured Jeremiah. "I'm certainly not going to be intimidated by threats from a beast like Ronald Morelle..."

Steppe cut him short. "Is it about Ronald Morelle? I haven't time to go into your quarrels."

"It is about Ronnie... and Beryl Merville."

Jan Steppe gazed at the man moodily, then into the fire, then back to Jeremiah Talbot. "Sit down," he said. "Now..." Talbot told his story plainly and without trimmings, save that his hatred of Ronnie led him to digress from time to time, "You saw; you are certain?"

"Absolutely. I ran down the stairs. There was a fellow taking photographs outside, a man with a brown beard..." Moropulos! And the photograph was that of Beryl Merville! "Go on."

"That is all. I felt it my duty to tell you. If Ronald Morelle attempts to

browbeat me, I'll give him in charge..."

"All right... you can go. Thank you." Jan Steppe had his own peculiar views on women in general, the relationship of Beryl with Ronnie Morelle in particular. Things of that kind happen. He had thought some such affair was possible, and was neither shocked not outraged. Beryl did not love him, he knew; she loved Morelle, He grinned wickedly.

"The car, sir." His first call was at the registrar's office. The special licence had been secured a week before.

"I can marry you at half-past two," said the registrar. "We like a day's notice, but in an exceptional case..." Steppe paid.

The Mervilles had not gone in to lunch when he arrived. Beryl was in her room, the doctor working in his study. Steppe wondered what he was working at. "I want to see Miss Merville—don't disturb the doctor." She came down, a listless girl. Intuitively she knew that he had been told. What would he do? She stopped at the door of her father's study, fighting her fear. Should she tell him first? In the end she came to Steppe. "Well, Beryl, what is this I hear about Ronald Morelle and you, huh?"

"What have you heard?"

"That you've been his mistress—that's what I've heard. Damned fine news for a bridegroom, huh? Does your father know?" She shook her head. "Do you want him to know?"

"I don't care."

"You don't care, huh? Got that way now, so that you don't care. You'll marry me this afternoon."

She looked up. "This afternoon?"

"Huh. You'd better tell the doctor; you can tell him anything else you like about Morelle—but if you don't tell, I won't."

Her hand had gone up to her cheek. "This afternoon... I can't... give me a day... you said it would be tomorrow. I'm not ready."

"This afternoon at half-past two. Will you tell the doctor, or shall I?"

She was trying to think. "I'll tell him. As you wish. This afternoon."

Lunch went into the dining-room. Nobody touched food. Steppe had to return to the house to get the wedding ring, send telegrams changing the date of his

arrival in Paris, settle such minor details of household management as the change necessitated. He was at the registrar's office when they came—Dr. Merville and the white-faced girl. In a cab behind the doctor's car travelled two Scotland Yard detectives.

The ceremony was simple. The repetition of a few sentences and Beryl Merville became Beryl Van Steppe. She did not know that his name was Van Steppe until she saw the marriage certificate. "You can go home with your father. Be ready to leave by the boat-train tonight." So he dismissed her.

All the way back to the house the doctor was talking, cheerfully, helpfully. She did not hear him. She was looking at the broad gold ring on her finger.

As they were entering the house her father leaned back and scrutinised the street. "I'm sure I've seen those two men before... Weren't they waiting outside the registrar's, Beryl?"

Beryl had seen only one man. A man with a black beard: a broad swarthy face and two eyes wherein burnt the fires of hell.

CHAPTER LVI

EVIE brought the news at a run. She had been shopping with Teddy—the store had given her a holiday and there was some talk of subscribing for a wedding present. "I said to Teddy, 'Let's stop and see who it is"—we knew it was somebody swagger by the two cars and the cab outside the door. And then I thought that I knew one of the cars. I said, "Teddy, I'll bet it is Beryl Merville'—and it was!"

Christina was pale. "She wasn't to be married until tomorrow," she insisted.

"Well, she's married. My dear, she looked awful. Teddy says..."

"Oh, damn Teddy!" snapped Christina, and was sorry. "I don't mean that, but I'm so used to damning your young men that I can't get out of the habit. Did they go away together—Steppe and she?"

"No—she's gone back to the house with her father. Steppe—is he a man with black whiskers?—well, he went alone."

Christina kicked off her slippers determinedly. "I'm going to see her," she said.

"What do you think you can do?" asked the scornful Evie. "Take my advice, Christina, never interfere between man and wife. Teddy says..."

"I repeat anything I have already said about Teddy," remarked Christina. "Chuck over my shoes, Evie." She could not tell Beryl. She could tell nobody. Ronnie Morelle must be interpreted by those who saw. She strode out, thanking God for life, and Ambrose Sault for the tingle of her soles upon the pavement. Spring was in the air, the park trees were studded with emerald buttons; some impatient bushes had even come fully into leaf before the season had begun. The sky was blue and carried white and majestic clouds; the birds were chattering noisily above her as she came through the park, and the earth smelt good, as it only smells in spring when the awakening of life within its bosom releases a million peculiar odours that combine in one fragrant nidar.

To Beryl's eye the girl, with her peaked face and her flaming hair, was a vision of radiance. "So good of you..." Beryl was on the verge of a breakdown as Christina Colebrook put her arms about her shoulders. "So lovely of you, Christina... I wanted to see you... I hadn't the energy to move... or the heart."

"Why today?"

"Steppe knows everything. He insisted upon today. As well today as tomorrow. I am troubled about father. I feel that something dreadful is going to happen. He is so restless, and he has asked John Maxton to come; John was a great friend of my mother's. In a way, I'm almost glad that there is this other trouble hanging over us... that sounds cruel to poor daddy, but it does distract me from... thoughts."

"What is this other trouble?"

But Beryl shook her head. "I don't know. There has been some unpleasantness about a company father floated. Jan Steppe did it really; father is only a figurehead. He has had people to see him, people from the Public Prosecutor's office. He doesn't talk much about it to me, but I have a premonition that all is not well. But, Christina, I'm just whining and whining at you, poor girl!"

"Whine," said Christina. "Go on whining. I should scream! Beryl, my love, you have to do something for me, something to relieve my heart of a great unhappiness. I intended seeing you today... you had my letter?... well, I'm too late to stop you marrying. I thought I would be in time; but not too late to save your immortal soul."

"What—?"

"Wait. I want you to promise me, by the man we hold mutually sacred, that you will do as I ask. No matter at what inconvenience or danger."

"I will do anything you ask," said Beryl quietly.

"What time do you meet this Steppe?"

"I call for him at eight o'clock. The boat-train leaves at nine- thirty."

"At eight o'clock you will go to Ronnie Morelle."

"No, no I can't do that..."

"You promised. You will see him: go to his flat and see him. Tell him you are married. Tell him the truth, that you are going away with a man you hate. Tell him that Steppe knows."

"I can't! You don't know what you're asking, Christina. I've... begged Ronnie before... begged him to run away with me. I can't do that again. It is impossible."

"You need beg nothing... nothing. Just tell him." She caught the girl to her. "Beryl, you're going to do what I ask you, dear?"

"You... you wouldn't ask me—"

"Out of caprice," finished Christina, 'or cussedness, or a wish to try experiments. No. But you must go, Beryl. I... I think I should kill myself if you didn't."

"Christina! What do you mean?"

"I mean it is life to go and death not to go!" said Christina, with a sort of ferocity that staggered her companion. "That is what I mean." In a quieter tone: "Have you seen Ronald lately?"

Beryl shook her head. "No. I saw him that night... the night they killed Ambrose... oh..."

"Don't gulp," warned Christina.

"I'm not gulping. I'm... yearning. I saw him yearning once, the dear. I am trying to find some of his strength now. It is a little difficult."

On the way home Christina dropped into a telephone booth and paid three precious pennies. "Ronnie! Christina speaking. Beryl is coming to see you tonight. At eight. Wait for her... don't dare to be out." She cut off before he could ask questions.

CHAPTER LVII

SIR JOHN MAXTON stayed to dinner. Beryl did not put in an appearance until just before eight. "Already, Beryl?" Dr. Merville scrambled up. His face was grey, his eyes sunken, the hands that took her by the shoulders shook. "My dear... I hope I have done right. I hope I have done right, my little girl." She tried to smile as she kissed him.

"Can't I take you to Berkeley Square, Beryl?" asked Sir John.

She shook her head. "No thank you, John... goodbye." They stood together, bareheaded, on the pavement, and saw her go. A drizzle of rain was falling, the dull red furnace glow of London was in the sky.

Together they walked back to the dining-room, and Maxton did not break in upon the doctor's thoughts. "Thank God she's gone," he whispered at last. "John, I'm at the end, I know it. Perhaps he'll help after—I'll be satisfied if he makes Beryl happy."

"He could help now," said John Maxton. "Why do you deceive yourself? How can you hope for anything from Steppe? I wish to God I had known that this infernal marriage was for today."

"She wished it," said the doctor. "I should not have insisted, but she wished it. Steppe isn't a bad fellow..."

"Steppe is a scoundrel, and nobody knows that better than ourself. Why are you in any danger from the law? Because you copied a draft prospectus which Steppe drew up, and issued it in your own name. Steppe had only to appear as a witness and tell the truth and he would find himself in your place—supposing this comes to a prosecution. But he won't. He could have saved..." He stopped.

"Ambrose Sault?"

"He could have saved the body of Ambrose Sault from annihilation by a word! The draft of the prospectus is in existence. It is in the safe that Sault made. Steppe could open it and ninety-nine-hundredths of your responsibility would be wiped out. But he won't risk his own skin."

"You think they will prosecute, John?"

Maxton considered. There was nothing to be gained by evasion. "I am sure they will," he said quietly. "If I were the Public Prosecutor I should apply for a warrant on the facts as I know them."

The door opened. "Will you see two gentlemen from Whitehall?" the maid asked.

It was Maxton who nodded. "Bertram... you have to meet this ordeal... courageously."

The doctor got up as the detectives entered. "I am Detective Inspector Lord, from Scotland Yard," said the first of them. "You are Doctor Bertram Merville? I have to take you into custody on a charge of misrepresentation under the Companies Act."

"Very good," said Dr. Merville. "May I go to my room for a moment?"

"No, sir," said the inspector. "I understand you keep a medicine chest in your room." Maxton nodded approvingly. He did not go to the police station with the prisoner. He went in search of Beryl... and Jan Steppe.

CHAPTER LVIII

RONALD MORELLE stood on the hearthrug before his electric radiator watching the fiery little wave that moved along the surface of the element. In such moments of complete detachment when his mind was free from the encumbrance of active thought, he received strange impressions. They were not memories, he told himself, any more than are those faces which grow and fade in the darkness just before sleeping and waking. They were wisps of dream that were born and dissolved in a fraction of time. He had see such clouds grow instantly above the lake of Geneva, and watching them from the terraces of Caux, had of a sudden missed them, even as he watched. So these impressions appeared and vanished. There was on that was distinct and more frequent than any other. It was of a hut, long and narrow. Two broad sloping benches ran down each side, and these, at night, were packed with sleeping men. The door to the hut was very solid and was locked by a soldier... he could sometimes hear the swish of the soldier's boots as he paced the gravel path surrounding the hut. Once a man had died... Ronnie helped to carry him out. It

was a plague that had struck the island... Island? Yes, it was an island, in the tropics, for the nights were very hot and the plants luxurious..."There is a ring... will m'sieur require me?"

"Yes, stay, Francois." Ronnie jumped up and dusted his trousers. Another second, and he was half-way across the room. "I'm so glad that I came, Ronnie; it wasn't that Christina insisted; I wanted to see you, dear."

How pale, how ill she looked, he thought, with a sinking heart. She was going away somewhere, for she was dressed for travelling. "Beryl, my dear, you are not well?"

"Oh, I'm well enough, Ronnie." She glanced back at the door. She expected that at any moment Steppe would come... he would guess. There was a train to be caught, too... the madness of this visit!

He held both her hands in his. "Beryl, they tell me you are going to be married. That isn't right, Beryl, is it?" She nodded. "But, Beryl..." he stopped. "I saw you once and I was cruel, wasn't I?"

"What is the use of talking about it? Ronnie, I hope you are going to be a better man than you have been. I admire you so much for defending that poor girl. You are trying to be different now..."

"I think so."

"And... I'm believing you, Ronnie. Is it easy to give up that life? Won't you want to go back to it again?"

He smiled. "I will take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a a stroke, yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep.'"

She looked at him fearfully. "Ronnie, how solemn you are... and you are so strong, too... I feel it. Ronnie, I am married!"

He bent his head as though he had not heard her. "I was married today to Steppe... Oh God, it is awful, Ronnie, awful!"

He put his arm about her and kissed the tearful face, and then... Crash! The door shook again. "I think that is your husband," said Ronnie gently. "Will you go into my room?"

He opened the door for her and said 'Yes' with his eyes to be alarmed Francois. Steppe flung himself into the room. In his great fur-collared coat he looked a giant of a man. "Well?" said Ronnie.

"Where's my wife?" The man's voice vibrated. "You swine! Where is my

wife?... She's come here... I know, to her damned paramour. Where is she?" he bellowed.

"She is in my room," said Ronnie, and Jan Steppe staggered back as if he were shot. "In your room?" He sounded as if he were being strangled. 'Well... now she can come to my room! You called me an ape this morning. I'll show you what kind of an ape I can be. Beryl!" he roared.

She came out, a tragic figure of despair.

"So you had to come and see him, eh?"

Francois had opened the door again, and a man came in unannounced. "Steppe!" It was John Maxton, and Steppe turned with a snarl. "Merville has been arrested."

"Well?"

"My father! Arrested! Jan, I must go back..."

"You'll go with me, huh! I haven't married your father—or your lover, either."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Maxton sternly.

"Catch my train! You can't stop me..."

"Steppe, for God's sake think what you are doing." Sir John Maxton was pleading now with a greater intensity than he had ever pleaded before a tribunal. "You could save Merville—you have the draft of the prospectus..."

"In the safe! In the safe!" roared Steppe, his face inflamed with fury. "Come, Beryl!" He held out his hand, but she shrank back behind Ronnie.

"Then open the safe," demanded Maxton.

"Go to hell! All of you... don't stand up to me, Morelle, I'll kill you! Beryl..."

"What is the word—this combination word, Steppe? You can get away tonight, they will find nothing until the morning..."

"I won't tell you, damn you! I'll see you..."

"Judas!" Ronnie Morelle stood, his finger outstretched stiffly, pointing at the other. "Judas... J—U—D—A—S. That is the word!"

Open—mouthed, Steppe lurched towards him. "You... you..." He struck, but his blow went wide and then Ronnie had him by the shoulders and they looked into one another's eyes. Beryl, horrified, sick with fear, saw her husband's face

go livid, saw him grimace painfully, monstrously.

"I know you!" he screamed. "I know you! You're Sault! Ambrose Sault!... You're dead! They hanged you, blast you! Ambrose Sault..." He put out his huge hands as to ward off a ghastly sight. "Come along, Beryl," he mumbled, "you mustn't stay here... it is Sault... oh..."

He went down in a heap. Beryl came forward, groping like one blind. "Ronnie..." She stared into his eyes, and in his agitation he put his knuckle to his chin. "Oh, my dear!"

CHAPTER LIX

"PERSONALLY," said Evie, "I think she should have waited six months. After all, Christina, even if her father was acquitted there is a scandal. I admit she was a wife in name only, as the pictures say, but she was Mrs. Steppe. Teddy quite agrees with me; he says that it isn't decent to marry within a week of your husband's death. Don't think I'm hurt about Ronnie getting married; I wouldn't be so small. It is the principle of the thing." Christina's mouth was bulging; Ronnie had sent her imposing quantities of candy. "Pass me that book about Beaulieu that you're sitting on, and don't talk so much," she said. "You're a jealous cat."

"I'm not. I declare I'm not. I like Ronnie, I admit, but there was something lacking in him... soul, that's what it was, soul!"

"Did Ambrose Sault have soul?"

"Why... yes, I always thought he had soul."

"Then shut up!" said Christina, opening her book.

THE END