SANCTUARY ISLAND

BY

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Sanctuary Island

CHAPTER I

ANYONE who had seen Elizabeth Anson as she lay, clad in her bathing-dress, with her dark hair shaken free and her hands clasped behind her head, allowing the warm sunshine to play on her golden-brown limbs, still glistening with sea water, would have found it hard to believe that she could have any cause to grumble against life. Yet, as she stared up at the blue of the sky, she was telling herself, as she had told herself often enough during the last two years, that life had cheated her.

She had just finished her morning swim and was lying in the small sandy cove which was the only spot where a boat could put ashore on the island, and from which a steep winding path led up to the higher ground. "Sanctuary Island" she called it, because it was here, when the thought of the swindling trick which life had played on her made her bitter and rebellious, and tempted her to play a swindling trick herself, that she fled to find sweetness and submission and at least a temporary contentment.

Cartographers, if they deigned to mark the island on their maps at all, marked it with a tiny dot and left it nameless; among the fisherfolk on the mainland it was known simply as "the island"; and she had not confided to anyone the name which she had secretly given it. Not to her mother, because she had realized that Mrs. Stellman, who had spent the whole of her married life in a vicarage, would have thought her blasphemous to apply to a mere island a word which she had always associated with the east end of a church, and would have failed utterly to understand if Elizabeth had tried to explain to her that even an island could be a Holy of Holies; and not to Richard Anson, because she had been quite sure that her husband would raise his eyebrows and say, "And from what, my dear Elizabeth, do you wish to seek sanctuary?"—which would be a question to which she could not very well make a truthful answer.

She smiled now as she thought how amazed and shocked and incredulous Richard would be if she were to tell him the truth, as she had sometimes been tempted to do. He would be utterly unable to comprehend how any woman who had not taken leave of her senses could ask more from life than to be the wife of Richard Anson. He was, Elizabeth felt, quite convinced that, if she thanked God for anything, it was for having selected her from among all women as being worthy of that privilege and happiness. To be the wife of Richard Anson, Chairman and Managing Director of Anson's Bank, Patron of Dilchester Hospital, President of every society in the district, twice Mayor of the town; who lived at Dilchester Court, ran a Rolls-Royce car, was a prospective Member of Parliament, and had contributed so generously to the funds of the local Conservative Association that he could hardly avoid

inclusion in the next Honours List—what more, he would wonder, could any woman want?

It would seem to him preposterous for any woman so blessed to complain that life had cheated her. Mast people, Elizabeth knew, would have agreed with him. There had been friends who, at the time of her marriage, had been at pains to impress on her the magnitude of the good fortune that had come her way, and to congratulate her on her adroitness in landing such an eminently satisfactory catch, but probably not one of them had given a thought to the price she had paid for the privilege, or had drawn up, as she had done, a balance sheet of the transaction, showing her profit and her loss.

"Transaction" was the right word. She had never thought of it as anything more than that, never tried to delude herself that in marrying Richard Anson she was doing more than sell herself. That was like Elizabeth. She had faced the fact that, in exchange for all her future husband had to offer her—and she had realized that the price he was prepared to pay was a higher one than she, as the daughter of a country parson with a vocation for poverty, had ever expected to fetch—she had no love to give him; but she had quietened her conscience with the argument that love did not enter into the bargain on either side.

Richard Anson was not offering her love, as she understood the word. When he had made his rather pompous proposal to her, no mention had been made of love, and he had asked her to marry him in a manner which left her in no doubt that he considered it an act of condescension on his part. He had not wanted love: he had wanted a wife, someone whose beauty would flatter him, who could play the great lady to his great gentleman, who could entertain his guests and grace his drawing-room, and who would acquiesce with at least a show of graciousness in the exercise of his rights as a husband. Knowing all that, Elizabeth had married him and had not felt that she was cheating him of anything.

She had been twenty-three at the time and her husband fifty. Thinking of it now, as she basked in the sunshine, she wondered how she had ever found the courage to do it. But she had really had no choice. Her father had died as he had lived, a saint with a load of debts, leaving behind him a wife who had never managed to make two shillings do the normal work of one, and a daughter who had been only half-trained for a musical career—and that against her father's wishes, since he had always believed that in visiting the poor of his parish and teaching in the Sunday-school she was fulfilling life's highest purpose. "The Lord will provide", had been his favourite text; and when, soon after her father's death, at a moment when she and her mother were secretly living on a diet which was largely bread and marmalade, the

Lord had provided Richard Anson's offer of marriage, she had felt that, it only out of duty to her mother, she must accept it.

It was then that she had drawn up the balance sheet of the transaction, and had placed on the credit side all those material advantages to herself and her mother which the marriage would provide—security, the luxurious surroundings of Dilchester Court, a generous allowance, freedom from a diet of bread and marmalade and those hundred and one nagging worries which took all the sweetness out of life, and the role of Dilchester's leading lady. These were the gains, which she had seen as clearly as had her friends.

And the losses? Only she had known of them. Not even her mother had any idea that there were any entries to be made on the other side of the account; and even if she had known of them, she would have considered them too insignificant to worry about. As Elizabeth put it, the ointment smelt so sweet that it was absurd to refuse to use it because deep down at the bottom of the jar there was a fly in it. She had been puzzled by Elizabeth's hesitation to accept Richard Anson's proposal, and a little impatient with her for not instantly jumping at such a chance, because she had not realized that before Elizabeth could jump she must first cut the bonds that bound her to John Hackett.

It had needed courage to cut those bonds. But she had done so— ruthlessly, brutally, because she had known that if she had tried to do it more gradually, letting them slowly wear away until they frayed and snapped, she would never have the courage to see the business through. Now, as she thought of John, a softness came to her eyes and a rather rueful little smile to her lips, as always happened when she thought of him.

She remembered him as he had been when she had first met him—a hefty young giant of eighteen, the son of a neighbouring parson, with unruly fair hair and a multitude of freckles, very much in love with her and terribly afraid to tell her so. She remembered him later, after he had spent a few terms at Oxford, with his new self-assurance and tremendous knowledge of the world.

She remembered, with a sudden little stab of pain, the evening when he had first kissed her, and she, clinging to him, had listened in breathless wonder while he so confidently planned their future. He would finish his time at Oxford and then set to work seriously with his writing, and soon—very soon— they would be married. They would do great things when they were married, both of them. He with his writing and she with her music would make the welkin ring. She recalled how they had laughed when they discovered that neither of them knew what a welkin was.

She remembered him as she had last seen him, leaning through the window of the railway carriage holding her hand, dreading the moment when the guard would blow his whistle and he would be forced to release her, yet not knowing how to endure those last few dragging minutes. He had been going no further than America for a brief visit to relatives, and as soon as he returned they were to be married and set about the welkin business; but she had felt that if all space were to be placed between them it could not hurt her more. Very vividly she recalled the sound of the guard's whistle and how John's lips had twitched as he drew her closer to the window and kissed her. "Keep on loving me, Elizabeth," he had whispered, and she had managed no more than, "John— darling!" and a squeeze of his hand.

That had been more than two years ago, and she had not seen him since. Within a month of saying goodbye to him had come the offer from Richard Anson, which she had somehow found the courage to accept. How could she possibly explain to John? How could she expect him to understand? John would not see it as a sacrifice which she was in duty bound to make, but as a heartless betrayal, a ruthless smashing of the wonderful world which they had built together, a cold-blooded bartering of all that was most beautiful for mere worldly possessions.

Elizabeth sat up, took her cigarette-case from the pocket of the bathing-gown that lay on the sand beside her, and lighted a cigarette. Life had cheated her out of John, though life, up to that point, had not been entirely to blame. She could, she supposed, have refused to marry Richard, if she could have persuaded herself that she would be justified in grasping her own happiness and leaving her mother to continue indefinitely on a bread-and-marmalade diet. But she had not felt justified, and had thrown her happiness aside, and it was only when she had done so beyond all hope of recovery that life had played its swindling trick on her, put its fingers to its nose and jeered at her for having been so easily tricked.

For within six months of her marriage to Richard Anson had come the news that she was a wealthy woman, heiress to the sum of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds left by a forgotten relative of her father's who had gone to America forty years ago and had been astute enough to die wealthy and unmarried.

But the money had come too late: the world which she and John had built together was already in ruins, and not even a hundred and fifty thousand pounds could build it again. A cheating, swindling trick!

She rose, slipped on the bathing-gown and went slowly up the steep, winding path. As she reached the top and saw the bungalow with its broad, shady verandah and roof of dull-red tiles, she smiled. The money, after all, had its uses. It could not rebuild her world, but it had made it possible for

her to build this little world of her own, this sanctuary to which she could come when life in Dilchester became unbearable, or when the memory of the fraud which life had perpetrated at her expense made her feel that she could not go on.

She had discovered the island daring a visit to the golf links for which the little village of Whitbourne was chiefly noted. Inquiry had produced the information that the island was for sale, and within a week she had bought it and the bungalow was in process of construction. She had been recklessly extravagant, excusing the bills to herself on the plea that Sanctuary Island was to be a substitute for heaven, and even a substitute for heaven was bound to cost money.

The bungalow consisted, in addition to kitchen and bath-room, of only two rooms, a bedroom and a sitting-room, but each of them had big windows to admit the sunshine, and was furnished just as she and John had planned that they would furnish that wonder house which she had smashed to pieces.

In the sitting-room was a grand piano, at which, during her visits to the island, she would sit for hours, not, perhaps, making the welkin ring, but losing herself in the music which she could rarely play at Dilchester Court, since Richard's taste was limited to music that had a good tune in it. At other times she would swim or read or go cruising about in the little motor-boat, or laze on the beach, content to feel that she was utterly cut off from everyone and everything that comprised her normal life, amusing herself sometimes by trying to calculate how many millions of gallons of salt water were contained in the couple of miles of sea that separated her from the mainland.

True, there was a telephone—it had cost a terrible lot of money, that telephone!—but it was to be used only in case of emergency, and not even Richard knew of its existence. Sanctuary Island would be a very poor substitute for heaven if there were the constant risk of Richard's voice interrupting her dreams.

Her husband had been inclined to be awkward about the island, obviously puzzled to understand how she could wish for any place better than Dilchester Court, and not a little uncertain as to the propriety of a young married woman going off unchaperoned to spend days—and nights—on an island two miles away from the mainland.

Elizabeth had not tried to explain. She had laughingly told him that, strange as it might seem, there were times when a woman preferred the company of seagulls to that of her husband. She had been very resolute and obstinate, and because in those early days he had been quite intoxicated with the

beauty of which he had become the proprietor, he had let her have her way without too much opposition. Moreover, a wife with a hundred and fifty thousand pounds could not be treated in quite the same high-handed way as a wife who did not possess a penny, and something in Elizabeth's manner had warned him that it would be wiser to indulge her whim.

But he did not like "this island business", and it was a source of constant irritation and uneasiness to him that, after his first tour of inspection, when Elizabeth had hurried him round the island and bustled him off in the motor-boat within a quarter of an hour, he had never been invited to it again.

Elizabeth passed through the sitting-room and went into the bedroom to dress; and when, half an hour later, she stepped on to the verandah, intending to spend an hour with a book, she suddenly paused and stood gazing, her hand above her eyes, towards the mainland. Half-way between the mainland and the island was a rowing-boat, and she could see that it was coming in her direction.

A pucker appeared between her eyebrows. Except for occasional trippers, whom she promptly sent about their business, no boat but her own ever came to the island. Anything that she required she herself fetched from Whitbourne, and none of the village people, who had grown accustomed to her "queer ways", would dream of visiting her uninvited.

As the boat drew nearer, she saw its single occupant clearly—an elderly, bearded man with the sleeves of his jersey rolled above the elbows and a peaked cap pulled down over his eyes. He was pulling the boat with the powerful, leisurely strokes of a fisherman, and Elizabeth, wondering what the man could want with her, made her way down to the sandy beach and was standing on the water's edge when the boat grounded and the man got out and came splashing towards her through the shallow water.

It was Jim Huggett, one of the local fishermen whom she knew well, having several times employed him to carry out repairs to her boat, and in spite of the heinousness of his offence in calling on her uninvited, she welcomed him with a smile.

"Good morning, Jim. What's the trouble?"

"Well, I'm not saying there's any trouble, missie," replied Jim Huggett, pulling off his cap and smiling at her; "but there's no knowing with telegrams."

"You've a telegram for me?"

"I have, missie. It come this morning—about an hour ago. Addressed to you, it is. Poste Restante, Whitbourne, it says, though I don't rightly get the

meaning of that. Postmaster, he says it's a way of saying you've got to call for it and he's got no sort of right to go delivering it. 'But you never know with telegrams, Jim,' he says. 'Maybe someone's dead or something, and I don't like the idea of that Mrs. Anson staying out there on the island and not calling at the post-office when maybe her husband or someone's broke his neck. You'd best take it out to her, Jim,' he says, 'though it isn't regular, so to speak, and I'd get into trouble if it was known.' But we reckoned you aren't the sort, missie, to go splitting on anyone who meant well by you—"

"Where's the telegram, Jim?"

"I did have it somewhere," replied Jim, and began fumbling in his pockets. "Ah, yes, I remember now. 'Don't you go losing it, Jim,' the postmaster says, 'or you'll be getting me into serious trouble. You'd best put it in your 'baccy pouch,' he says, and that's where I put it. You see, the postmaster, he knew I'd never go losing my 'baccy pouch—ah, there it is, missie."

He pulled the telegram from the pouch, brushed off the clinging shreds of tobacco, and handed it to her. Elizabeth glanced at the envelope. Mrs. Richard Anson, she read. From her husband, undoubtedly; the "Richard" told her that. It was like Richard to insist on his proprietorial interest in her even on a telegram. Opening the envelope, she pulled out the slip of paper. Telephone to me immediately—Richard, she read.

She glanced up to find Jim Huggett eyeing her anxiously. "Not bad news, I hope, missie?"

"No, Jim, not bad news."

Jim smiled and put on his cap, as though he had decided that, since there was no question of a corpse, there was no longer any need to remain bare-headed.

"If there's any answer, missie, postmaster said as I was to take it back with me."

"No. Jim, there's no reply, thanks."

Jim nodded, scratched his head and seemed disinclined to go.

"Boat running all right?" he inquired.

"Splendidly, thanks."

Jim shook his head.

"Them new-fangled things," he said, in a tone of disgust—"spitting and coughing and stinking and getting troubles in their innards! Maybe I don't get along so fast, missie, but I'd rather trust to the arms God gave me."

Elizabeth smiled at him.

"But God didn't give me arms like yours," she reminded him. "It was kind of you to bring the telegram out tome, Jim. And thank the postmaster, won't you?"

"I will that," Jim assured her. "Good-day to you, missie."

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH stood watching until the boat was just out of the cove, and then, with a wave of her hand to him, she turned and went back up the path towards the bungalow, frowning thoughtfully.

It was just like Richard to send that curt, peremptory telegram without a word of explanation. He was not accustomed to giving explanations: he issued his orders and expected unquestioning obedience. He was like that in business, she had heard—brusque, domineering, the hard, inscrutable man of affairs—and he ran his home on the same lines. Many a time, during the first few months of her marriage, she had flamed into furious resentment against his hectoring way with her, but she had soon discovered that any expression of her resentment was not worth while, and that for the sake of peace it was better to ignore his frequent rudeness.

She was puzzled to think what could have occurred of sufficient importance to make her husband wire to her. A sudden thought that her mother might be ill she instantly dismissed. Her mother, since the legacy of debts left by her husband had been removed from her shoulders, and she had enjoyed good food, expensive clothes, the comforts of Dilchester Court, and the dignity of being the mother-in-law of Richard Anson had shed a good ten years; her aches and pains had miraculously disappeared, and although there was always an array of patent medicines in her bedroom, of each of which she occasionally took a few doses, she was actually in excellent health.

But if not her mother, then what? Richard had never before telegraphed to her during her spells at Sanctuary Island, though there had always existed the arrangement that in case of emergency he could wire to her at the post-office at Whitbourne. Perhaps he himself was ill....

She fetched the telephone from her bedroom, seated herself in an arm- chair in the sitting-room, placed the instrument on a table beside her and plugged in; a few moments later came her husband's clear, precise voice: "Is that you, Elizabeth?"

"Yes. What's wrong, Richard?"

"Are you quite well?"

"Of course. Why?"

"I wondered," replied her husband, and she knew from the tone of his voice that he was displeased with her about something.

"Is anything wrong, Richard?"

"You may well ask, Elizabeth. You must forgive my saying so, but you have been most thoughtless and inconsiderate."

"I don't know why you should say that, Richard—"

"Please don't interrupt me," he cut in, and she could picture the look of annoyance on his face, and his plump white fingers, perfectly manicured, irritably drumming his desk as he spoke. "You have been most thoughtless and inconsiderate. I have been extremely anxious. When you left home on Saturday, the arrangement was that you would be returning on Monday at the latest. Today is Tuesday."

"I said I might be home on Monday, Richard. But it's absolutely perfect down here—glorious weather."

"The weather is equally glorious in Dilchester, Elizabeth, and in any case I fail to see that the meteorological conditions enter into the question. I was expecting you on Monday, and when you did not arrive I was naturally anxious. I thought you might be ill."

"Sorry, Richard, but I really wasn't definite about Monday. In any case, I'm perfectly well and enjoying myself immensely, so you needn't worry about me any more."

"That is a great relief to me. And when, may I ask, are you proposing to return to your home?"

"Oh, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. At the end of the week, I suppose. Why?"

"I should have thought," he replied, "that a husband was entitled to ask a question without being called upon to state his reasons, but perhaps I am over-estimating the claims which a man has on his wife."

Elizabeth bit her lip.

"Very well, then, Richard; I'll be home on Saturday, Will that do?"

"It will certainly not do. As you seem to have forgotten all about it, I will remind you that tomorrow—Wednesday—there is a function which, as my wife, you will be expected to attend."

"Then I have forgotten, Richard. What function?" She distinctly heard his "Tut!" of annoyance. "Tomorrow, Elizabeth," he said, in a voice that suggested a schoolmaster repeating something for the fiftieth time to an inattentive pupil, "there is the ceremony of unveiling the memorial to Anna Rita Rymer."

"Oh, yes—the missionary woman. I'm afraid I had forgotten that. But there's no need tor me to be there, is there?"

"My dear Elizabeth, of course you must be there. Everyone of any importance in Dilchester will be there."

"But I'm not so important as all that, Richard."

"That is for you to decide. As my wife, you will be expected there. I sometimes despair of ever making you realize, Elizabeth, that a woman who is married to a man of my—er—position and importance has duties and responsibilities which she cannot shirk no matter how much she may dislike them. It was at my suggestion, and chiefly with my money, that the memorial to Anna Rita Rymer was erected, and as I am performing the unveiling ceremony, you can hardly expect me to appear without my wife. You will please return home immediately."

Elizabeth sighed.

"Very well, Richard; I'll be there."

"I shall expect you in time for dinner this evening. The ceremony is at three o'clock tomorrow—"

"I'll be there," Elizabeth repeated. "But don't expect me for dinner this evening. I'll be home in time for lunch tomorrow. Good-bye."

She rang off without giving him time to raise objections. After all, there was no need for her to leave until the next morning, and she wanted to make the most of the few hours that were left. It might be some time before she could slip away to Sanctuary Island again. Richard was becoming more and more difficult each time she came now, and there would have to be a decent interval before her next visit.

She went out on to the verandah, seated herself in a deck-chair and gazed, as she was so fond of gazing, at the span of water that cut her off from the mainland. But the spell was broken. Her serenity had gone, and in its place had come a sense of irritation and discontent. She had got to go back.

She would always have to go back. These visits to her island could never be more than brief interludes which in reality only made her normal life seem less bearable by contrast. Looking ahead, she saw herself for long years as the wife of Richard Anson, attending "functions", sitting on committees, organizing bazaars, entertaining people with whom she had absolutely nothing in common, crushing down her longing for all those things which she had once believed to be the only things worth having—all those things which she and John would have found together and which she could never hope to find with Richard.

It was her own fault, she supposed. It was of no use longing for love and all that love could give when she had deliberately thrown love on the scrap-heap. But, no; that wasn't true. It was not her fault. She had been tricked, cheated, swindled. If life had played fair with her, John would now be sitting here with her and she would not be going back to Dilchester Court.

It was queer how she kept thinking of John today. She did not want to think of him: it hurt too much—even after three years as Richard's wife. Or was it especially after three years as Richard's wife? But somehow today she could not help thinking of him and of all that she had missed by losing him. Children. She and John had discussed that subject and had planned their children as they had planned everything else. There were to be three of them— two boys and a girl, all of them, according to John, to be exactly like their mother, and all, according to her, to be exactly like John. She had wanted children—then.

She went to bed that night feeling depressed and dispirited. But the next morning, after a swim and a hearty breakfast, the prospect of returning to Dilchester did not seem quite so unbearable. After all, she told herself, she was lucky to be able to slip away to a place like Sanctuary Island, and to sulk because her holiday was over was merely childish.

Getting out the little motor-boat, she started up the engine and set off for the mainland. There, having handed over the boat to the care of Jim Huggett, she made her way along the village street towards the garage where she had left the long, low sports two-seater which she always used for these trips.

Richard didn't approve of the car; for the wife of a man in his position and importance he considered it undignified, and insisted that in Dilchester she should make use of the Rolls-Royce and the chauffeur; but since she had bought it herself he could not very well forbid her to have it, and as long as she refrained from appearing in it in the streets of Dilchester more than was absolutely unavoidable, she drove it, if not with his approval, at least with his consent.

She was half-way along the street when she heard her name called.

"Mrs. Anson!"

It was Dr. Guy Ewell, broad, bluff, with bushy grey eyebrows and twinkling blue eyes, Dilchester's rudest and most popular medical practitioner, arrayed in a suit of dazzling plus-fours and with a bag of golf clubs slung over his shoulder.

"And what are you doing fifty miles away from home, Mrs. Anson?" he asked. "Playing truant again, eh? You needn't trouble to deny it; I saw Anson yesterday and he told me." He smiled at her. "You know, Mrs. Anson, you must be a sore trial to that husband of yours."

"After three years, Dr. Ewell," she laughed, "isn't every wife a sore trial to her husband?"

"God bless my soul, hark at the woman! Who's been telling you state secrets?"

"So you admit it's true?"

"I'm admitting nothing. But if it is true. I'd prefer to think you didn't know it. I'm going to stir up my liver with a round of golf. I come to the Whitbourne course when I can spare the time. If I play golf anywhere nearer home, people expect me to give consultations on the greens and prescribe all along the fairway, and I can't even charge 'em for it." His keen eyes regarded her shrewdly. "What have you been doing to yourself? You're looking better."

Elizabeth smiled.

"Please remember, Dr. Ewell, that I didn't ask for a consultation in Whitbourne High Street. I'm splendid, thanks. I've just been doing nothing a for few days—lying in the sun, lazing."

"H'm!" grunted the doctor. "Tanning, eh? And you fancy you're bursting with health just because every square inch of you body is toasted brown? It never seems to strike a woman that if God had intended her to have a brown skin He'd have given her one."

"And has it ever struck you, Dr. Ewell, that if God had intended that a woman shouldn't get tanned by the sun He'd have arranged for her to be born in stockings, skirt, and a high-necked jumper?"

"I'm not arguing," replied the doctor. "And I'm not complaining. I made more money out of sun-bathing last summer than out of all the other diseases put together. And when is Dilchester going to see you again?"

"I'm going back this morning. I'm just on my way to pick up the car. Duty calls."

"And you didn't pretend not to hear it? You must be a very remarkable woman, Mrs. Anson."

"I did pretend not to hear it," she laughed, "but it made such a hullabaloo that it was no use trying to keep up the pretence. For the sake of peace and quietness I'm going home with my skin three shades lighter than I intended it to be. There's a—function this afternoon, and I've got to be there." She made a wry face. "I never knew such a place as Dilchester for functions. You'd be doing everyone a kindness if, as a doctor, you could throw some of Dilchester's functions out of order. I suppose you'll be there this afternoon, won't you?"

"Not if I know it. What is it this time?"

"This memorial to Anna Rita Rymer. Richard is unveiling it this afternoon."

"Huh!" grunted Dr. Ewell.

"That's just how I feel, if 'huh' means that you find it terribly hard to summon up much interest in Anna Rita Rymer."

"Interest? God bless my soul, I took her tonsils out! You can't expect a man to be interested in a woman when he's taken out her adenoids and tonsils."

"Then you won't be there?"

He smiled.

"Between you and me, Mrs. Anson, when I saw your husband yesterday I promised him I'd put on my silk hat and mix with the celebrities on the platform, but I've a sort of an idea I'm going to have another appointment this afternoon."

"A serious consultation with a niblick?"

"That's more than likely But I'm glad you're going home, Mrs. Anson. It doesn't do to have you away from Dilchester; things go wrong. What's the matter with your husband?"

"Nothing that I've noticed."

"Then you're an unobservant young woman, that's all I can say. The man's all on edge—nervy—-worried about something, I should say. When I met him yesterday and pulled his leg about the Bank—told him he ought to be ashamed of himself battening on the savings of the poor and running a Rolls—he fairly jumped down my throat. Bless me, I meant no harm."

"I'm sure you didn't, Dr. Ewell. But Richard has been—well, rather nervy lately; I have noticed that. He's been working terribly hard and really needs a holiday. Still, if Richard's nerviness is the worst catastrophe that has befallen Dilchester while I've been away—"

"It isn't."

"Battle, murder, and sudden death?"

He glanced at her quickly.

"So you've heard about it, have you?"

"I've heard nothing."

"Then you made a very good guess. Battle, murder, and sudden death just about hits the nail on the head. I was called in to the case, but the man was dead before I reached him."

"Another road accident?"

"Bless me, no! Some woman—a Mrs. Burns—killed her husband. Suddenly attacked him with a hatchet. But I'll spare you the gruesome details. She must have gone out of her mind."

"Perhaps."

"Eh? What do you mean—perhaps?"

"And perhaps not," said Elizabeth. "But you're not seriously suggesting, Dr. Ewell, that Mrs. Burns killed her husband because I came to Whitbourne to tan my skin?"

The doctor shook his head, smiling.

"There's logic, and there's woman," he said, "and never the twain shall meet. I'm not suggesting anything of the sort, Mrs. Anson." He laid a hand on her arm. "I'm just telling you in my own clumsy way, my dear, that Dilchester isn't quite the same to any of us when Mrs. Anson isn't there." He glanced at his watch. "Bless my soul! Trust a woman to gossip! I shall never get further than the third green before it's time for lunch."

Elizabeth smiled as she watched him hurrying off along the street. She liked Dr. Ewell. He was—safe. He always gave her that feeling of security. The sort of man who would see you through if anything went wrong....

Making her way to the garage, she got out her long, low, red-winged sports car, and, with the exhaust emitting a sound like the popping of colossal corks from gigantic magnums, set off along the road to Dilchester.

CHAPTER III

RICHARD ANSON, as he sat at his desk in his comfortable study, had the appearance of a man who was perfectly satisfied with the world in general and with himself in particular. He was leaning back in his revolving chair, with the tips of his white, well-manicured fingers pressed together and a smile of approval on his face, as, with his head tilted slightly backwards, he listened attentively to his secretary, who was seated beside the desk, reading from a notebook.

Every now and then, in a pause between sentences, Celia Paterson raised her golden head and her big eyes bestowed on Richard Anson a glance which suggested that she found him every bit as satisfactory as he found himself.

Most women, if they had ignored his steely grey eyes, which were just a little too small and set a little too close together, would have been inclined to agree with him. Anson had always been secretly proud of his figure, and at the age of fifty-two he rarely surveyed himself in the long mirror in his dressing-room without telling himself, quite truthfully, that he would easily pass for ten years younger. His hair had greyed a little at the temples, but his face had few lines in it, and so long as the skin-food which he applied to his face each night continued to do its work he did not worry about a few grey hairs which, he felt, only lent him an added dignity. He was dressed, as always, with impressive neatness, from the soles of his impeccable shoes, which a carping critic might have found a little too small for a man of Anson's height, to the crown of his well-groomed head.

Everything about Richard Anson was impressive: the massive mahogany desk at which he was seated, the thick pile carpet on the floor, the general air of solid prosperity which pervaded the whole house. If you visited Anson, you were impressed first by the aloof dignity of his butler, and then in turn by the distance you had to cover between the door of his study and the desk; by the way in which he rose to welcome you and waved you to a chair; by the oracular manner in which he made the simplest statement; and if Celia Paterson chanced to be in the room, you would probably have found her hardly less impressive. You would have realized at any rate that she was of the type to attract the attention of anyone who tended to be impressionable. Once again a carping critic might have found that her hair was just a little too golden, her eye-lashes a little too black, her lips a little too scarlet and forming a cupid's bow a little too perfect to be natural, but even a carping critic might have been inclined to forget all this if her big blue eyes had given him one of the adoring looks which she was now bestowing, as opportunity offered, on her employer.

"This sainted woman," read Celia, in her soft, slightly husky voice, "whose sacrifice we have gathered together today to commemorate—"

Anson raised a smooth, white hand.

"Just a moment, please, Miss Paterson," he said. "'Martyrdom', I think would be better. Just alter 'sacrifice' to 'martyrdom' and we'll leave the speech as it is. Type it out for me as soon as possible If anything should occur to you which you think might improve it, I shall welcome the suggestion."

Celia rose from her chair, smiling.

"I'm sure I couldn't possibly improve it, Mr. Anson," she said, "I think it's absolutely wonderful. You must feel very proud, Mr. Anson, to think that Anna Rita Rymer was your own sister."

Anson smiled.

"Actually, she was my half-sister, but I am none the less proud of the relationship. She was in many ways a most remarkable woman, and a good woman. No woman who was not could have done what Anna Rita Rymer did."

"And did she really do all the wonderful things you mention in your speech?"

Anson nodded.

"As I say in my speech, Miss Paterson, she was happy to sacrifice everything for the sake of her ideals, to give up all that a young woman naturally holds most dear, to go out to China as a missionary, to undergo hardship and privation, to risk disease and danger, and in the end to suffer a terrible death at the hands of Chinese bandits. I have no hesitation in saying, Miss Paterson," added Anson, in his best oratorical style, "that no woman in this country has been a greater power for good, exercised a greater spiritual influence, or set a greater example of self-sacrifice and devotion to duty than Anna Rita Rymer."

"I think it's wonderful," breathed Celia ecstatically. "I think it would be marvellous—"

The telephone bell rang, and, without waiting to explain what had aroused her sense of the marvellous, Celia picked up the receiver, listened for a moment and turned to Anson.

"It's Mr. Doran—from London."

Anson almost snatched the receiver from her hand and clapped it to his ear, but his voice, when he spoke, had none of its usual brusqueness. Mark Doran was what is commonly known as a power in the world of finance and it behoved even Richard Anson to address him with some show of deference.

"Is that you, Mr. Doran? Anson speaking. Very good of you to ring me."

"Don't mention it, Anson," came Doran's voice.

"You got my letter?"

"I had it this morning. But I rang up about my young nephew. I am obliged to you Anson. He'll enjoy a brief stay in your part of the world before he leaves for China. By the way, if you can persuade him that in going to China as a missionary he's chucking his life away, you'll be doing him a good turn. I told him yesterday that if he's aching to convert the heathen he could find plenty of work in the West End of London. I hope Mrs. Anson isn't too annoyed with me for springing a guest on her like this?"

"Not at all." Anson assured him. "We shall be only too pleased to welcome him. As regards my letter—"

"Ah. yes—your letter. Well, it's a great deal of money, and before I come to any decision you must give me a chance to think it over. It's not the sort of thing to be rushed into. Within the next day of two I may ask you to run up to town and see me."

Anson frowned, but his tone was as deferential as ever. "Certainly. Any date you care to name. As far as I am concerned, the sooner the better; the matter is really very urgent."

"Such matters usually are, Anson. However, I'll think it over and let you know. Good-bye."

Anson replaced the receiver and remained for some moments lost in thought, frowning as he drummed his desk with his fingers. He hoped Doran wasn't going to prove difficult. The money had to be found, and if Doran let him down ... He dismissed the thought. Doran must not let him down.

His thoughts were disturbed by a tap on the door, and a moment later it opened. Mrs. Stellman stepped into the room and paused.

She was a woman of about fifty, and, except that they both had the same dark chestnut hair, it was difficult to imagine her as the mother of Elizabeth. Whereas Elizabeth was rather tall, and slim, and graceful, Mrs. Stellman was inclined to be short, and betrayed a distinct tendency to plumpness.

In front of her, suspended by a ribbon from her neck, was a tray on which was displayed an assortment of paper flags and badges, each of which bore the words: "Anna Rita Rymer Cot". From her wrist dangled one of those sealed tins with a slit in the lid such as are usually supplied by suspicious charity organizers to their collectors. Pinned on her ample bosom was a large rosette with a paper centre on which the same words were printed.

She smiled across at Anson.

"May I come in, Richard? Of course, I expect you're terribly busy, but I am sure you can spare a minute for this." She held up the collecting-box and jangled the coins inside. Crossing to his desk, she held out the box. "It's such a good cause, and I knew you would wish to be among the very first to subscribe. You're not quite the first, because immediately after breakfast I went into the kitchen and sold a flag to each of the servants. Sixpence each they paid. I thought it was very generous when one remembers what very poor wages they earn."

Anson raised his eyebrows.

"I've always been under the impression, Mrs. Stellman, that my servants were extremely well paid."

"Oh, of course, Richard. I'm sure I don't know what they do with all their money," said Mrs. Stellman hastily. "What I meant was—the very poor wages all servants earn in comparison with—er—people who aren't servants."

She took a flag from the tray and pinned it to the lapel of his coat. Anson, taking a half-crown from his pocket dropped it into the tin.

"Thank you, Richard. If everybody subscribes as generously as that, we shall have a record collection. Of course. I'm not supposed to see what anybody puts in the tin, but I always take a peep. You'd be surprised what people give— pennies and halfpennies and even buttons." She turned to Celia. "And what about you, Miss Paterson? I'm sure you're going to buy a flag, aren't you?"

"I should love to, Mrs. Stellman—" began Celia, but before she got further Anson rose from his chair, took another flag from the tray, and slipped a shilling into the collecting-box.

"Miss Paterson will give me the privilege of buying one for her," he said.

"Thank you, Richard," said Mrs. Stellman. "And now everybody in the house has bought one except Elizabeth. Such a pity she's not here. I was looking forward to having her with me when I went out collecting. It's really rather naughty of her not to be here this morning."

Anson frowned.

"Elizabeth has promised to be here in time for lunch," he said, crossing to the door and opening it. "Good-bye, Mrs. Stellman. I hope you have a most successful collection."

Mrs. Stellman beamed at him.

"I'm quite sure we shall, Richard. It's such a good cause, cots; so necessary. As I told the Committee yesterday, it would be very awkward having babies if there weren't any cots to put them in. Don't you agree?"

Anson smiled faintly.

"Fortunately, Mrs. Stellman, that's a situation with which I'm never likely to be confronted."

Mrs. Stellman tapped his arm with her gloved hand.

"You never know, Richard," she smiled, and went bustling from the room.

Anson closed the door behind her.

"Anna Rita Rymer," he smiled, "is not the only martyr in the family. I suppose I shouldn't say that, but I know you understand, Miss Paterson, that I say a good many things to you which I should not say to other people. A man naturally confides in his confidential secretary, and I feel quite sure that anything I say to you will go no further."

"Of course not, Mr. Anson."

He went up to her and pinned the flag in her blouse. As he did so, his hand just touched her neck and she glanced up at him, smiling, with an expectant look in her eyes.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Anson. It's terribly kind of you."

Anson returned to his desk.

"You'll find, Miss Paterson," he said, "that I can be terribly kind to anyone who takes the trouble to study my interests."

"I do my best, Mr. Anson, and I do hope you're satisfied."

He nodded.

"Quite satisfied—so far. You've only been with me a few weeks, but when we know each other better we shall, I feel sure, get on very well together. And then, I suppose, just when I have decided that I've found a young woman who has all the qualities of a perfect secretary, you'll come and tell me that you're going to get married."

"Why ever should you say that, Mr. Anson?"

"It's the usual thing, and you don't expect me to believe that a—er—charming girl like yourself has no attachment? Didn't I see you the other day with a very good-looking young man in Dilchester High Street?" He was toying with his fountain-pen and did not see the quick, anxious look which she gave him.

"I don't think you could possibly have seen me, Mr. Anson."

"A tall, dark man," continued Anson, ignoring her interruption. "You got out of his car outside the Middleton Hotel. It was a blue two- seater—"

"Oh, yes, of course; I remember now. That—that was my brother. He came down for the day to see me—from London."

Anson glanced at her keenly.

"Then there's nobody, Miss Paterson, who is likely to take you away from me as soon as I've become accustomed to you?"

"Nobody at all," she assured him.

"Good," said Anson. "I don't want to seem inquisitive, but before one trusts too much in a confidential secretary one likes to be assured that the relationship is a more or less permanent one. And now let's get to business again. I want you to send a wire for me. It's a most confidential business matter, and for that reason I don't wish the wire sent from Dilchester. I should like you to take it over to Burnford and send it from there."

"Certainly, Mr. Anson."

"Address it to Hamilton, E.T.C. Company, Ltd., Cornhill, London. You might look up the number in the telephone book. Wire as follows:

"It is a matter of great urgency that you should postpone your call until the thirteenth of next month stop We are facing grave difficulties and any demand from you will precipitate crisis stop Wire me your decision immediately. Anson.

"I'd like you to take that at once, Miss Paterson, if you will."

She hesitated, looking at him doubtfully.

"Of course, it's no business of mine, Mr. Anson, but this telegram—I mean, I couldn't help noticing how worried you've looked lately, and I've been terribly anxious in case there's anything wrong."

He glanced up at her as she stood beside him.

"And if I told you that I was terribly anxious and worried and that almost everything was wrong, would that matter very much to you?"

"Why, of course it would, Mr. Anson. I should be terribly upset. You've been so absolutely marvellous to me, and if there's anything I can possibly do— "

He took her hand and smiled up at her.

"That's kind of you, Celia, and if I were to tell you that there is something you could do to help me, would you be willing to do it?"

She gave him one of her adoring glances.

"I'd do anything I possibly could for you, Mr. Anson," she replied, and there was just the slightest little emphasis on the "you".

Anson pressed her hand and released it.

CHAPTER IV

AT the wheel of her red-winged two-seater Elizabeth could never remain for long in the doldrums, and by the time she reached Dilchester, after her fifty-mile drive with the wind-screen open so that the wind buffeted her face and roared in her ears, the last shreds of her depression had been blown away.

After all, she told herself, as she ran the car into the garage, she must not lose her sense of humour. There really was something intensely humorous in the idea of her playing the great lady among the local celebrities, paying homage to the memory of a woman for whom she didn't care a snap of the fingers, listening with a solemn face to the flowery oration which Richard had so carefully prepared.

Richard always prepared his speeches with the utmost care, as a rule learning them by heart and practising them in the seclusion of his study. She had never heard him make a speech which he had not begun with a plea for the indulgence of his audience for any shortcomings, a lament that he was a very poor speaker, and a subtly conveyed suggestion that he had had no time for preparation and was speaking extempore—a ruse which rarely failed to elicit from the speaker who followed him a reference to his modesty and graceful compliment to his oratorical powers. But probably Richard was not the only man to indulge in that little deception, and she mustn't be catty.

During the drive home she had made up her mind that she would have nothing to do with cattiness. She would be very nice to Richard in future, because it really wasn't his fault that life had played a swindling trick on her, and she would certainly be doing the same on Richard if she failed to keep her part of the bargain and play the role of Dilchester's leading lady as he was entitled to expect her to play it.

He would, she supposed, have a few words to say about her lack of consideration in not returning home on Monday; but she was fully determined, as she went along the hall towards his study, that she would not allow him to irritate her. Several times lately she had only just stopped herself on the edge of an angry outburst, and there was nothing to be gained by making a scene. Besides, what was the use of going into the Holy of Holies if, when she came out into the world again, the first little trial of her patience swept away all the serenity she had gained there?

She was smiling as she went into the room, but as her husband, seated at his desk, glanced up at her and she saw the resentment in his eyes and the grim line of his mouth, it was all she could do to continue smiling. It seemed that a wave of hostility met her as she crossed towards the desk, and she

felt that she was forcing her way through an atmosphere that was heavy with displeasure.

Pulling off her motoring gauntlets, she tossed them on to a chair.

"Well, here we are again, Richard."

He sat for some moments, his elbows resting on the desk and his hands clasped, regarding her intently.

"So you have at last condescended to return to your home, Elizabeth."

She nodded, still managing to smile.

"In plenty of time for lunch, Richard, as I promised. It was a marvellous drive back, and I had a glorious time on the island."

"I don't doubt that in the least. But it is more than rime for you to realize that having glorious times is not the only thing in life, or even the most important thing, particularly when you have them at the cost of someone else's peace of mind and at the expense of your duties at home. As I told you on the telephone, I was extremely worried when you failed to come home on Monday as you had arranged to do, and I have not the least doubt that if I had not telegraphed you would not have returned in time for today's engagement."

"I'm glad you did wire, Richard, because I'm afraid I had forgotten. As a matter of fact, I don't think I realized that you'd want me at the unveiling ceremony. Still, here I am, so why worry?"

"I'm afraid, Elizabeth, that we can't dismiss the matter quite as lightly as that. True, you have returned in time for this afternoon's ceremony—after being reminded by me, and after ignoring my expressed wish that you should return yesterday—but you have still been guilty of a very grave derelict ion of duty." Elizabeth felt that her patience was ebbing fast. "What other crime have I committed?"

"Have you forgotten that today is Dilchester's flag day in aid of the Anna Rita Rymer cot, and that you are supposed to be in charge of it? Evidently you have forgotten, or you would hardly, I hope, have absented yourself—"

"Oh, Richard, there's no need to be so pompous about it and lecture me as if I were a naughty schoolgirl. I did all I undertook to do. I said from the very beginning that I wouldn't collect in the street, and mother agreed to look after that part of the business for me. She loves that sort of thing, and I hate it, and she'll do it far better than I should, anyway. I organized the whole thing and saw that everything was in order before I went away, and that was all I undertook to do. You're making an absurd fuss over nothing."

"If it means nothing to you," replied Anson, "it is more than time that you realized your mistake. Has it occurred to you, Elizabeth, that today's ceremony, which you did not propose to attend, means a very great deal to me? Apart from the prominent part I have played in the erection of the memorial, Anna Rita Rymer was my sister—"

"And has it occurred to you, Richard," interrupted Elizabeth impatiently, "that I might be just a little weary of Anna Rita Rymer? Since I came to Dilchester scarcely a day has passed when I haven't had Anna Rita Rymer stuffed down my throat."

"If that is the case, I can only say that it is a very great pity you have not seen fit to model your conduct a little more closely on hers."

"Oh, I know," sighed Elizabeth. "A paragon of all the virtues, wasn't she? I ought to know; I've heard it often enough. Anna Rita Rymer—the pure, noble, devout, self-sacrificing martyr. But I'm not cut out to be a martyr, and I'd hate to be the smug sort of prig which you make out Anna Rita Rymer to have been."

"You have lost your temper, Elizabeth, and don't realize what you're saying."

"I realize perfectly what I'm saying," she replied angrily. "I'm saying what I've longed to say ever since I came to Dilchester and was forced to swallow doses of this woman every day of my life. Everything I do is compared with what you imagine Anna Rita Rymer would have done. Because I drive a car which she wouldn't have driven, you disapprove of my car. If I wear a dress which isn't the frumpy sort of thing she would have worn, then it's flashy and vulgar and not the sort of thing a lady should wear. Anna Rita Rymer never danced the tango or drank cocktails or smoked cigarettes or went to a night-club or used lip-stick, so it isn't right for me to do any of these things."

"You're talking the most outrageous rubbish, Elizabeth—"

"It may be outrageous. Anything would seem outrageous to you if it knocked a hole in the halo of Anna Rita Rymer. But it's not rubbish. It's Anna Rita Rymer this and Anna Rita Rymer that until I'm sick to death of the sound of her name. I don't want to be like her. I don't intend to model myself on her. I've not the slightest desire to turn myself into the dull, soured, self-righteous sort of prig she must have been. Damn Anna Rita Rymer!"

"I'm trying very hard not to lose my temper with you, Elizabeth—"

"Oh, I'm sure you are, Richard. As the brother of Anna Rita Rymer you could hardly do otherwise, could you? She was never known to say a hasty word to anyone. She was always overflowing with loving-kindness—even to the bandits who murdered her. You can't wonder they killed her, can you? From all I've heard of her she'd drive any self-respecting bandit to murder."

Anson sprang to his feet.

"Elizabeth! I absolutely forbid you to continue this—this—"

"Blasphemy? Oh, very well; I apologize. I shouldn't have said that. But you know now how I feel about it all. And now I've started I may as well finish. Frankly, Richard, it's no use trying to make me feel about Anna Rita Rymer as you pretend to feel. Yes, I mean 'pretend'. All this veneration and adoration and holding her up as an example of what a woman should be—it isn't genuine. It can't be. You know perfectly well that if I'd been like Anna Rita Rymer you'd never have wanted to marry me. No man would. I dare say a figure like a bolster may help a woman to heaven, but I'd much prefer to have my own figure and risk it."

"Elizabeth!"

But she was too angry to heed him now.

"And all this memorial business," she went on. "You don't really expect me not to see through that, do you? It's terribly transparent—just about as crude a bit of publicity as I've heard of, much more suitable for Hollywood than Dilchester. Richard Anson is the brother of Anna Rita Rymer, and Richard Anson is terribly anxious to be Sir Richard Anson, M.P., so he pays for a memorial to her, unveils it himself, and hopes that his prospective constituents will take the halo off Anna Rita Rymer's head and put it on his. You never know, Richard; it may turn into a coronet some day."

Anson's hands were clenched; his face was white with anger.

"You've said quite enough, Elizabeth," he said. "And now listen to me. You have behaved like a child and I propose to treat you like a child."

She gave a shrug. She was quite calm again now. "Haven't you always done that?"

"I have always done my best," he answered, rather pompously, "to treat you as a husband should treat his wife. I have shown you every consideration, given way to you, and often against my better judgment, on almost every occasion, hoping that in return you would show some sort of appreciation of your duties as my wife. But you have done nothing of the sort."

"When have I ever failed you, Richard?"

"You failed me this morning, when you neglected to take your proper place in charge of the collection for the Anna Rita Rymer cot fund. You failed me yesterday, when you did not return home as I told you to. If I had not reminded you, you would have failed me again this afternoon. It is quite obvious that when you go away to your bungalow you cannot be trusted to return home when you should return, and in that case you leave me no choice in the matter. In future you will not go to the island at all."

She glanced at him quickly, and for some moments her eyes met his steadily. Then she slowly shook her head.

"No, Richard; you can't do that."

"I'm telling you, Elizabeth, that I forbid you to go to the island again, and I don't propose to enter into an argument about it."

Again she shook her head.

"No," she repeated. "You can do a good many things, but that's one thing you can't do."

"I warn you that if you persist in refusing to obey me it may come to the point where you will have to choose between the island and this house."

Her eyes met his without wavering.

"If it ever comes to that point," she said. "I shall certainly choose the island."

He strode round the desk and grasped her arm roughly. "So that's it, is it?" he exclaimed furiously. "You'd choose the island, would you? I guessed as much. I've suspected it for a long time. You thought I believed you, didn't you? You thought I'd swallowed your story. You thought I was fool enough to believe that any woman would want to go off and shut herself up on a twopenny-ha'penny little island with a batch of sea-gulls. But I didn't believe you. I knew all the time that you were lying."

She wrenched her arm free.

"Richard—how dare you!"

"Lying!" he repeated. "Lying all the time and thinking I didn't know it, laughing at me behind my back for being fool enough not to know why you went to your island."

"You know very well why I went, Richard."

"I know what you told me: you went to play your piano and be alone. Alone! Do you think any man in his senses would believe that?"

She stepped back from him and stood staring at him, wide-eyed, bewildered, horrified.

"Richard—what are you suggesting?"

"You don't know? Very well, then I'll tell you. I'm suggesting that you didn't go to be alone, that you went there to meet your lover, to play the faithless wife, the wanton—"

"Richard—for God's sake stop I You must be mad! You don't know what you're saying!"

Again he gripped her arm.

"Who is he?" he demanded. "You're going to tell me who he is—"

Again she wrenched her arm free and stepped back from him, leaning against the edge of the desk. She was very pale and her hands were trembling, but her voice was calm and steady.

"You've said an abominable thing, Richard—made a foul accusation which you must know in your heart isn't true."

Anson had shed all semblance of self-control. His lips were working, his hands shaking.

"I know it is true!" he exclaimed. "I've known all along that you were lying and deceiving me. I had only to see your face when you came back to know that you'd been to meet your lover. You can smile when you've been to your island, can't you? But your smiles are too precious to be wasted on your husband. It isn't worth while to be pleasant and agreeable when you're merely in your own home. No! You keep all that for when you're playing the prostitute— "

"Richard"—she stopped abruptly and made a little gesture of helplessness. "We shall do no good like this," she said. "You don't realize what you're saying—you can't—and we shall only make matters worse. Sooner or later we shall have a good deal to say to each other, but it's useless trying to say it now."

Her quiet tone calmed him a little.

"I don't wonder that you prefer not to talk about it. But don't imagine that I don't mean what I say—I mean every word of it. You're going to your island no more—that's final. You can sell the place—burn it down. I was a fool ever to have consented to your having it. I should have known that no woman would want to go off to an island for days on end to be alone."

Elizabeth's hands were moving restlessly, sliding along the edge of the desk against which she was leaning.

"If you really believe all you've been saying, Richard," 'he said, "you have your remedy."

He had crossed to the french windows and was standing with his back towards her, staring out into the garden; but as she spoke he suddenly turned and faced her again. "You mean divorce you?"

"That's the usual remedy, isn't it?"

"So it may be, but you're not going to escape your responsibilities quite as easily as that, Elizabeth. You made a bargain—a very good one from your point of view—and I intend to see that you keep it. I've kept my part of it,

and if you're counting on my letting you off your part you're mistaken. Divorce would suit you splendidly, wouldn't it?"

"Until this moment I had never even thought of it, but I'm beginning to think it might be the best thing for both of us."

"I don't doubt it. And of course your lover agrees with you. It might suit your book, but it wouldn't suit mine. You've everything to gain by it, and I've everything to lose."

She could not refrain from smiling slightly.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said. "People don't pay so much attention to that sort of thing nowadays. It might postpone your knighthood for a little while, but I don't suppose it would deprive you of your title for long."

She had hit the mark, and he turned away from her again.

"And there's no reason," she went on, "why it should keep you out of Parliament. There isn't likely to be an election just yet, and people soon forget. And even if they don't forget, they'll only think you were unlucky enough to have married an abandoned woman. I shall get the blame—not you. No one would believe anything against Richard Anson, the brother of Anna Rita Rymer. Divorce, after all, might be the simplest way out of the situation."

"You're not getting your divorce," he said curtly. "I've no intention of exhibiting myself to the world as the deluded husband. You're going to give up your island and stay at home and do your duty as my wife. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but that is my decision, and I've no more to say about it."

Elizabeth sighed.

"Very well, Richard. You've said more than enough already, and I've said everything there's any need for me to say."

"I notice you haven't denied it."

She shook-her head.

"No. You could hardly expect me to do that. But there's nothing more to be said, Richard, until you choose to apologize."

She stood upright, and, as she did so, her right hand touched a paper on the desk and it fluttered to the floor. She stooped to pick it up, saw that it was a telegraph form, and got a glimpse of a single word which made her catch her breath sharply. She straightened herself, hesitated a moment and sent a quick glance at her husband as he stood gazing out of the window. Then, almost against her will, her gaze was drawn back to the telegram. It was addressed to her husband, and ran as follows:

MANY THANKS. ARRIVING DILCHESTER FOUR-THIRTY TODAY HACKETT.

For some moments she stood staring at the slip of paper, seeing the words through a blurring haze. Hackett I But it couldn't be. Richard had never heard of John. She was imagining things. John wasn't the only Hackett in the world, and Dilchester Lodge was the last place to which he would be likely to come. But something told her that she was not imagining things, and as she stood there with the telegram in her hand, she was conscious of the thudding of her heart and a strange, strained feeling in her throat.

"Richard."

"Well?"

"This—this telegram."

He glanced at her over his shoulder.

"This telegram," she repeated.

Turning, he crossed to where she was standing, took the telegram from her hand and glanced at it.

"Another wifely duty for you to perform, Elizabeth," he said. "But perhaps, as John Hackett is quite an attractive young man, you may condescend to display a little interest and play the hostess with some show of cheerfulness."

"John Hackett?"

He nodded.

"He's the nephew of Mark Doran, and as I have very special reasons for wishing to please Doran, I hope you will make an effort to be as charming as possible to his nephew while he is a guest in my house."

"John Hackett is coming here?"

"Just for a brief visit. He's been abroad, I gather, and is off again shortly, and Doran rang me up and asked me if I'd give him a few days in the country before he sails. As you were not here, I couldn't consult you, and in any case, as I've told you, I couldn't afford to risk offending Doran. I've arranged for the car to meet him at four-thirty."

She gazed at him for some moments in silence, incapable of uttering a word. Then:

"But he can't come, Richard. I can't have him here. It's—it's most inconvenient."

"For once in your life, Elizabeth, I must ask you to study my convenience in preference to your own."

"But, Richard, I'd much rather not—"

He made a gesture of impatience.

"I don't know what's the matter with you this morning, Elizabeth. You seem determined to make yourself as difficult as you possibly can. What conceivable objection is there to young Hackett coming down here for a few days? You're being childish and ridiculous. Just because I've asked you to make an effort to give him a good time, you start raising objections."

"Oh, it's not that, Richard. You know that in the ordinary way I love having people down here, but just at the moment... Oh, I don't know. There's been so much to do lately and I think I'm tired. I don't feel like entertaining. Couldn't we put him off? He won't be leaving London until after two, and you could send him a wire—"

"I shall do nothing of the sort. I have made the arrangement and I don't propose to alter it because you happen to feel less inclined than usual to carry out my wishes." He turned from her and strode to the door. "Hackett will be here at tea-time, and I shall expect you to make yourself agreeable to him." He went from the room, closing the door noisily behind him.

Elizabeth remained where she was, gazing at the telegram in her hand, trying to steady the blurred words that lurched and swayed before her eyes, so that she could read them again. John—coming here—now!

CHAPTER V

DILCHESTER had gone on holiday. It is true it was Wednesday afternoon, which had been early-closing day for as far back as the memory of the very oldest inhabitant could carry him; but added to this was the fact that, at the earnest solicitation of Mr. Richard Anson, the elementary schools had all been given a half-holiday; while all local employers of labour had been circularized with the suggestion, couched in the suavest and most persuasive sentences that Celia Paterson had been able to evolve from her employer's rather pompous and unyielding phraseology, that the granting of a free half-hour to all their employees would not only be a gracious gesture but might also constitute an act of merit on the part of the employers. The letter also hinted that the moral uplift resulting to the workmen thus released—always supposing they used the free half-hour for the purpose for which it had been granted—would be such that the intensified efforts put in by the men for the remainder of the afternoon would more than compensate for the brief period during which work would be shut down. It did not occur to Richard Anson or Celia or any of the other people actively concerned that the employees might not, if their opinions were canvassed, quite agree on this point; but as their opinions were not sought, no one was disillusioned.

Richard Anson, as the prime mover in the matter of the unveiling ceremony, had, in characteristic arbitary manner, addressed a letter to the chairman of the local licensing bench, suggesting that all hostelries within a radius of ten miles from the town should be closed down for that morning session. It was a severe rebuff to his pride to receive from the clerk to the bench a note couched in formal language regretting that the circumstances did not warrant the magistrates in thus interfering with the laws of England.

An article in the Dilchester Gazette (with which was associated the Steepleton Magna Courier and theIrvingham Advertiser) had appeared a few days before the ceremony, under the name of Richard Anson, pointing out in florid detail the immense significance of the forthcoming occasion to everybody in and around Dilchester, and exhorting all and sundry—especially the mothers and small children—to array themselves (and the said children) in their Sunday best to attend in Dilchester Square on Wednesday at 3 p.m. to be edified and inspired by the tribute then to be paid to the memory of Dilchester's most famous citizeness, Anna Rita Rymer.

To Elizabeth Anson, as her husband opened the car door, on arrival at the Square, for her to alight, the scene was unreal, farcical, out of all proportion. This Rymer woman was doubtless all that had been said of her—to Elizabeth she had never been more than a name, held up before her eyes ever since she had come to Dilchester with an insistence and frequency which to her

acutely sensitive nature soon became nauseating, typifying everything that was pious, heroic, and even saintly—but Elizabeth could not rid herself of the feeling that the business of unveiling this preposterous statue, and the pomp and circumstance with which the whole affair had been surrounded, had assumed proportions entirely incongruous to the proper perspective of the facts.

The doors of the public bar of the "Red Lion" had been thrown open, the day being warm, and the loungers sitting at the deal benches, pewter mugs of beer in front of them, were surveying the scenes in the Square with a cynical disregard, punctuated by an occasional spit, which struck Elizabeth Anson, as she descended from the car within a short distance of the hostelry, as constituting a very much saner attitude to the whole affair.

The conversation, could she have paused and heard it, might have suited her mood.

"Who is this 'ere female they're making all the fuss about?"

"Oh, I don't know—Anna somebody or other."

"What was she then, Bill—film star or something?"

"Grrh! No, she warn't no film star. 'S'matter o' fac', she was agin 'em."

"Well, what did she do, any'ow?"

"Gawd knows, Jim. I know she used to knock aroun' with old Ted Moore.... 'Ere, Ted, what did this Anna What's-name do?"

Ted Moore spat eloquently, grunted something unintelligible, rose, and slouched from the bar into the bright sunlight.

He made his erratic way to the small crowd surrounding the statue in the middle of the Square.

Despite the intensive publicity efforts of Richard Anson, the attendants at the ceremony consisted mainly of Good Women and Earnest Men. There was, of course, the inevitable sprinkling of small boys, quite a number of pious little girls in clean print frocks, and a few town loafers. Standing slightly apart from the main body was the figure of the stalwart town policeman, who surveyed the scene with something of a proprietorial interest.

The statue, from which the veiling-cloth had just been removed, was that of a rather plain girl with a sacrificial expression. Richard Anson, standing at the foot of the plinth, was reading aloud the inscription in his clear, precise, almost precious tone:

"Anna Rita Rymer. Born in this town of Dilchester on November 19, 1895. Suffered martyrdom at Chin-Soo in China on March 30,1920. She gave her

beautiful life to the cause of humanity, and by her sacrifice inspired unborn generations to noble endeavour. Erected by the citizens of Dilchester in proud and loving memory."

The crowd, a little uncertain of the correct procedure, broke into low murmurs of sound, to be hushed after a brief interval by the voice of Richard Anson, now oracular and declamatory.

"Here is the name which will uplift the youth of our country for countless generations. Today, on the eleventh anniversary of her great sacrifice, we again do homage to the name and memory of Anna Rita Rymer."

Subdued hand-clapping was started at this point by one of the groups surrounding the speaker.

"Thoughts of self were conspicuously absent from this saintly woman's mind. She came from a family already bearing an honoured name, a name held in the deepest respect throughout the countryside—"

"Hear, hear!" put in Anson's chief clerk. He remembered his employer's relationship with the woman he was eulogizing.

"And it is scarcely a matter for wonder that that selflessness, crystallized, as it were, in the personality of Anna Rita Rymer, was such as to inspire her to deeds of true heroism. She thought not of self, but of the glorious work which lay before her. It is unnecessary for me to remind you, citizens of Dilchester, of what that work consisted. She lived in an atmosphere of piety from her early youth, and in her 'teens had already decided to devote her talents, her energies, her means—her whole life—to the service of Christian missions. Her services declined by the recognized missionary societies, she gave her own slender fortune to the foundation of the Dilchester Chin-Soo Mission...."

The voice droned on. Elizabeth Anson found her attention wandering. Her gaze strayed around and amongst the crowd surrounding the statue. She felt intuitively the utter meaninglessness of the tribute which her husband was paying to the memory of his dead half-sister. As her glance moved from one face to another, she found herself speculating in an uninterested way as to the degree of reality that the proceedings had for each of these pathetically pious people.

Her eyes caught sight of Ted Moore, by now slightly within the crowd. His clothes were shabby; his unshaven cheeks were flushed with drink, his cap askew, his whole bearing anything but attuned to the solemnity of the occasion. But, surrounded as he was by faces of such standardized vacuity as these occasions produce, his own expression stood out in bold relief and arrested Elizabeth Anson's attention.

Here, at any rate, she thought, was a man whose mental processes were to a certain extent alive: the sneer on his lips, the scathing contempt in his eyes, as he listened to the pompous periods of the speaker, struck, deep down in her heart, a note sympathetic to some chord in her own being.

Roast beef—or, perhaps more appropriately, rice pudding day after day for weeks becomes boring, intolerable, at length nauseating. And ever since arrangements had been discussed for this unveiling ceremony she had been regaled with talk about Anna Rita Rymer, had had the dead missionary held up before her eyes as a model of what a Christian woman should be, upon which one could not do better than to base one's own life. She had never quite been able to understand what there was so terribly meritable in going to a foreign country and patronizingly trying to wean the inhabitants from the practice of their own religion, intrinsically as potent for good as that in which one had by the accident of birth been nurtured. It had always seemed to Elizabeth a piece of gross impertinence on the part of these self-satisfied evangelists to force their own dogmas upon the adherents of perhaps an equally laudable and efficient code of moral teaching. It was so short-sighted, she thought.... A smile momentarily lightened her face as the idea came into her mind: why were all the missionaries she had ever met myopic?

She wrested her attentions back to the declamatory sonorousness of her husband.

"The example of this Christian woman should serve among us for countless generations as a model of what can be achieved by selfless devotion to a single aim. In the mind of Anna Rita Rymer was one resolve—one object—one abiding craving—to take the Gospel of Christianity to the poor, benighted, heathen Chinese. One may ask 'Why the Chinese?' My reply to that is, I think, unanswerable: 'Why not?' The inhabitants of that vast country, thousands of miles away, were blessed—supremely blessed—with the presence in their midst of a woman who deserves, and must surely be accorded, a place amongst the noble martyrs of history—Anna Rita Rymer."

Elizabeth, joining politely in the storm of enthusiastic clapping, caught sight again of Ted Moore. His hands were thrust defiantly into his trousers pockets, and on his face was more than ever a look of sullen scorn. She got the impression that his tolerance of the speaker's words was being badly strained.

"She was a beautiful woman"—Richard Anson's hand gestured towards the marble statue, rather unwisely, Elizabeth thought—"with a beautiful soul. This town of Dilchester should be for ever proud that she was born and lived within our very midst.

"What must it have meant for her—leaving behind this lovely city and her friends, whose name is legion? As she wrote in one of her beautiful poems:

"Heart and soul, body and mind,

I have left this world behind.

Here on China's darkest strand,

A stranger in a foreign land."

Vigorous applause seemed called for here, and at Richard Anson paused, looking round expectantly, is was forthcoming. "China's darkest strand" didn't mean a thing to his audience, but it rhymed with "foreign land", a fact which largely accounted for the powerful appeal of the verse.

Elizabeth, watching and more or less listening, shuddered. She marvelled that Richard could find it possible to repeat such banality; but she had realized for some time that, where Anna Rita Rymer was concerned, all sense of values seemed to have left her husband. He saw in the present ceremony not so much the glorification of his missionary half-sister as an opportunity for bringing himself into the limelight which he invariably sought.

Deliberately she wrenched her attention from Richard's ponderous utterances and sent her mind wandering carelessly along whichever paths it chose to follow.

John Hackett would be at Dilchester Court that afternoon. She told herself she did not know whether she was glad or sorry that he was coming. Deep down in her heart, however, she realized, she was craving to see him again. She had never seen him since her marriage to Richard. John had gone abroad shortly after she had written to him of her intention to marry Anson; he had not replied to her letter, and she had no knowledge of his reactions to the news. She knew John had loved her; she knew, now more than ever, that she had loved him. If only Fate had not played her that cursed swindling trick! If only she had not been forced by circumstances into contracting this marriage I If she had only deferred it for a few months, and the knowledge of her inheritance could have reached her before committing herself to this loveless marriage with Richard Anson....

She pulled herself up with a jerk. The tones of her husband's voice were becoming slower, more impressive, more ponderous. He was evidently reaching a point at which he expected an outburst of applause.

"Let us be for ever thankful, my friends, for the example of this devoted, saintly woman. Love of her fellow man was the abiding impulse of her whole life. In her beautiful soul she had heard echoed the words of our Lord: 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.' Let us for ever

revere her in that she immolated herself so completely upon the altar of duty as to cast aside scornfully the material blessings with which she was surrounded and, disdaining comfort, despising luxury, denying all thoughts of self, gave her wonderful talents to the glory of God and the advancement of the Chinese."

Ted Moore could repress his feelings no longer.

"Bunk!" he shouted angrily. "Sheer bunk!"

"We should be proud," repeated Richard Anson, in a somewhat louder tone, "that this saintly woman—"

"Bunk, I'm telling you—!"

The speaker paused, wondering for a moment which was the least undignified way of coping with such a situation. Then:

"That man had better go away," he said. "He is not himself. It is deplorable that an occasion of such importance and solemnity should be marred by the interruption—I might say almost the blasphemous interruption—of a dipsomaniac—"

Moore removed his hands from his trousers pockets and pushed his way further into the crowd.

"Look here, Anson," he exclaimed, "if you mean I'm tight, you're a liar!"

Two good women, unsettled physically by Ted Moore's elbows and spiritually by his sacrilege, endeavoured to expostulate.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ted Moore!" vociferated one.

"Yes, you great, drunken loafer? Fancy coming here blackening the memory of a wonderful woman!" Ted Moore glared.

"Wonderful woman my foot!" he scoffed. "It's a lie! She—"

The proprietorial policeman thought it was time to take a hand. Edging his way through the crowd, he reached Moore's side and grabbed his arm.

"Come on, Ted. Push off. You're disturbing the peace. Now if you don't go like the sensible man you are I'll have to lock you up."

"All right, Burrows," agreed Moore. "I'll go. But I've never heard so much utter bunk in all my life...." The tactful policeman encouraged rather than pushed him through the small throng, which readily parted to allow them to pass, and the proceedings continued.

Anson, who had prepared several more telling phrases of his oration, had been disturbed but the interruption, and finished his speech with a few remarks both commonplace and halting. The applause of the crowd as he concluded reached Ted Moore when he was some distance from the

gathering and inspired him to turn round and make rudely contemptuous gesture in its direction.

CHAPTER VI

ELIZABETH returned home after the unveiling ceremony in the car with her husband. She had hoped to avoid the necessity of a tête-à-tête with him, and the risk of his reopening the discussion of the morning; but as Mrs. Stellman had refused to be deprived of her chance of a gossip with the local celebrities and had told Richard not to keep the car waiting for her, the tête-à-tête had been unavoidable.

Anson, however, as the big car purred along towards Dilchester Court, gave no sign that he was aware of the tension between himself and his wife of which Elizabeth was so acutely conscious. The deference which everyone had shown to him that afternoon, and the consciousness that his speech had made an excellent impression, had salved his wounded pride and acted like balm on his injured feelings. He lolled back in the corner of the car, smoking his cigar, with a faint smile of satisfaction on his face.

"A very impressive ceremony, I think, Elizabeth," he said.

"Very," agreed Elizabeth.

She didn't feel inclined in the least to discuss the ceremony. At the moment she could think of nothing but the fact that in a few minutes she would be meeting John again. All through the afternoon, during the speeches and the singing, that thought had been in her mind, persistent as the hum-note of a bell. Why was he coming? Didn't he realize that it was Richard Anson whom she had married? But he must have realized. There were not two Richard Anson's and Richard had stage-managed his wedding remarkably well. There had been publicity enough to satisfy a film star. Then why was John coming? To tell her all the hard, undeniable truths which he was entitled to tell her, and to say all the cruel, bitter things which she had given him no chance to say two years ago? No, she couldn't imagine John doing that.

"As regards the statue itself," her husband was saying, "I consider it a very inspiring piece of work and most appropriate for the purpose for which it is intended. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes—most appropriate."

Anson took a long draw at his cigar.

"And what did you think of my speech, Elizabeth?" She wanted so badly to make some biting reply—to hurt his pride, wound his vanity, shatter his irritating self-satisfaction, but she bit back the scathing words that sprang to her lips. Somehow, with thoughts of John filling her mind, she couldn't bring herself to do that sort of thing. In a few moments she would be seeing

John again, and, in the face of that tremendous fact, Richard and his self-satisfaction seemed utterly unimportant.

"I thought you spoke splendidly."

"I thought so myself," replied her husband. "One always feels, of course, that one could have done much better if one had been able to spend a little time in preparation, but I don't think I did so badly. I noticed several reporters were there...."

Elizabeth was only vaguely conscious of what he was saying. How could she possibly meet John again? How would she find the courage to look him in the eyes, after the pain she had made him suffer? Such clear, steady eyes, John's. And those little creases round them—footprints of laughter, which she used to try to smooth away with the tip of her finger, calling them "worry lines", when they were nothing of the sort.

How would John look at her? What would he say to her? Panic suddenly swept over her, and the idea came to her that she must at all costs avoid meeting him, slip away in her car to the island and stay there until John had left. But she instantly dismissed it. After this morning's scene, the island was out of the question. Besides, how could she stay there alone on the island, knowing all the time that she might be with John, hearing his voice, touching his hand, feasting her eyes on him?

"A most regrettable incident," said Anson. "Nothing short of an outrage, which should never have been allowed to occur. The fellow is well known to the police and should not have been allowed to go near the spot. I shall certainly speak to the Chief Constable about it."

"Yes, Richard, I should if I were you."

"The fellow was merely being vindictive," continued Anson. "I know all about him, and so do the police. Moore is his name—Edward Moore. A thorough-going blackguard. He seems to be nursing a grievance against me. He was at one time employed in the Bank and I was forced to dismiss him for—er—dishonesty. Experience has shown me, Elizabeth, that people are most resentful against misfortune when they have done everything to deserve it. However, the man was soon silenced and I don't think the incident was noticed by more than a few people.",

"What was it he said, Richard? I thought It sounded like 'bunk'!"

"That was, I believe, the word he used. But one could hardly expect a fellow like Moore to see more than 'bunk', as he was pleased to term it, in this afternoon's ceremony. He's the sort of man who has no reverence for anything or anybody, no sense of decency, no finer feelings. He is probably a Communist."

It occurred to Elizabeth that if Edward Moore were a Communist, then she was one too. The word "bunk" summed up so exactly her own feelings about the afternoon's ceremony. Even if Anna Rita Rymer had been everything she was believed to have been, she could by no stretch of imagination have deserved the nauseating flood of flattery that had been poured on her memory by the various speakers. And so much of it had not rung true.

Try as she would, she could not bring herself to believe that the crowd of local celebrities assembled round the plinth of Anna Rita Rymer's statue had been there out of a real desire to pay homage to the noble self-sacrifice of the distinctly plain, unwomanly-looking woman which the statue represented Anna Rita Rymer to have been. She did not want to be ungenerous, but her husband's motives were so pitifully transparent that she could not help wondering whether the motives of the other men and women who had graced the platform with their presence were not of the same quality. Her thoughts returned to John.

Whatever might be his motive in coming to Dilchester Court, she wished he had not done so; not just at this moment, anyway. Never since her marriage had she felt the need of John as she felt it now. Never had she realized so fully of what life had defrauded her, or regretted her marriage so bitterly, and John's presence in the house would only rub salt in the smarting wound. She would feel safer, more sure of herself, more able to face the situation and see it through, if John were not there to emphasize what might have been.

When they reached home she hurried up to her bed-room. John, if he had arrived, would probably be in the library, and she had a moment of panic in case her husband should invite her to go in with him and be introduced to Mr. Hackett. She was half way up the stairs before the butler relieved Anson of his hat, and had reached the landing before Anson spoke.

"Come down as soon as you're ready, please, Elizabeth," he said.

With a nod she hurried into her room and shut the door. She was not ready to meet John yet. When she went into the library and came face to face with him, with Richard standing by watching her, she must be very calm and composed. Richard must not guess, must not get a hint of what that meeting meant to her. That brief, happy chapter of her life was not for Richard's eyes, and the least sign of confusion, the least indication that the meeting with John Hackett meant more than a meeting with any other man, would probably result, with Richard in his present mood, in his insisting on reading every word that the chapter contained.

And what did this meeting mean to her? What could it possibly mean? She did not know what she expected from it or what she did not expect.

She took off her hat, seated herself at her dressing-table and lighted a cigarette. And as she studied her reflection in the mirror, she dismissed from her mind the whys and wherefores, and began, woman-like, to wonder if John would see much change in her. From that she went on to wonder what changes she would see in John, what marks he would bear of all she had made him suffer. She wondered whether she would be the more glad to see the marks of her handiwork or to see that he was still unscarred. She wrinkled her forehead over that problem and finally abandoned it in favour of powder-puff and lipstick.

Glancing at her watch, she found that she had already spent a quarter of an hour in her bedroom, pressed out her cigarette in the ash-tray and went from the room. Half way down the stairs she paused, and stood with her hand on the banisters, listening. She heard her husband's voice, deep and impressive as ever, coming from the library, the next moment another voice, which made her catch her breath and sent her hand fluttering to her throat. So for a few moments she stood there, and then, very calm and composed, she went down the stairs, across the hall and into the library.

Just inside the door she paused and glanced at Anson lolling back in his chair behind his desk; then, forcing a smile, she looked towards the tall figure with the broad shoulders and bronzed face that stood by the mantelpiece. The first thing she noticed was that John's hair was no longer an unruly mop, as she had always remembered it, and the thought came to her: Oh, why has he smarmed his hair down?

"Come in, my dear," said Anson genially. "This is Mr. John Hackett, Doran's nephew. This, Hackett, is my wife."

John smiled and made her a formal little bow.

"How do you do, Mrs. Anson?" he said. "It's tremendously kind of you to have me down here at such short notice."

She wanted to give him her hand, but somehow could not bring herself to do it. She wanted to say something to him, but before she could think of anything appropriate, Anson was talking again.

"We're only too pleased to have you, Hackett," he was saying. "Mark Doran is a man whom I admire immensely, and any friend of his is more than welcome. Dilchester isn't exactly an exciting place, but I dare say you'll find plenty to do. We've a tennis-court, and although I haven't much time for that sort of thing myself, my wife is enthusiastic about the game and something of an expert."

"Not much of an expert, I'm afraid," said Elizabeth, and noted that the little creases were still there around his eyes. "But I'll do my best to give you a game, Mr. Hackett, if you promise not to expect too much from me."

Her eyes sought his, but there was nothing to be read in them—no secret message such as she had half hoped to see there, and his smile, as he answered her, was a formal one.

"I can safely promise you that, Mrs. Anson," he said. "I'm not much of a hand myself. I'm merely one of those who try to play the game, and if I have to take a beating from you it won't be the first time I've been bested by a woman."

As her husband started talking again, she began to study John systematically, wondering if he had meant her to read into that last remark of his any meaning other than the obvious one; whether, after all, he had come here to say bitter things to her.

She was grateful to him, at any rate, for having given no sign that they had met before. There was no need for Richard to know that, though there would, she supposed, be no actual harm in his knowing. It might even have been better to tell him frankly that she and John were old friends, because it was going to be very difficult to keep up this pose throughout his visit.

But it was too late to tell him now. It had been too late even when she came into the library. If Richard was to be told at all, he should have been told when she picked up the telegram that morning. But somehow she had felt that at that moment she could not bear to speak to him of John, and now, if he were told, he would remember that incident of the telegram and demand an explanation of her silence. And after all why, since John evidently did not wish it, should Richard be told? By what he had said to her this morning he had forfeited all right to her confidence.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sudden entry of Mrs. Stellman, with her tray still suspended from her neck and her collecting-tin dangling from her wrist. Elizabeth got up quickly from her chair and intercepted her as she crossed the room.

"This is Mr. Hackett, Mother," she began, trying to catch her mother's eye.

But Mrs. Stellman, if she saw the look of appeal, did not understand it. She paused, stared at Elizabeth with a bewildered expression on her face, and then, with a "So ridiculous, Elizabeth!" thrust her way past her and held out her hand to John.

"So it's you, John, is it?" she said affably. "Such a surprise! I thought you had forgotten us."

John shot a quick glance at Elizabeth and took her mother's hand.

"How do you do, Mrs. Stellman?"

"I'm not sure that I oughtn't to be very cross with you," Mrs. Stellman blundered on, "neglecting us like you've done. Why, this is the first time

we've seen you since Elizabeth's marriage, and you didn't even come to her wedding. Nor send her a present."

"I've been abroad, Mrs. Stellman."

"Elizabeth was terribly disappointed that you weren't at the wedding—weren't you, dear? I'm sure, if I were she—after being such good friends—I should never forgive you for not coming to my wedding."

John smiled.

"I should have liked to be there, Mrs. Stellman, but I'm sure Elizabeth understood that it was quite impossible."

Elizabeth was watching her husband's face. He was frowning, glancing from her to John, puzzled and obviously annoyed. He rose from his chair and came towards her.

"So you and Mr. Hackett have met before, Elizabeth? I was not aware of that."

"It was ages ago, Mr. Anson," said John. "At least, it seems ages ago. It was before I went up to Oxford. My people lived near here and we met occasionally."

"Then there was hardly any need for me to introduce you as if you were strangers."

"To all intents and purposes, Mr. Anson, we are strangers. I haven't seen Elizabeth for years—not since she became Mrs. Anson."

"Strangers!" exclaimed Mrs. Stellman. "What rubbish I Why, they were inseparable, Richard, and I'm sure I got quite tired of the sight of John, the way he hung around the house asking for Elizabeth. I remember thinking at one time that it was going to be a really serious love affair, but it never got further than a little flirtation." She shook her finger at John, smiling at him. "And after all that, John, you didn't even take the trouble of come to her wedding. I shall have more to say about that to you later."

She paused, glancing around with a puzzled expression. Elizabeth was nervously twisting the corner of her handkerchief; John's face wore a faint smile of amusement; while Anson was frowning and drumming the edge of his desk with his fingers.

"Have I said something I shouldn't have said?" asked Mrs. Stellman innocently. "It's tiresome of me—though I'm sure John doesn't mind my having a joke with him, do you, John? But come along to the drawing-room. Tea is waiting, and you always get so disagreeable, Richard, if the teacakes are cold."

She bustled from the room, and Elizabeth followed her, conscious that Anson's eyes were watching her closely as she went.

CHAPTER VII

TEA was taken in an atmosphere of strain which Mrs. Stellman's constant chatter not only did not relieve but actually increased. Anson's genial mood had forsaken him, and he made only monosyllabic replies when anyone addressed him, sitting detached and frowning thoughtfully. Every now and then Elizabeth realized that he was scrutinizing her keenly, and although she tried to chat naturally with John and her mother, and made several valiant attempts to draw her husband into conversation, the only result was that she felt more awkward and ill at ease, and eventually abandoned her efforts and lapsed into silence.

John puzzled her. He was aloof, formal, utterly unlike the free-and-easy, impetuous young man that she remembered. The little footprints of laughter were still there, but there was no laughter in his eyes, and the more she studied the grim look about his lips, the more sure she felt that he had come to say hard, bitter things to her. Well, he had a right to say them, and she wouldn't run away from the ordeal of hearing them. If John wanted to hurt her, she would not try to stop him. But she would be glad to get the ordeal over as quickly as possible. She would give John his chance after tea—take him down into the rose garden and let him say what he had to say.

She would not try to defend herself. What possible defence was there? She would not even expect him to forgive her. In John's eyes she had razed his dreams to the ground and left his heaven in ruins, and no man would forgive a woman for doing that.

But after tea Elizabeth had no chance to take John to the rose garden. Anson suggested tennis, and, since a suggestion from her husband was in the nature of a royal command, she decided that the interview with John must be postponed, and went up to her room to change.

As she came downstairs again, Anson, already changed into his white flannels, appeared at the door of his study.

"Just a moment, please, Elizabeth."

She went into the room, and he closed the door behind her.

"Without wishing to be inquisitive, Elizabeth," he said, "I feel that I am entitled to some sort of explanation."

She glanced at him, wrinkling her forehead.

"About what, Richard? Haven't we had enough of explanations for to- day?"

"If you conduct yourself in such a way that explanations are necessary," replied Anson, "you have no right to complain if I ask for them. You must surely realize that this afternoon, when you came in here and met Hackett, your behaviour was most unusual."

"Unusual? In what way?"

"Please don't pretend not to understand. You came in here and allowed me to introduce Hackett to you as though you were perfect strangers to each other. And Hackett, for some reason or other, abetted you in your deception."

"Deception is hardly the right word, Richard, is it? It's true that I knew John years ago—before I was married—but we were hardly more than boy and girl, and when we met again to-day we met almost as strangers." She smiled. "What did you expect me to do, Richard? Fling my arms round his neck and kiss him?"

"No, Elizabeth. I should have been surprised if you had done that—in my presence. I have never suspected you of crudeness."

"Then what exactly is your complaint? That I didn't tell you as soon as I came into the room that John and I were old friends? I didn't get much chance to tell you, did I? Besides, you had been talking to John for a quarter of an hour before I came in, and if I'd thought about it at all, which I didn't, I should have taken it for granted that John had already told you. Of course, I had an idea, since you said nothing about it, that John couldn't have told you, but before I had a chance of saying anything, in came mother and let the cat out of the bag."

"'Let the cat out of the bag' is quite an apt description, Elizabeth. Apparently all those many years ago—so many years ago that you had forgotten all about it—you and Hackett were—shall we say?—- attached to each other. 'Flirtation' was the word your mother used, I believe, and she should be in a position to know."

"Oh, mother!" laughed Elizabeth. "You should know mother by this time, Richard. She always did imagine that every young man in the district was in love with her daughter. And suppose I did have a mild flirtation with John, what about it?"

"That," said Anson, "depends on its mildness, or otherwise. From the way your mother spoke, I got the impression that it was not quite so mild as you would have me believe."

"Well, perhaps not," she admitted. "As a matter of fact, I believe we really were rather in love. But it was just a boy-and-girl affair, which we both forgot long enough ago. You didn't surely call me in here to dig into my awful past?"

"I called you in here, Elizabeth, to tell you first that I very much resent the deception you practised on me this afternoon. If you knew Hackett, you should have said so and not have allowed me to make a fool of myself by

introducing him to you. I also wish to tell you that if there was anything between you and Hackett—"

She raised her hand.

"Oh, Richard, please! I've told you the truth, and if you're going to make a fuss over a boy-and-girl love affair—"

"I also wish to tell you," repeated Anson, ignoring her interruption, "that if there was anything between you and Hackett when I asked you to marry me, the honourable course would have been to tell me so. When a man chooses a wife he has a right to know all about her, and is entitled to feel resentful if he discovers later that he has been hoodwinked."

"You're being ridiculous Richard. I don't know what's happened to you. You seem to suspect—"

"I do suspect!" exclaimed Anson. "I have every reason to suspect, and if I've come to the conclusion that you're not to be trusted, you have only yourself to blame. As I told you this morning—"

She made a quick gesture.

"I'd rather forget this morning, Richard."

"I don't doubt it, but if you are wise, you will remember every single word I said to you and behave accordingly. You may be quite sure that if you have managed to deceive me in the past you will not succeed in doing so in the future. I shall know, as I know that you're deceiving me now about Hackett. If there was nothing between you and Hackett, why act as you acted this morning when you saw the telegram from him on my desk? Do you imagine I didn't notice? One look at your face was enough. You didn't want him to come hire, did you? Of course not. It might not be so easy to throw dust in my eyes if Hackett were here in the house. No, you would rather keep him away from here and sneak off to meet him on your island—"

"Richard, I refuse to listen! I refuse to stay here and yet you insult me! If you really believe what you're pretending to believe about John and me, why did you let him come here? Why don't you go now and order him out of the house?"

She was facing him with furious eyes. He turned away from her, picked up his tennis racquet and began to take if from the press.

"You know very well I can't do that. Doran asked me to have him here, and I can't afford to offend Doran. A great deal depends on my keeping Doran's goodwill. At the present moment I am conducting certain financial negotiations with him, and if they fall through the consequences might be very serious."

"So serious, Richard, that rather than run the risk of having to face them you prefer to run the risk of your wife being unfaithful to you? That's what you mean, isn't it? That, at any rate, is what you're suggesting, and if you don't know that it's a foul suggestion—if you don't realize that the accusations you've been making are abominable, indecent, obscene suggestions— "

She stopped abruptly as she caught the sound of footsteps, and glanced round to see Dr. Ewell, clad in flannels and carrying a tennis racquet, standing at the open french window.

"Hullo, Anson!" he said. "So the truant has returned, has she? Well, I've just come along to see if she feels like making me run about a bit." He patted the belt round his ample waist. "Some of this has got to go. If you ever think of starting slimming, Anson, you can save the price of tablets and play tennis with your wife instead. She's a Tartar. Makes me blow like a grampus."

Elizabeth smiled across at him.

"We're just going to play, Dr. Ewell," she said. "Mr. Hackett, an old friend of mine, is staying with us, and you'll make the fourth. But I thought you were spending the day at golf?"

The doctor smiled.

"Where I'm concerned, Mrs. Anson, the way to the eighteenth green is paved with good intentions. I got no further than the club-house bar."

They went out to the tennis-court and found John already there, carefully adjusting the height of the net. Elizabeth introduced him to the doctor, who eyed him keenly and seemed to approve of him.

"You take a lot of exercise, Hackett, by the look of you," he said. "You'd better play on my side and do the running about. I prefer to stand on the base-line and deal with the lobs."

"Base-line play won't reduce your waist-line, Doctor," laughed Elizabeth. "Come along, John: you and I will play the others."

But it was not to be.

"Hardly a suitable arrangement, I think, Elizabeth," said Anson. "Hackett looks as if he might be dangerous, and with your reputation—as a player—I think it would be wiser to keep you apart. Hackett and I will play you and the doctor."

Elizabeth made no reply. She turned away, took off her long white coat, tossed it on to the garden seat and moved towards the end of the court.

Tennis with Richard Anson entailed the observance of certain rules apart from those laid down by the Lawn Tennis Association—at any rate, if the

other players were to extract any enjoyment from the game. Elizabeth had discovered them by bitter experience. The first and most important rule was that the side on which Anson was playing must always win. He was not much of a player, and Elizabeth, who was far above the average, had found it difficult at first to avoid breaking this particular rule, and in the excitement of the game would would send over a sizzling drive which left her husband standing and gave her the set, without realizing what she was doing. She found it at first very hard to let her husband win without making it too blatantly obvious that she was doing so, and thus breaking the second rule—that Anson must never be allowed to guess that his victory was due to any lack of effort on the part of his opponent. She had developed, by practice, a special technique a the art of unsuspected self-defeat, and her husband was comfortably secure in his conviction that his game was steadily improving.

Another rule which she had discovered was that when Richard had won the game, she must always be a little peevish about it, because Richard could not extract the full sweetness from his victory unless he could feel that his opponent was finding a bitterness in defeat. She only played with him when the royal command was issued.

Today, although Anson played with even less distinction than usual, savagely banging every ball that went to him and putting most of them out of court or in the net, it was not very difficult to contrive that he and John should win, since John played a good game and the doctor's base-line tactics, to which he stolidly adhered, were a severe handicap. Anson and his partner won comfortably, and as Elizabeth put on her coat she was relieved to see that his victory had put her husband in a rather better temper.

"Come in and have a drink, Hackett," he said, "and then I'll show you my garden. What about you, Ewell? If a whisky-and-soda won't hurt your waist-line you'd better come along."

But the doctor had plumped himself down on a seat and was mopping his brow with a handkerchief.

"You can send me one out, Anson," he said. "I couldn't walk as far as the house even for a whisky-and-soda."

With a nod, Anson turned and went with John across the lawn. At that moment, along the gravel path came an extraordinary figure, red-faced, with rumpled hair, lurching and swaying and advancing in a series of short, staggering steps. Anson recognized Ted Moore, and his forehead wrinkled into a frown.

Behind Ted Moore, hurrying along the path, with an expression of consternation on his face, obviously torn between his dignity and his duty of

breaking into a run and overtaking Moore, came Graves, the butler. As he saw the look on his master's face, he decided in favour of his duty, ran forward and grabbed the swaying figure by the arm.

"Just a moment, Hackett," said Anson, and strode forward. "What's the meaning of this, Graves?"

The butler was apologetic.

"Very sorry, sir," he said, "but he slipped past me and was out into the garden before I could stop him."

"Notta tome," said Ted Moore thickly; "tha's wha' he shaid—Mr. Anshon's notta tome. But I knew better. Of course, if it'sh inconven'ent to see me now, Mr. Anshon, you just shay sho and I'll come back when you've changed outa your pyjamas." He stared at Anson's white flannel trousers, with an inane smile on his face. "Pyjamas, with perm'nent turn-upsh," he muttered. Anson made a gesture of impatience.

"If you can't do your duty better than this. Graves, I must find someone who can. The fellow's drunk."

"Drunk? 'Course I'm drunk," agreed Ted Moore. "I'm alwaysh drunk. But that's not my fault. That's your fault, Anshon. And if it isn't your fault, it's the fault of Anna Ri'a Rymer."

"It couldn't be helped, sir," said Graves in desperation. I told him you were out and refused to admit him, but be pushed his way past me—"

"Take him away at once. Graves, and if he gives any trouble hand him over to the police."

"P'lice? Did you say p'lice, Mr. Anshon? Then allow me to tell you tha' if anybody ought to be handed over to the police, it's not me—it's you. I'm a jolly good fellow and you're a dirty blackguard. That'sh it—dirty blackguard. That'sh what I've come to tell you, and if you don' like being called a dir'y blackguard, Mr. Anshon, that doesn't alter the fac' that you are a dirty blackguard."

"Take the man away. Graves."

Graves did his best, but Ted Moore planted his feet wide apart and refused to be moved by a mere tugging at his arm.

"Jus' a minute, my good man," he said; "I'm talking to Mr. Anshon. I'm explaining to him that he's a dir'y blackguard." He faced Anson again. "'Here on China's darkest shtrand, a stranger in a foreign land'," he recited. "That'sh bunk, Anshon. I said it was bunk, and I shtill maintain that it's bunk, and if you weren't a dir'y blackguard, you'd know it's bunk. Jus' the short of bunk Anna Ri'a Rymer would write. And then you go an' put a

statue up to her. 'Here on China's darkest sthrand'—well, if that isn't bunk I'd like to know wha' is. The Sthrand isn't in China. You know as well as I do the Shtrand's in er—the—Shtrand. Number eleven bus from Li'erpool Shtreet." He paused and stared at Anson, evidently struggling to pull himself together. "I wan' to talk to you, Anshon," he said. "Private and confidential."

"At the present moment, Moore, you're not fit to talk to anyone.... Take him away, Graves."

Graves tried again, but Ted Moore was still immovable. With a smile John stepped forward.

"I'd better lend a hand, Mr. Anson, hadn't I?" He gripped Ted Moore's other arm, and together he and Graves led him off along the path.

Ted Moore glanced back over his shoulder.

"Asshult and battery, that's what it is," he called. "I'm not drunk. At least, I may be—it's a ma'er of opinion. But I'll be back, Anshon. I'll be back at my earliesht conven'ence, because you're a dir'y blackguard and I'm going to tell you so."

As the trio disappeared from view, Anson turned away and strode into the house.

Dr. Ewell, seated beside Elizabeth on the garden seat, had watched the scene with a glint of amusement in his eve.

"Ted Moore's getting worse," he remarked. "I hear he made a nuisance of himself at the ceremony this afternoon. He'll be landing himself in trouble if he's not careful, poor devil!"

Elizabeth glanced at him in surprise.

"I shouldn't have thought Moore deserved much pity, Doctor."

"You wouldn't, eh? Well, if you'd lived as long as I have, you might think differently. I've known Ted Moore a good many years. There are few people in Dilchester I haven't known a good many years. But he was a decent enough young fellow at one time. And then he started drinking. Some trouble over a woman, I believe. Bless my soul, the mess your sex can make of things!"

Elizabeth smiled.

"Woman didn't make the world, Dr. Ewell."

"And that's the worst mess of all, eh? Now don't start arguing with me; I'm too hot, and you never can keep to the point for five seconds." He turned and looked at her. "What's worrying you, Mrs. Anson?"

"Worrying me?"

He nodded.

"As your medical adviser, I'm entitled to ask without being snubbed." He laid his hand on her arm. "And as your friend, Mrs. Anson, I'm prepared to risk the snub. What's worrying you?"

"Why should you think that any thing's worrying me?" He gave her a long searching look.

"Have you ever heard of irisoscopy?"

She shook her head.

"What is it—a new disease?"

"It's nothing of the sort. Bless me! The ignorance of you women I It's a scientific method of diagnosis by examining the iris of the eye."

She gave a puzzled frown.

"What has that to do with my being worried?" And then, as his meaning dawned on her: "Oh, I see."

"So it's no good telling me you're not worried," said Dr. Ewell, "because your eyes tell me that you are, and I'd sooner trust your eyes than your tongue. Do you feel you can tell me what's wrong?"

She shook her head.

"Not even if I tell you that I've a very shrewd suspicion without being told?"

Again she shook her head.

"Not even then, Dr. Ewell."

"Huh!" grunted the doctor. "Well, I don't say you're wrong, but I do say that all sorts of messes in this world are due to misplaced loyalty. If it doesn't cause the mess, it's often misplaced loyalty that stops us getting out of it. That's especially true of women. The way they'll stick to a man who's only fit for the scrap-heap!"

"Can loyalty be misplaced, Dr. Ewell?"

"God bless my soul, of course it can! And women are the worst offenders. They'll stick to some man through thick and thin, although they know he's a worthless blackguard, until—well, some of them manage to keep it up all their lives—sink their own personality, crush their feelings, keep the devil that's in them under control. Others don't. There comes a time when the devil gets the better of them, and then there's a bust-up and I'm not sure they're not better off for it. A devil's better out than in, any time, even if to get rid of him you have to rush down a steep place into the sea, like the Gadarene swine. That's what happened to that Burns woman, and she's in deep enough waters now, poor soul! But I'm still not sure that she's not better off now she's killed her husband with a hatchet than if she'd gone on

living, as no doubt she did live, giving misplaced loyalty to a blackguard of a man. Bless my soul! Where's that whisky-and-soda?"

There was no sign of the drink, and for some time they both sat in silence, until at last Dr. Ewell, staring fixedly at one of the tennis posts, blurted out a question: "Who's that young Hackett fellow?"

Elizabeth glanced at him quickly.

"John I Oh, he's a very old friend. I knew him years ago—before I was married."

"Ah!"

"Why?"

"I was just wondering, that's all."

"Wondering what?"

"Trust a woman to be inquisitive. If you must know, I was wondering whether young Hackett is the answer to a question I've been asking myself."

For a few moments Elizabeth was silent. Then she laid a hand on the doctor's arm.

"Do you know, Dr. Ewell, you're really rather a dear," she said. "I'll fetch you your whisky-and-soda."

She got up hastily from the seat and left him staring after her, with a slight frown, as she went towards the house.

CHAPTER VIII

THAT evening Elizabeth was half angry and half amused at her husband's obvious efforts to play the genial host to his guest. Dinner was almost a pleasant meal, and later, in the drawing-room, after Elizabeth had played the piano while they had their coffee, diplomatically confining herself to music that had a good tune in it, he suggested bridge.

It was only on very rare occasions that Anson visited the drawing-room after dinner, his usual excuse being that he had work to do and must go to his study, and it struck Elizabeth that the financial negotiations with Mark Doran must be of tremendous importance for her husband to have thought it necessary to go to such lengths of hospitality. On the rare occasions when he did play bridge, he played moderately well; but much the same sort of rules applied to bridge as to tennis, if the game was to be enjoyable. Every hand was followed by a lengthy post-mortem, in the course of which Anson would point out just where she had gone wrong, and go into elaborate details as to what would have happened if she had done right. But the knowledge that many of the mistakes which he pointed out had been deliberate mistakes, in accordance with the unwritten rules of the game, enabled Elizabeth to accept his criticism with becoming humility.

Dr. Ewell, having neglected his practice all day, as he made a rule of doing on one day every week, had returned for dinner, and again Elizabeth and he were opposed to Anson and John, Mrs. Stellman preferring an easy chair and her needlework.

Anson and John won, according to plan, and when he had added up the score, and had announced the flattering margin by which he had proved victorious, Anson got up from the table.

"And now, Hackett," he said, "I must ask you to excuse me. I am a busy man and I've work awaiting me in my study."

He went to the door.

"See that I'm not disturbed, please, Elizabeth. Good night, Mrs. Stellman. Good night, Hackett. Good night, Ewell. Don't hurry away. If you're wanted urgently, I suppose they know where to find you?"

"As a matter of fact they don't, Anson. I make a rule that any patient who dies on a Wednesday can either die in peace or call in my partner."

Anson went out.

"Come along, Mrs. Stellman," invited the doctor. "You and I will take on the young people."

Mrs. Stellman shook her head.

"I don't play bridge, Doctor—not since Richard started teaching me. So much to learn, and whatever card I play, it always turns out to be the wrong one. I never feel quite safe until I've only got one card left, and even then Richard sometimes tells me that I've no business to have it, and must have revoked."

The doctor rose from the table and seated himself in an arm-chair. Mrs. Stellman smiled across at Elizabeth.

"Why don't you take John and show him the garden, Elizabeth?" she said. "I'm sure it's much more pleasant out there than in this stuffy room, and you must have a great deal to say to each other after all this long time. Make him tell you why he didn't come to your wedding." She shook her finger at Hackett. "I haven't forgiven you for that, John, and if Elizabeth doesn't have it out with you, I shall."

Elizabeth glanced at John.

"Shall we?"

He nodded, and they went together through the french windows. They crossed the lawn in silence, came to a small summer-house at the further end of it and as if by common consent went into it and sat down. It was Elizabeth who broke the silence.

"Well, John?"

The moon was up, turning the garden into a fairy-land of black and silver, and she could dimly see his face as he turned towards her.

"Well—Beth?"

It was his own special name for her, a name which no one else had ever used; and as she heard it, and the tone in which it was uttered, she knew instantly that he had not come to say bitter things to her, that John, in spite of his grim lips and his formal manner, was the same John that she had known before.

"Why have you come, John?"

She saw him smile faintly.

"I've been asking myself that question, Beth, ever since I arrived, and I'm not quite sure what's the real answer to it."

"You knew, didn't you?"

"That you were Mrs. Richard Anson? Oh yes, I knew that."

"And still you came?"

He nodded.

"Do you mind?"

"It depends why you've come, John. I'm a dreadful coward, and if you've come to hurt me—"

"No, Beth, not that," he said hastily. "I don't want to hurt you."

"It would only be human if you did."

"I know. I'm human enough. Just at first, when I heard the news—I was in America at the time—I wanted to hurt you. I wanted to hurt everybody. You know the feeling. Because I had been hurt, I wanted to take it out of someone else. But that didn't last long, and I certainly didn't accept Anson's invitation with any thought of taking it out of you. I suppose I accepted it because— well, I took it that I shouldn't have been invited if you hadn't wanted me to come, and I didn't want you to think I was sulking. Besides, I had half decided to ask you to let me see you again before I went away."

"You're going away?"

"To China—next month—as a missionary."

"John! You—a missionary?"

"Shall I make a very bad missionary, do you think, Beth?"

She did not answer that. She asked him to tell her all about it, and as he told her she realized, though she did not want to admit it, that he was of the stuff that missionaries are made of. He spoke with all that eager enthusiasm, all that hot glow of idealism which had so attracted her in the past. He was busy again now, building a new wonder world as he had once built one with her, throwing himself heart and soul into the building, leaping carelessly over every difficulty, confident, undaunted, superbly sure of himself. Almost he made her believe that in becoming a missionary he was at last undertaking the work for which he had been created; yet all the time she resisted the conviction, was aware of an unwillingness to agree with him, of a sense of personal injury that he should be going off like this to take up a new life in which she could have no part. He was building a world to which she would not be admitted, in which he had reserved no place for her, and the realization that henceforth she could have no hand in any of his building gave her just a touch of heartache. She told herself that she had no right to feel hurt that she was left out in the cold, because she had forfeited her rights as a citizen of John's world; but none the less she did feel hurt. She told herself that in any case it could not make the least difference to her life if John went to China, yet quite definitely she did not want him to go.

"Somehow, Beth," he said, "I felt I couldn't go without seeing you again. You see—well, you can never be too sure, when you set off on this sort of trip,

that you'll come back again, and I didn't want to go until you and I had got things right between us."

"I'm glad, John. But why a missionary?"

"Oh, I don't know. It sort of got me, Beth. It's something worth doing, really worth doing, and that's just what I was looking for. I wanted something that would need a man's whole life—and more. Besides, my father was always keen that I should take up missionary work. He was out there himself, you know, years ago."

"And your writing, John? All those wonderful books you were going to write to make the welkin ring?"

He shrugged his shoulders

"That went, Beth—when everything else went."

She could not answer that. She had detected just the faintest touch of resentment in his voice, the first since he had started talking to her, and there came to her a sudden overwhelming realization, such as had never come to her before, of the wrong she had done him, of what she had destroyed when she had laid his wonder world in ruins. His books—those wonderful books that he had been going to write. She remembered, with a choking feeling in her throat, how they had sat together and planned it all, how she would type the manuscripts for him and read the proofs and correct the spelling errors which he would always be making, because he never had been able to spell and Oxford would never teach him. She remembered that there was to be a copy of his first book bound in calf specially for her, and he had vowed that no book should ever bear any dedication but the two words "To Beth". All that she had taken from him—and from herself; and though John might forgive her, she knew now that it had been a piece of wanton vandalism which she could never forgive.

She leaned towards him and laid a hand on his arm.

"John, my dear," she said, "I'm not going to try to excuse myself. Some things can't be excused. But I want you to understand. I want you to let me tell you."

"We shan't do any good by talking about it now, Beth. It's over and done with. I didn't come here to rake it all up again."

"But I want to tell you, John. I want to make you see that it wasn't that I didn't love you. I did love you—more than I had ever loved you. That sort of love doesn't suddenly go because a man goes to America for a few months. I couldn't bear to let you think that, John. Will you listen and try to understand?"

She did her best to explain to him, but she realized, as she told him, that the reasons which had seemed so convincing and compelling two years ago sounded pitifully weak and inadequate now that John was sitting beside her, listening to them. She was surprised to discover how unconvincing they seemed, amazed that for no better reasons than these she had felt herself justified in working such havoc. But she stumbled on with her explanation, desperately anxious that he should say something to reassure her that the reasons were not such pitifully contemptible ones as they seemed to be.

"I understand, Beth," he said quietly, when she had finished.

"You don't sound very sure about it, John."

"You can't expect me to agree with you, can you? I should be something more than human if I thought you had done right—I don't; I think you were utterly wrong. I think that you and I together would have found something which would have made up to you a thousand times over for what you would have lost if you had come with me to look for it. But I think that you believed you were doing right and you mustn't think that I bear you any grudge."

She went on to tell him of the legacy that had come to her so soon after her marriage to Anson, of the swindling trick that life had played on her, confessed to him that she had regretted a thousand times what she had done, that she would, if it were possible, gladly undo it all.

"It's a nice old mess, John, isn't it?" she said at last, forcing a little laugh.

"A nice old mess, Beth," he agreed. "Hadn't we better go indoors?"

Half way across the lawn Elizabeth paused.

"You'll stay, John, won't you?"

He smiled at her.

"Do you want me to?"

She nodded.

"I'll try," he promised.

As they were about to step off the lawn, John stopped abruptly and stood peering into the darkness of the shrubbery away on their left.

"What is it, John?"

"I thought I saw someone—over there. He seemed to disappear into the shrubbery."

"It was probably Jakes," she told him. "He's the head gardener. He comes in very late sometimes to see to the furnace of the hot-house."

They went indoors. Mrs. Stellman had already retired and Dr. Ewell had gone home, but there was still a light burning in the library.

At the foot of the stairs they paused and she gave John her hand, smiling up at him.

"Good night, John."

"Good night, Beth."

She turned, ran half way up the stairs and paused again.

"John!"

He glanced up at her.

"Yes, Beth?"

"Just bless you, John!" she whispered, and hurried up to her room.

For some long time she sat at her dressing-table, deep in thought, and it was not until she heard her husband's footsteps on the staircase that she came out of her reverie and got to her feet.

There were two doors to Elizabeth's bedroom, one leading to the landing and the other to her husband's dressing-room. She went quickly across the room and locked them both.

CHAPTER IX

ANSON, when he left the drawing-room, crossed the hall, went into his study and flung himself into an easy chair. He lighted a cigar, leaned back and frowned at the wall opposite as though he had a personal grudge against it.

He had work to do, but he did not feel like doing it. He was far too nervous and irritable to settle down at his desk and wrestle with figures, and had only made the excuse of having urgent work to do because he had felt that he could not sit any longer at the bridge table and preserve an appearance of geniality.

This young Hackett fellow—damn him! Knowing what he did know, or, more accurately, suspecting what he did suspect, it had been all he could do to be polite to the young cub. But he could not afford not to be polite to him. There was Doran to be thought of, Doran must on no account be offended just now, as, if he turned awkward, God only knew what would happen. It was a humiliating position to have to play the host to young Hackett when, if he were to do as he felt like doing, he would give the young bounder a good thrashing and kick him out of the house.

Young Hackett and Elizabeth—he was quite sure he had hit the nail on the head there. He had, of course, no definite proof, but in view of all the facts it did not need any extraordinary powers of inference and deduction to reach the conclusion at which he had arrived.

There had been something between them before her marriage: that was patent. And it hadn't been quite the innocent boy-and-girl affair that Elizabeth had tried to make out. Mrs. Stellman had let the cat out of the bag, and probably even she was not in possession of the full facts. If the affair had stopped there, it would not perhaps be of much importance. A man nowadays had to be broad-minded, or at any rate not too exacting, as regards his wife's past. To have a past was no longer a male prerogative. But the question was, had the affair stopped there?

Everything pointed to the fact that it had not. That incident this morning, when Elizabeth had found the telegram on his desk. She had given herself away then, pretty obviously. It had no doubt come as something of a shock to her to discover that young Hackett was actually to stay in the house, and she was desperately anxious that he should not come. Hackett, no doubt, was ready enough to take the risk, but Elizabeth had thought it far too dangerous to have him here, carrying on an affair with her right under her husband's nose. The young bounder had a nerve to attempt it, and the infuriating part of the whole business was that he, Anson, had been powerless to prevent his coming. And still more infuriating was the thought

that if Hackett chose so to abuse his position as a guest in the house as to carry on his contemptible little intrigue during his stay, he couldn't afford to quarrel with him. But he could keep a sharp eye on the pair of them—give them no chance, and as soon as he'd got all he wanted from Doran, young Hackett could go to the devil.

And that incident with the telegram was not the only thing. Why, when Elizabeth had met Hackett this afternoon, had she pretended not to know him? Even if his imagination were running away with him over the telegram incident, there were plenty of grounds for suspicion here. Young Hackett had backed her up too, and it was obviously a put-up job between them. Thanks to Mrs. Stellman's garrulity, he had discovered that deception and was on his guard.

All this island business, too. He had been a fool ever to permit it. He should have realized that a woman who went off, sometimes for a week at a time, to a lonely island fifty miles away from her home wasn't likely to be playing straight with her husband. The whole thing was quite transparent. Everything pointed to the probability that she and young Hackett had been meeting there, thinking themselves quite safe, congratulating themselves on their cleverness in tricking him, laughing at him behind his back. If it wasn't young Hackett, it was someone else.

Elizabeth was never the same when she came back from her island—always more cheerful, less inclined to be irritable and difficult, more ready to be tractable and carry out his wishes. She could afford to be tractable for a few weeks, knowing as she did that she would soon be running off again for another secret meeting.

If he had not been so utterly sure of Elizabeth, so confident that no woman would take the risk of deceiving him, he would have realized long ago that the look which was always in her eyes after a visit to Whitbourne was not there as a result of a few days spent in the company of seagulls.

She had been indignant enough when he had accused her, but her indignation had cut no ice with him. Any woman in similar circumstances would play the injured innocent. And she hadn't denied it—had pretended that to deny such an abominable charge was beneath her dignity. But that was a good old hackneyed device, worn out long ago through constant use by thousands of faithless wives, and it had made not the least impression on him.

Moreover, she had been very ready to remind him that, if he believed his accusations to be true, he had his obvious remedy. She had jumped at the idea of a divorce. Well, she wasn't going to get her divorce. A nice fool he'd look, standing in the witness-box, admitting that his wife had been too

clever for him; that young Hackett had pushed him out of the way, and stepped into his shoes; that he hadn't been able to keep his wife in order and look after his own property.

All Dilchester would be laughing at him, enjoying the joke. There were plenty of people in Dilchester who would be glad to see Richard Anson forced to eat humble pie, but he didn't propose to give them that satisfaction.

There were other things to be considered, too. It was all very well for Elizabeth to sneer at his desire to be included in the next Honours list, but if ever a man had deserved to be included, he had, and she'd sing a different tune when she could call herself Lady Anson.

No, there must certainly be no divorce. But he would have to walk warily. Elizabeth had money of her own, and if he pressed her too hard there was nothing to prevent her from walking out of the house and leaving him, and he realized that if he were forced to play the part of a husband deserted by his wife, it would be an even more humiliating one than that of a husband who, having discovered his wife's unfaithfulness, took the only means of ridding himself of a worthless woman. Besides, even if he had the proof, it would be impossible to petition for divorce without dragging in young Hackett's name, and that would finish things as far as Doran was concerned.

At the thought of Doran his frown deepened. Doran had been guarded when he had put the proposition to him—a damn' sight too guarded. Fifty thousand pounds, he had said, was a great deal of money, and he had obviously been puzzled to understand why such a sum should suddenly become necessary, and, although he had been very polite, he had obviously accepted with the utmost reserve the explanations which Anson had given him. He had asked far too many questions and wanted far too specific details for Anson to feel any real confidence that the money would be forthcoming. And today, when he had spoken to him on the telephone, Doran had evaded the subject. He must have time to think it over. Good God! How much more time did the man want? The matter was urgent, and the maddening part of it was that, the more he insisted on its urgency, the more suspicious Doran was likely to become.

And if Doran refused, what then?

Anson prided himself that he had never been afraid to face facts, and he faced them now. Looked at squarely, the facts were ominous enough to give even Richard Anson an uneasy qualm. Anson's Bank, which had always been regarded, and rightly so, as a solid pillar of stability, was undoubtedly in imminent danger of collapse. So far, only he and several of his co-directors were aware of the state of affairs; but that sort of thing had a way

of getting round, and if once a hint got abroad as to how dangerously unstable was the actual condition of that pillar of stability, nothing could avert a panic which would bring it crashing to the ground. Anything approaching a run on the Bank at the present moment must mean the closing of its doors; and if Anson's Bank were compelled to stop payment, it would not be only the pillar of stability that would crash to the ground. Inevitably, at the same time, would crash the reputation of Richard Anson, and somewhere among the debris would be buried his prospects of inclusion in the Honours list and of becoming Dilchester's M.P.

And, when things were in that condition, Doran was humming and hawing and asking damn' fool questions, while matters got worse and worse. What the devil did it matter now if the Bank had made investments from which an element of risk was not quite absent? Anson's Bank wasn't the first to invest its money in a way which might not perhaps be strictly above criticism, and it was just bad luck that in the case of Anson's Bank everything had gone wrong.

But it was too much to expect that the Bank's shareholders and depositors would realize that. Directors who, if things had gone well, would have been congratulated by the shareholders for the dividends earned for them, would be turned on by the same shareholders and accused of inefficiency and mismanagement and possibly even of fraud, if things went wrong.

Things must not go wrong. Doran must let him have the money. Fifty thousand pounds, though it might not put the foundations of the pillar in a thoroughly sound state again, would at any rate postpone the collapse for a time, and it was chiefly time that was needed. Given time, things might right themselves. Shares which had so unaccountably fallen might rise as unaccountably. Given time, a hundred things might happen to stave off the disaster.

And fifty thousand pounds was not an enormous sum to a man like Doran. Besides, friendship should count for something. It might perhaps have been wiser to confide in Doran, to make a clean breast of the whole business and rely on friendship to see him through. Even now that might be the better course. A letter to him perhaps—a personal letter—giving just a hint that the situation was serious, and putting the suggested loan in the light of a favour to be done to help a friend over a difficulty. It could do no harm, anyway.

He rose from his chair, crossed to his desk and sat down. As he did so, he glanced towards the french windows, frowning slightly; and then, unscrewing the cap of his fountain pen, he took a sheet of paper and began to write.

He had not written many words when he jerked his head up sharply and again frowned at the french windows. This time there was no mistake: there came three sharp taps on the glass. Anson got to his feet, crossed the room, pulled the curtains aside and opened the windows.

As he did so, Ted Moore stepped into the room and stood blinking at him in the light. His face was still flushed and his eyes were bloodshot, but he seemed to be more or less sober, and was quite steady on his legs as he stood facing Anson with a truculent look on his face.

"What's the meaning of this, Moore?" demanded Anson sharply.

Ted Moore wagged a hand at him.

"Don't try getting on your high horse, Mr. Anson," he said, "because it isn't going to help you. I told you I'd be coming back, didn't I? Well, here I am. You and I have got to have a talk."

"If you wish to see me, Moore, the right place to apply is at my front door and not at my study window."

"I tried the front door this afternoon, and the butler refused even to take a message to you."

"In view of your disgusting condition, that was hardly to be wondered at. I'm amazed that, after your disgraceful behaviour at the unveiling ceremony this afternoon, you had the effrontery to show your face at my house. To force your way out into the garden, in your drunken condition, and exhibit yourself to my guests—you're lucky not to find yourself in the hands of the police. Perhaps you don't remember that this afternoon you were most abusive?"

"I remember," answered Moore. "I called you a dirty blackguard. Well, they say that as the wine goes in the truth comes out, and you never were a man to like the truth, Mr. Anson."

"I don't propose to argue with you, and I certainly don't propose to grant an interview to anyone who slinks round through my garden and knocks at my study window. If you've anything to say to me, you can either write it or ask for an appointment in the proper way. And now get out of my house."

Moore shook his head.

"You refuse to go, do you? Very well, then you leave me no choice. I shall telephone for the police and have you removed." He turned abruptly, crossed to his desk and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Just a minute, Mr. Anson," said Moore. "Giving me in charge isn't going to save you. I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to ring the police if I were you. You'll be seeing all you want of the police in a few weeks' time, unless

I'm mistaken. When Anson's Bank stops payment you'll be the one the police will be looking for."

Anson shot him a quick glance and his hand slowly replaced the receiver.

"What exactly do you mean by that, Moore?"

"You know very well what I mean. The bank is on its last legs. Never mind how I know. I've one or two very good friends there, and that sort of thing can't be kept to the directors."

"You're talking the most arrant nonsense. If you have heard rumours of anything amiss with Anson's Bank, I can assure you that there is not one scintilla of truth in them. The Bank is in a sounder position now than it has been at any time in its history."

Moore grinned.

"If that's so, Mr. Anson, why don't you ring the police and give me in charge, as you threatened to do P I'll tell you why not—because you know damn' well that giving me in charge isn't going to stop my tongue. And if I care to tell a few people in Dilchester what I know about the Bank, your number's up. But you needn't be anxious, Mr. Anson: the Bank's no concern of mine. I took my bit of money out last week, and if the rest of your depositors lose theirs, that's their funeral. I didn't come here to talk about the Bank. I just mentioned that subject to show you that you'd be acting rather recklessly if you telephoned the police and refused to listen to me. The Bank can go to hell as far as I'm concerned. And if it does, you'll go with it."

Anson seated himself at his desk.

"You're still drunk, Moore," he said, "and I don't wish to be hard on a man who isn't responsible for what he's saying. You'd better go home and get to bed. But remember this: if you dare to repeat outside this house a single word of the pernicious nonsense you've just been talking, I shall know how to deal with you. A Bank, no matter how strong its financial position, can't afford to have public confidence in it undermined by libellous statements of the kind you've been making, and if such rumour gets about I shall know where it comes from. Now go home. If you've anything to say to me, come and see me again when you're sober."

"I'm sober enough," replied Moore, "and I've been waiting for a long time to have a talk with you. I've given you more than enough rope already, and you're getting no more. That's your own fault, Anson. If you'd behaved like a gentleman I dare say I'd have thought you weren't worth worrying about. But you didn't behave like a gentleman—"

"And since when, Moore, have you been an authority on gentlemanly behaviour?"

"That's neither here not there, though I fancy I've a better right to call myself a gentleman than you have. You may not get drunk and force your way into someone's garden and tell him to his face he's a dirty blackguard, but you've done worse things than that. I'm just about tired of seeing you pose as a gentleman, just about sick of seeing everyone in Dilchester treat you like a tin god and stick you up on a pedestal. I'm going to knock you off your pedestal."

"If you're not drunk, Moore," said Anson, "I can only assume that you've suddenly taken leave of your senses. For some reason or other you seem to have a grudge against me—"

"That's it. You've said it, Anson. I have got a grudge against you. I've got a damn' long score to settle with you. It goes back a good many years, but the Statute of Limitations doesn't apply to this sort of debt. And I'm going to see that you pay it."

The banker's hand went towards the bell-push.

"Don't bother to ring that bell; I've not finished. As I told you just now, if you'd behaved like a gentleman I might have left you alone, but this afternoon just about put the lid on things. You and your high-falutin' claptrap I And because I didn't agree with you, and had had a few whiskies, and made a remark which you didn't like, you had to go and call me—what was it?—a blasphemous dipsomaniac, with half Dilchester standing round to hear it. If that's your idea of being a gentleman, it's not mine, and there and then I made up my mind I'd do what I've been thinking of doing for a good many years. You with your hoity-toity ways and your patronizing manner and your tin-god reputation! I'm going to blow the whole damned outfit sky-high. The Anson racket is finished, see? You and your sister, you're a good pair. But she's luckier than you, Anson. She's got a beautiful marble statue in Dilchester Square, and that's more than you're ever likely to get."

"I've listened to quite enough of this rigmarole," put in Anson. "It is all very incoherent—"

"You wait a minute. You'll soon see what I'm driving at. This grudge we were talking about—it goes back a good few years. Back to the time when you kicked me out of the Bank and refused to give me a reference."

"You can hardly blame me for that. When an official of a bank is found guilty of dishonesty—"

"Dishonesty—hell!" exclaimed Moore angrily. "That's what you said. That's the excuse you gave, and that's what everyone in Dilchester thought was your reason for sacking me. The great Richard Anson had said so, and who was going to listen to me when I tried to kill the lie?"

"I can assure you, Moore, that I was actuated by no personal feelings against you—"

"That's a lie! D'you think I don't know your real reason for kicking me out? Perhaps you've forgotten Miss Marlow? Ah, I see you haven't. She was a very pretty girl—Grace Marlow, wasn't she, Anson? Naturally, if she hadn't been quite exceptionally pretty, she'd never have got the job as your confidential secretary. It must have hurt your pride when you discovered that you were being cut out with Grace Marlow by a tuppeny-ha'penny cashier named Edward Moore."

"Of all the monstrous suggestions—" began the banker; but Moore cut him short.

"That's why you sacked me, Anson—because you couldn't bear the thought of a mere cashier standing in you way and preventing your getting something which you'd marked down for yourself, because you hoped that with me out of the way, with no job and no reference, you might find Grace Marlow more accommodating, more likely to be dazzled with all you could offer her, more ready to strike a bargain with you. Poor kid! She got the worst of the bargain all right. D'you know where she is now, Anson? I saw her a year ago—walking the pavements in Piccadilly. That's one thing you've got to pay for. What would Dilchester say if it knew of that, eh?"

Anson, as was his habit in moments of stress, was drumming the desk with his fingers.

"I advise you to remember, my friend," he said, "that there is such a thing as the law of libel."

Moore brushed the remark aside.

"The law of libel cuts no ice with me—nor any other law. I'm under no illusions about myself. I've sunk pretty low, and whatever happens to me I can't sink much lower. That's another thing you've got to pay for, and if your sainted sister were still here I'd see she paid for it too. I'm what I am because of you and Anna Rita Rymer, the saint who has a marble statue erected to her, and the man who paid to have it erected. Saint? Bunk! I said it this afternoon and I'm saying it again now. When you talk of Anna Rita Rymer as a saint, you're talking bunk."

"Listen to me, Moore. I've no particular objection to your abusing me if it gives you any satisfaction, but you will please understand that if you try to blacken the name of my sister—"

"You can't blacken what's already black, and if I've no objection to blackening her name, then you've no right to say anything about it. You may be her brother, but I was her husband."

Anson sprang to his feet, clenching his fist as if about to strike the other. But instantly he regained control of himself.

"I advise you very strongly, Moore," he said, "to leave my house before I am tempted to lose my temper with you. I've stood a good deal already, but when you begin making scandalous, scurrilous statements about Anna Rita Rymer—I refuse to listen to any more."

"It's not pleasant hearing, is it, Anson? As I told you just now, you never were a man to like the truth, and this happens to be the truth. Anna Rita Rymer was my wife. Things didn't turn out as badly for me as you hoped they would when you kicked me out of the Bank. I went to pieces for a bit, and then I pulled myself together, left Dilchester and managed to get a job. It would make a long story if I told you everything, and it's enough for you to know that I met Anna Rita Rymer and fell in love with her. We got married—secretly, because she knew that her high and mighty brother would raise hell if he discovered that his sister had thrown herself away on a good-for-nothing fellow who had been kicked out of the Bank for dishonesty. We were happy for a time. It was a bit of a struggle, but both of us would rather have starved than ask you for help. Then came the child—a boy...."

Anson was watching him closely. If the man was lying, inventing all this story, he was doing it remarkably well. He had an uneasy feeling that the story was no invention, that there were at any rate some grains of truth in it, which Moore had used to concoct this incredible tale. He was torn between the desire to throw the man out of the house and the feeling that he must at all costs get at the truth.

He glanced up to find Moore watching him with a smile of amusement.

"Shall I go on?"

"As you've said so much, you may as well finish."

"I intend to. I intend to show you Anna Rita Rymer as she really was. Not as the self-sacrificing, holy woman who was martyred for her faith, but as a cruel, heartless, selfish woman, who was no more worthy of a marble statue than I am. Just a psalm-singing hypocrite, with a thirst for publicity. She was like you there, Anson: she had to be in the limelight. She wouldn't be happy if people didn't think her the eighth wonder of the world. She wasn't content to be just a good wife and a decent woman: she wanted to be up on a pedestal, and as long as she got there she didn't care a damn how. I'll tell you the sort of woman she was, Anson. She got bitten by the missionary bug. I'm saying nothing against missionaries, but converting the heathen didn't mean a thing to Anna. All she wanted was limelight and still more limelight, and this missionary business gave her just what she wanted. I didn't matter; the kid didn't matter; nothing mattered, so long as Anna

could appear as the courageous, self-sacrificing woman, who went to China to face all the dangers of a missionary's life, and got her picture in the papers."

Moore paused and began pacing the room. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes, lighted one and continued his pacing.

"Is that all, Moore?"

Moore halted and stared at him.

"She went," he said. "I'd saved a few pounds by that time, and she took the lot and went. She left us flat, without a penny, without caring a damn what happened to us. She never even sent me a line, though I wrote to her when the boy was ill. She was too busy giving interviews to think about us. The kid died, and after that there didn't seem to be anything left worth living for. I went on the whisky again—lost my job—sank lower and lower, until I became what I am now—what you and Anna Rita Rymer made me. That's the sort of woman you put up a statue to. There's your saint and your martyr. Martyr I She wasn't even that: she was just a damn' nuisance. She was told to keep out of the way when the Chinese were fighting, but she would insist on walking right into it. Naturally. Trust Anna to be where the limelight was!" He planted himself in front of the banker. "That's the truth, Anson! I can't make Anna pay for what she did to me, but I can make you pay for the dirty way you treated me, and by God, I'm going to do it!"

Anson turned away from him and sat at his desk again.

"I'm not the kind of man who is easily intimidated, Moore, but since you seem inclined to threaten me, suppose you speak plainly. How exactly do you intend to force me to pay for this imaginary injury which I have done you?"

"I'll tell you. I'm up against things. Nobody will give me a job—I don't blame them for that—and I must live."

"You must forgive me, Moore, if I say that I fail to see the necessity."

Moore made a gesture of impatience.

"That sort of talk won't help you, Anson. I've got you, and I'm not going to let you go. You're going to pay in hard cash—enough hard cash to keep me in comfort for the rest of my days."

"So it's blackmail, is it?"

"You may call it what you like: you'll pay just the same. Because, if you don't, I'll see that there's not a soul in Dilchester who doesn't hear the truth about Anna Rita Rymer. I'll tell them what I've just told you—and a great deal more. That'll be nice for you, Anson, won't it? You, Anna's brother, who

put up a statue to her and took half an hour this afternoon to tell Dilchester what a pure, good, kind-hearted, saintly woman she was—how will you like it when the whole of Dilchester's laughing at you, sniggering at you for having made such a fool of yourself? I know you, Anson. You're the last man in the world to be able to stand up to ridicule, and that's why, when you've done blustering and bullying and threatening, you'll pay up all right. I've thought all this out pretty carefully, and I shouldn't have come if I hadn't been sure of you. You'd better get your cheque-book out."

The banker smiled contemptuously.

"Have you really persuaded yourself, Moore, that the people of Dilchester are going to believe this incredible story of yours?"

"They'll believe it all right."

"It doesn't seem likely to you that they would probably rather accept my word than that of a drunken good-for-nothing fellow whom I dismissed from the Bank for dishonesty? I can tell you just what will happen if you tell your preposterous tale: people will say that it's just another case of a man with a bee in his bonnet. The modern way of putting it would be to say that you have a persecution complex. And there's always the law of libel, if I thought it worth my while to take advantage of it."

"You won't take advantage of it. I don't propose to libel you. If anyone's libelled, it'll be Anna Rita Rymer, and every statement I make about her I can prove up to the hilt. You don't think I'd have started this business if I hadn't been sure I could have carried it through, do you? I've got my proofs right enough. You can't get past a marriage certificate and a birth certificate, and I've got both of them. I can prove that Anna Rita Rymer was my wife."

He pulled some papers from his pocket, unfolded them and thrust them in front of Anson's face.

"There you are, Anson, there's my proof. Get past that if you can"— tapping the papers with his finger. "There's the marriage certificate, and there's the child's birth certificate. People will believe what I say if I can prove I was Anna's husband. A man doesn't blacken his own wife's character unless he's good reason for doing so. And if they still don't believe me, I've got documents to prove every word I've said." He pulled another thin bundle of papers from his pocket and flourished them in front of the banker's face. "There they are, Anson—proof of everything I've said, so you may as well pay up and look pleasant."

With a quick, unexpected movement Anson grasped the bundle of papers and wrenched it from Moore's hand. The next instant he sprang to his feet, tore the papers across and across and tossed the pieces in the wast e-paper basket.

"That for your proof, you blackmailing skunk!" he exclaimed furiously "If you imagined you could scare me with your childish threats—"

Something in the look on the other's face made him pause abruptly. Moore was smiling at him, quite undisturbed by the loss of the papers, and apparently amused at the whole incident. He met Anson's gaze for a few moments, and then, still with that smile of amusement, shook his head.

"Not quite such a fool as that, Anson," he said. "The papers you've destroyed were only copies. And now you'd better calm yourself down and start talking business."

The banker stared at him, as though uncertain whether he was speaking the truth or playing another trick on him; then he sank down on to his chair with a shrug of resignation.

"Very well, Moore," he said. "Frankly, I don't believe a word of this ridiculous story, and I don't for one moment suppose your precious proofs are worth the paper they're written on. I haven't the least doubt that if you ventured to spread abroad your libellous story I could very soon put a stop to it. But I realize that you might cause me a certain amount of inconvenience at a time when, for certain reasons, I am anxious not to be mixed up in any such unsavoury affair; and without in any way admitting my liability or committing myself to any action, I should be interested to hear what you consider would be fair compensation for the injury you consider yourself to have suffered."

Moore laughed.

"If you mean, how much do I want to keep my mouth shut, Anson—well, since you're disposed to be reasonable, I won't be unreasonable. If I'd still been in the Bank I'd have been earning about five hundred a year by now. But there's Grace Marlow, too; you've got to pay for what you did to her; and as you're so proud of being the brother of Anna Rita Rymer, I'm sure you'll want to pay for what she did to me. As an honourable gentleman, you'll naturally be anxious to discharge your own sister's debts."

"You talk too much, Moore. How much?"

"Twenty pounds a week," said Moore. "That's the figure. I shall want a proper deed and the money paid into my account every Saturday. You can have it that way, or you can write me a cheque for twenty thousand and we'll cry quits."

"And how can I be sure, supposing I agree to your terms, that you will refrain from disseminating—"

"You can't be sure. You've got to take my word for it. But you needn't worry: I shan't talk as long as I get my twenty per week regularly. If I should start

talking, you can cut off my allowance, can't you? Well there's my proposal, Anson. What's your answer?" The banker rose to his feet.

"My answer is that you can go to the devil." He strode to the french windows and pushed them open. "Get out!" he ordered. "Get out of my house before I kick you out!"

He stepped threateningly towards Moore, who, with a smile and a shrug, turned away and strolled to the window.

"So that's your answer, is it?" he said. "Well, I'm not worrying. You'll change you mind when you've simmered down a bit and thought it over. I'll give you a couple of days, but no longer. You know my address; drop me a line."

With a nod he went out through the french windows and disappeared in the darkness of the garden.

Anson closed the windows, switched out the light and went upstairs. Outside the door of his wife's room he paused, hesitated a moment, and then knocked and turned the handle. The door was locked, and Elizabeth made no answer to his knock. But the light was still burning, as the thin shining line below the door told him, and he could distinctly hear her moving about in the room.

With a frown he turned away, went along the corridor and entered his dressing-room. Switching on the light, he glanced across at the door that led into his wife's bedroom, moved towards his dressing-table, and then suddenly turned and strode to the communicating door. Very carefully, so that he made no sound, he grasped the handle, and turned it and tried the door. That too was locked.

Slowly he turned the handle back, and suddenly raised his clenched fist as if he were about to send it crashing against the panel. Then, regaining control of himself, he lowered his arm, shrugged his shoulders and turned away from the door.

CHAPTER X

ELIZABETH was in her dressing-gown, standing in front of the mirror, when she heard her husband's footsteps on the stairs. She was smiling, having just come to the conclusion, after a prolonged and careful scrutiny, that the two years that had passed since she had last seen John—or, more significantly, since John had seen her—had left no footprints on her face. But as she heard Anson pause on the landing outside her door, the smile vanished, and she frowned slightly as he knocked and tried the handle.

She turned and stood gazing at the door, wondering if he would repeat his knock and perhaps call to her. But he didn't. She heard him move away and go into his dressing-room, and with a little sigh of relief she slipped off her dressing-gown and got into bed.

She lay back on her pillow and turned her head so that she faced the door of the dressing-room. No sound came from the other side of it, but she saw the handle slowly and noiselessly turned and as slowly and noiselessly turned back to its normal position, and held her breath, picturing the frown of annoyance on her husband's face, and a little scared at the realization of what she had done. It was a gesture which, though she had often longed to, she had never made before, and even now she was rather surprised at her own courage and nervous about the consequences. Richard might rattle the door-handle, call out to her, insist on being admitted....

She waited, expecting every instant to hear her husband's voice, sharp, authoritative, commanding, ordering her to open the door, wondering if she would have the courage to refuse. Her hand went to the light switch above her head, and paused. She should have put out the light before Richard came upstairs, before he had seen it and realized that she was awake now. To put it out now, with Richard standing on the other side of the door, knowing that she was awake and had heard his knock, would be an open declaration of rebellion which she was not sure she had the pluck to make. Then suddenly, with an angry, defiant glance in the direction of the door, she snapped out the light.

For a time she lay very still, listening intently, wondering whether she should answer if her husband knocked and demanded admittance, or pretend that she had fallen asleep. But he did not knock again, and when, a few moments later, she heard him toss the money from his pockets on to the dressing-table, she relaxed and closed her eyes.

She was rather surprised that Richard had taken his rebuff so calmly. She wondered why. He was the sort of man who regarded his wife as his personal property and held strong views as to the rights of property owners, and it would have been much more in keeping with his usual behaviour if he

had hammered on the door until in sheer desperation she had let him in. He would not realize that, after the accusations he had flung at her this morning, it was inevitable that she should lock her door. If he believed that his accusations were true, if her were convinced that she and John were lovers, fastidiousness would not stand up against his pride and his sense of property. There was a cruel streak, too, in Richard, and if he believed her to be in love with John, it would appeal to that cruel streak in him to punish her by insisting on his own rights, to refuse to give her a divorce, to make her pay to the uttermost.

She was glad that she had found the courage to lock her door. Richard, she had no doubt, would have something to say about it in the morning, but the morning must take care of itself. She decided that she would go to sleep.

Sleep, however, did not come readily. She found herself thinking of John. He was the same John that she had always known—the John who called her Beth. It had been almost like old times, sitting there with him in the summer-house, listening to his plans, watching him sketch out the world that he was going to build.

But not quite like old times, or quite the same John. Something had been missing; or rather, there had been something there which had never been there in the old days—a reserve, a feeling of constraint, little hesitations and reticences, which had cropped up every now and then to dam the free flow of their intercourse. They had drifted into side channels, only to realize that there were rapids ahead and that for safety's sake they must turn back.

She tried to picture John as a missionary, and although she knew that he had all the eager enthusiasm, all the burning belief in his work, all the lofty idealism, she somehow could not make a convincing picture of him. She told herself that converting the heathen was not the work for which John was really cut out, and went on to build up a case against his going to China which made it appear that if he did so he would be throwing his life away.

And then, suddenly, trying to be frank with herself, she asked herself whether it might not be that the wish was father to the thought. Was she so sure that John would be wrong in going to China because she did not want him to go, because she shrank from the thought that she might never see him again? She was sufficiently frank with herself to admit that there might be just a touch of that in it.

Yet, after all, if John's heart was in this missionary business, she had no right to try to prevent him. She had thrown away that right two years ago. But was John's heart in it? He had been enthusiastic enough; but John was always enthusiastic, whatever he undertook, and she thought, once or twice, as he had talked to her in the summer-house, that she had detected just the

slightest hint of bitterness in his tone. It was hard to put her finger on anything definite, but more than once he had given her the impression that he was trying to convince himself as much as her that he had found his life's work, that he was not so sure about it as he pretended to be, that it was rather a case of feeling that he must throw himself whole-heartedly into some work rather than into this particular work. It struck her that John was going to be a missionary in China much as other men went to shoot big game.

Before she fell asleep she had convinced herself that John did not want to go to China. And very surely she did not want him to go.

On the other side of the locked door, Richard Anson found sleep just as laggard. He went to bed with a feeling of bitter resentment against the whole world with the exception of himself. He was not accustomed to defeat; from the many fights in which he had been engaged during his business career he had always emerged as the victor; and now that the risk of defeat and disaster loomed on the horizon, he was like a mad dog driven into a corner—savage, dangerous, snarling, and showing his teeth, ready to attack his dearest friend to effect his escape.

Why the devil must all these things happen to him? He had done nothing to deserve them. Other men had taken worse risks than he had taken and got away with it, and it was grossly unjust that he should be singled out to be the one who failed to get away with it. But the fight was not over yet, and he was the last man in the world to lose his head and get into a panic. Doran might turn up trumps. He would not, after all, write to him. If there was no word from him in the morning, he would run up to Town and see him. It was always better to face a man if you wanted something from him. He'd manage Doran all right if he met him—use his personality, impose his will on him. His will and his personality had never failed him yet and he had enormous faith in them.

Ted Moore, for instance, the dirty, blackmailing scoundrel. Moore had crumpled up and slunk off like a whipped cur when he had stood up to him and told him to go to the devil. Ted Moore would not get a penny. He could do his worst. Let him tell his preposterous story. No one would believe him. Most people in Dilchester knew him for what he was—a drink-sodden, worthless waster—and any lies he might tell about Anna Rita Rymer would only arouse indignant derision.

As for his story—well, it might be true; Anna had always been a queer customer, and he had never quite succeeded in getting to the bottom of her. Once or twice, when she was a young woman, before she got bitten by the missionary bug, he had had a bit of trouble with her. That time when she

had tried to go on the stage, for instance, and he had been obliged to put his foot down. Ted Moore was right there: Anna always liked the limelight.

As for the rest, it might be true or it might not. In any case, no one would believe it, and there was not much risk of Anna Rita Rymer losing her publicity value. Anna's halo was too firmly fixed on her head to be knocked off by any stones that Moore might throw. All the same, it had been an unpleasant incident—just the sort of thing that would happen to irritate him when he already had more than enough to contend with.

This affair of Elizabeth and Hackett. God knew how far it had gone. Pretty far by the look of things. But he'd take good care it didn't go any further. He'd been too easy-going with Elizabeth, let her have her own way too much, given her far more freedom than it was safe to give any woman. She would have to be brought to heel. A scandal now would be disastrous. But he knew how to handle a woman, and there would be no scandal.

Having thus convinced himself that he was faced by no difficulty which his will and personality could not overcome, Anson shot a resentful glance in the direction of the communicating door and then turned his back on it.

John Hackett, in his bedroom further along the corridor, made no attempt to sleep. He sat at the open window, smoking cigarette after cigarette, gazing out into the moonlit garden with its black and silver tapestry.

He asked himself the same question as Elizabeth had put to him: why had he come to Dilchester Court? He had told Beth that he didn't know, except that he felt he couldn't go off to China and leave her thinking, perhaps, that he had accepted his dismissal with a bad grace.

But he was not sure that that was the real answer. Trying, as Elizabeth was trying in a neighbouring room, to be frank with himself, he wondered whether, if he got down to rock bottom, he might not discover that he had come to Dilchester Court because he had lacked the courage to go to China without doing so. He asked himself whether this coming to see Beth was not, in reality, a sign of weakness and not of strength; whether, in fact, he had come not so much to show her that he bore her no ill-will as to satisfy that hunger for a glimpse of her from which for two years he had never been free. It was not long before he was forced to accept that explanation as the true one.

He faced that fact; faced the fact, too, that he would have been far wiser to stay away. Beth was just the same; or, rather, the old Beth was still there, and to her had been added a new Beth—a Beth who was the wife of Richard Anson, composed, formal, distant; a Beth who, when you caught her unawares, had a sadness in her eyes and an expression of resignation. That was the Beth to whom he had been introduced in Anson's study, who had

played tennis and bridge with him, and it was only when she had taken him to the summer-house that the real Beth had revealed herself—-bright-eyed, eager, vivacious, talking as she had always talked, laying her hand on his sleeve with that little confiding gesture of hers, listening to him while he told her of his plan to go to China as a missionary.

Beth had not thought much of that plan. She had not said so, but he had sensed her disapproval, realized that if she had the planning of his life he would never go to China. It came as a shock to him to discover that if Beth, as she sat beside him in the summer-house with her hand on his sleeve, had begged him not to go to China, he would almost certainly have abandoned the scheme there and then. One hint from her that his going would hurt her, and he would never have found the courage to go.

He faced other facts; that if it had been weakness to come to Dilchester Court, it would be still greater weakness to stay; that since Beth was Anson's wife, it would be unfair of him to stay—unfair to Beth and unfair to himself. He smiled faintly as he added: "And unfair to the heathen Chinese." But Beth had asked him not to go. It had been the old Beth that had asked that; and he had promised her to try, because he had felt at that moment that there was nothing that he could refuse her.

He would stay, then; and because he realized that there was danger in his staying, he told himself, as he got up from his seat at the window and began to undress, that he would forget that the old Beth had ever existed and would see only the new Beth—composed, formal, distant, the wife of Richard Anson.

CHAPTER XI

ELIZABETH contrived, the next morning, to get down to the breakfast-room without encountering her husband, and was relieved to find that John and her mother were already there. Sooner or later, she supposed, Richard would have to be faced on the subject of that locked door, but the longer she could postpone the interview the better, and there was safety in the presence of her mother and John. Richard could be trusted not to advertise his humiliation, and would wait until they were alone to say what he had to say.

She was prepared for him to show signs of heavy displeasure, and relieved when he entered the breakfast-room to note that the signs were lacking. No doubt she had John to thank for that, as she had learned by experience that the presence of her mother was no deterrent if Richard felt it his duty to reprove her.

Seating himself at the table, he opened his newspaper, and, after glancing through it and pontificating, as he usually did, on the political situation, he laid it aside and picked up his copy of the Dilchester Gazette, the local newspaper of which Dilchester was quite unjustifiably proud. He studied it for some moments and then gave his self-satisfied smile.

"They've made quite a splash of yesterday's ceremony," he said. "Two columns and a picture of the memorial. Not a very good picture."

"Am I in it, Richard?" inquired Mrs. Stellman. "I saw the men with their cameras taking photographs while the ceremony was on, but I was standing just behind Mrs. Hilliard—what a size, though I know she's spent a small fortune on slimming—and I was very much afraid the photographers wouldn't get me in, and I didn't like to push too much—"

"It's a picture of the memorial, Mrs. Stellman, and a very poor one at that. I shall have a word with the editor about it. It gives no idea at all of what the statue of Anna Rita Rymer is really like."

"What's the matter with it, Richard?" inquired Elizabeth. "Can't you see her halo?"

John glanced at her quickly. There was a bitterness in her voice of which he would not have believed her capable, and a contemptuous smile on her lips which he had never seen there before. He glanced at Anson and saw his quick frown and the angry look which he gave her.

"That sort of remark, Elizabeth," said Anson, "does not strike me as being in the best of taste." He glanced at the paper again. "They give a very full report of my speech."

John noticed the slight flush in Elizabeth's cheeks and her teeth pressed against her lower lip, and suddenly felt furiously angry with Anson.

"They made no mention of the unpleasant little incident with that man Moore," added Anson. "I was afraid they might give it more prominence than it deserved. I shall speak to the chief constable and see that steps are taken to ensure that Moore causes no more trouble."

"Bunk," repeated Mrs. Stellman. "I heard quite clearly what he said, and it struck me as so unnecessary. I dare say quite a lot of people there agreed with him, but they were much too polite to say so. I'm sure the best thing you can do, Richard, is to forget all about Ted Moore. Such an unpleasant fellow."

"I'm afraid I don't agree with you, Mrs. Stellman," replied Anson. "I have found that you can't get rid of the unpleasant things of life merely by shutting the door on them and pretending they don't exist. Don't you agree, Elizabeth? They have an unhappy knack, even if you've locked the door, of breaking it down, and forcing themselves on your attention."

Elizabeth met his mocking eyes steadily.

"I quite agree, Richard," she said. "It's probably better to open the door and fight it out with them once and for all."

"I'm glad you agree," answered her husband. "But it takes courage, my dear, and one must realize that there is the risk of getting badly hurt in the fight."

Again John noticed that quick exchange of glances between them—hostile glances. He had an uncomfortable feeling that more lay beneath the words than had appeared on the surface. He began to wonder if this could be that clue to that look of sadness and resignation which he had noted in the eyes of the new Beth.

Mrs. Stellman, too, was obviously aware of a certain tenseness and did her best to ease the strain. "It's a beautiful morning!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you two young people run along to Whitbourne and have a bathe? Quite like old times! Do you remember those moonlight bathes in the river, John? I'm sure you do, Elizabeth. Of course, there was no harm in it, but I had quite a few words with the vicar about it. It would be different, he said, if there were bathing-machines; but I told him that if I went bathing by moonlight, I should feel much safer in a clump of blackberry bushes than in a bathing-machine. I'm sure there's no privacy in some bathing-machines. Those double ones—where the partitions don't always go up to the roof—"

Anson rose from the table.

"I must be off," he said. "I have to go to London today, Elizabeth, and I don't know what time I shall be back—possibly quite late, so don't wait up for me. Just see that I'm not locked out, that's all."

He went from the room, accepted his hat, gloves, and stick from the waiting Graves, got into his car and was driven to the Bank.

As he entered his private office, Celia, seated at the typewriter, looked up and smiled.

Celia Paterson, as confidential secretary to Richard Anson, was not as other secretaries are. Sometimes she worked at the Bank, sometimes at Dilchester Court, and sometimes, when Anson was in a genial mood and there was no pressing work to be done, she was privileged to do no work at all. A trip to London during office hours was not an infrequent occurrence, though it was understood that in return she should not object to going to Dilchester Court and putting in a few hours' evening work if Anson needed her.

"Good morning, Miss Paterson," said Anson, seating himself at his desk and beginning to glance through his letters. "Did you send that wire to the E.T.C. Company?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Anson, I took it over to Burnford and sent it off as you told me to."

He nodded and became immersed in his correspondence. Celia, after bestowing on him a soft, lingering look, turned her attention again to her quiet typewriter.

Anson, having hastily looked through his mail, leaned back in his chair, frowning thoughtfully. There was no news from Doran again. That settled it; he must go up to town and see him. If the money was to be of any use, Doran must let him have it immediately. You never knew. Leakages occurred, however carefully you tried to prevent them, and at the least leakage from the Bank the disaster would be on them. There was a train about eleven....

He discovered that he was gazing fixedly at the fair head of Celia Paterson, as she sat at her typewriter. He reflected that, with the little shaft of sunlight touching it, her hair shone like gold. It was a shapely head, too, and he noted an impudent little curl that was frolicking on the smooth white skin at the back of her neck. Her lashes looked preposterously long as he studied her profile, and there was an attractive innocence about her Cupid's bow mouth, with the lips slightly parted as she leaned forward, inspecting her work. A good-looking girl, who could pass for a lady anywhere if she were properly dressed and prevented from putting that red stuff all over her nails. He could imagine Celia Paterson being a very agreeable and amusing companion for a man. In small doses, of course. If the dose were too large,

Celia would prove cloying. But he was beginning to think that large doses of any woman were a mistake. Yes, he was quite sure that Celia could be very agreeable and amusing if she cared to be. She didn't look the frigid, distant sort. He couldn't imagine her, for instance, locking her door against her husband. Any woman who did that deserved what she got. That sort of thing released a man from his obligations; and there was a limit to a man's patience, anyway.

"I'm going up to London today, Miss Paterson," he announced. "I have several important matters to attend to, and quite probably, when my interviews are over, I shall want to get some letters off by tonight's mail. I'd like you to come up to town and bring a machine with you. You'd better meet me about five o'clock. The Ritz will do—in the lounge. If I should be late, order yourself some tea."

"Thank you, Mr. Anson. That's terribly kind of you."

"Afterwards, perhaps, when we've done our work we might have a little dinner together." He smiled at her. "Would you like to?"

She flashed him a ravishing smile.

"I'd simply love it, Mr. Anson."

He nodded, rising from his desk and picking up his hat and stick.

"Quite romantic, Miss Paterson, eh—-you and I dining together? But I suppose you're used to being taken out to dinner. There must be plenty of young fellows anxious to escort a pretty girl like you."

"Oh, no, Mr. Anson," she assured him. "I very rarely go anywhere."

He smiled at her again.

"That's all right, then. I don't want to find myself involved in a duel. Five o'clock—at the Ritz."

Anson left his interview with Doran feeling far from satisfied. Somehow on this occasion his will and personality had not worked according to plan. Doran had been evasive, indefinite. Fifty thousand pounds was a large sum, he had said, and he couldn't be rushed. Anson might rest assured that he would give the matter his very careful consideration and let him know as soon as possible, but for the moment he was not prepared to commit himself to any definite promise. And there had been more questions—keenly probing questions concerning the stability of the Bank, and it had been quite obvious to Anson that his answers to them had not seemed entirely satisfactory to Doran.

Well, there it was. He could do nothing more and must await Doran's decision and hope for the best. In the meantime there was Miss Paterson

awaiting him at the Ritz. A pretty child. Charming—except for her finger-nails. He must take the first opportunity of telling her not to put that red stuff on them. These modern young women—all paint and powder. A man couldn't tell what he was getting. They even painted their toe-nails these days. He wondered if Miss Paterson had painted toe-nails. That remained to be seen, he told himself, and smiled.

It was nearly half past five when he reached the Ritz. He found Celia demolishing a chocolate éclair and drinking China tea, with her little finger elegantly crooked as she raised the cup to her Cupid's-bow mouth. He was relieved to see that his estimate of her possibilities had not been wrong: she looked quite a lady. As he greeted her and seated himself beside her, declining tea and éclairs, he ran an approving eye over her frock and hat. He did not know much about frocks, but it was of some light, clinging material and became her very well, a clever combination of revelation and concealment which Anson found distinctly intriguing and attractive. She was surrounded by an aura of some subtly alluring perfume. As a general rule Anson objected to a woman using perfume, but this particular scent struck him as not unattractive and seemed to harmonize with Celia's soft, clinging personality. He made a swift, furtive inspection of her legs, and was pleased to note the neat little shoes and the silk stockings—so thin that he was not quite sure there were any stockings there. He was prompted to find out by contriving to touch one of them, but refrained.

"I've brought my portable typewriter, Mr. Anson," she told him. "But I didn't like to bring it here, so I left it in the cloak-room at the Tube station."

"It can stay there," said Anson. "There will be no letters to write after all—none that there's any urgency about, at any rate. We can do them in the morning. We're free to spend our evening without worrying about business. What would you like to do?"

"Oh, whatever you say, Mr. Anson," she told him breathlessly. "I'm sure anything you suggest will be lovely."

"Well, what about some dinner first? Where would you like to go?"

"May I choose—really?"

He nodded, feeling indulgent and magnanimous. "Well, somewhere with music, please, Mr. Anson. I adore music. Perhaps—if you'd like it—couldn't we have dinner here? I've always longed to have dinner at the Ritz. If it's not too terribly expensive—"

"Expense doesn't enter into the question," replied Anson rather pompously, and frowned slightly.

The Ritz was not at all the sort of place he had had in mind for his tête-à-tête with Celia. There was no knowing whom he might run into there, and, visualizing Celia as his partner for dinner in the setting of the Ritz, he was not sure that she was quite so unmistakably a lady as his first appraisal of her had led him to believe. He had an uncomfortable feeling that if anyone he knew should see him dining there with Celia, it would be blatantly obvious to the onlooker that he was dining with his typist. He couldn't afford to risk that sort of thing. There was such a thing as discretion.

"I think perhaps somewhere quieter," he suggested. "I know of one or two nice little places in Soho—"

"Oh, anywhere you like, Mr. Anson, of course," breathed Celia.

"And afterwards, if you like it, we might go to a show."

That, she said, would be adorable, and they studied the amusement guide in his evening paper, with their heads so close together that a wisp of Celia's golden hair kept brushing against his cheek, so that it took them a considerable time to come to a decision. Eventually she chose Twiddle- Toes, because she had heard that the music was adorable and the dancing perfectly sweet. There was still some time to fill in before dinner, and she suggested that they should walk along to Soho, buy the tickets and look in the shops.

They left the Ritz. Outside, Anson turned in the direction of Hyde Park Comer, offering the Knightsbridge shops as a bait. He had no intention of walking in the direction of Soho. He had already decided that the journey to Soho was to be made in a taxi. Celia, he had told himself, would expect a taxi. Moreover, he had an impression that there was no place quite like a taxi for helping to break down those regrettable barriers that separate man from man— or, more accurately, man from woman.

He bought the tickets for Twiddle-Toes. There were no boxes left, and he felt just a twinge of annoyance with Celia when she insisted that she would much rather see Twiddle-Toes than any other show, because there were plenty of other shows where a box was available; but he had an uneasy feeling that if he insisted too much on the desirability of a box his motives might become too obvious, so he surrendered and booked a couple of stalls.

They wandered along to Knightsbridge, inspecting shop windows. Dresses were Celia's chief preoccupation. Anson had never realized how many adorable dresses there were in shop windows. He tried to tempt her to the windows that displayed alluring garments of crèpe-de-Chine, and had a vague idea that the purchase of a few such garments for her might go a long way towards the abolition of the barriers; but she betrayed no interest in those windows, hurrying past them as though it were not quite proper to

notice their existence. He hoped she wasn't a prude. He bought her a hand-bag, which she thought adorable, and she rewarded him by slipping her hand in the crook of his arm and giving him a look which suggested tremendous possibilities. But he felt terribly self-conscious, walking along Knightsbridge with her clinging to his arm, and was relieved when a glance at his watch told him that it was time to hail a taxi.

The ride in the taxi was a disappointment. She sat in the corner examining her face in her mirror, dabbing her nose with powder and touching up the Cupid's bow with lipstick. It always irritated Anson to see a woman making-up in public; it was like a man shaving in public or cleaning his teeth; and he sat in his corner impatiently watching her and finding nothing to say. He wondered if she were doing it purposely—to keep him at a distance. But, if that were so, why the looks which she gave him from time to time with those big, eloquent eyes of hers? They reminded him of the eyes of a heifer, soft and sleepy, only they were infinitely more exciting. Hang her make-up! If she went on like this they'd be at the restaurant by the time she had finished.

They were. It was only when the taxi pulled up at the door that she put away her toilet apparatus, and Anson was so annoyed that he gave the taxi- driver only a threepenny tip. But when he got inside the restaurant and found himself sitting opposite her at a table for two in a corner, his annoyance began to slip from him. The soft light from the red-shaded table lamps, the soft carpet beneath his feet, the soft, languorous music of the orchestra, and the softness in Celia's eyes, all combined to soothe his temper and arouse his senses to an appreciation of his surroundings. He asked her what she would like, and, as she seemed to have no definite ideas beyond hors d'oeuvre, took the matter out of her hands and ordered the dinner himself.

"And what would you like to drink, my dear?"

"May I have anything I like—really?"

"I wish you to."

She leaned across the table.

"Fizz!" she whispered.

Of course. He might have known what her choice would be. He ordered a bottle of champagne. And she probably thought the place "Bohemian".

He glanced round at his fellow diners, caught the eye of a man sitting a few tables away, and frowned. He was a youngish man, good-looking in a common sort of way, dressed rather too flashily to be quite a gentleman, and it struck Anson as most unlikely that he had ever seen the man. Yet there was something familiar about him, and he had certainly been staring at

Anson. That was the worst of being a person of importance; it was difficult to go anywhere without being recognized.

Damn the fellow! He was staring again. He hoped to goodness it was not someone who had recognized him. It wouldn't do for this sort of thing to get talked about. And then it occurred to Anson that it was probably Celia at whom the man was looking and not himself. Celia was a good-looking young minx and most young men would not be able to keep their eyes off her. The fellow as probably admiring her and envying him his good fortune. He felt distinctly better for that reflection.

Celia took a few sips of her champagne, set her glass down and giggled.

"What's the joke?" he inquired.

"I was just thinking, Mr. Anson," she laughed. "You and me—out on the spree together—I wonder what Mrs. Anson would say about it."

He frowned slightly. Why must the stupid child make a remark like that—dragging his wife's name into it just when he was beginning to feel that things were starting to move more smoothly? Didn't she know that on such an occasion as this the last fact of which a man cared to be reminded was that he had a wife? He was about to make some pompous remark which would have dismissed the subject once and for all, when he checked himself, realizing that this was just the opening for which he had been waiting.

"Don't let's talk about that sort of thing, Celia," he said, and noted her encouraging smile and the look in her eyes as he used her Christian name. "Just for this evening let's forget that I'm a married man—your employer—chairman of a bank and a highly respected citizen of Dilchester. Let's be just two human beings—Celia and—er—Richard—who—er—rather—like each other."

"Oh, Mr. Anson, may I? May I really call you by your Christian name?"

"I'd like you to, my dear."

"That's adorable of you. Of course. I'd never have dared if you hadn't said I might, because I'm really just a little bit afraid of you, you know."

He smiled, flattered.

"My dear Celia, there's no cause for you to be afraid of me."

"But you're such a terribly important person."

He did not contradict her, but he gave her a smile which was meant to assure her that in her case there was nothing to be feared from his terrible importance.

"I wonder if I dare!" she said in that husky voice of hers. "Dare I?"

"Dare you what, Celia?"

"Well, Richard's rather a mouthful, isn't it? I was wondering if you'd mind very much if I called you Dick."

Dick! Good God! He—Richard Anson—Dick! "I would prefer you to call me Richard," he said, trying not to be too dignified.

"Of course—just as you like—Richard," she agreed. Her hand was lying on the table. He leaned forward and covered it with his own.

"Just two human beings, my dear," he repeated—"you and I—Celia and Richard—man and—er—woman. Just for this evening I want to forget all my troubles and worries—"

"Troubles?" She smiled. "I shouldn't think you've any very serious troubles, Mr.—Richard."

"Wouldn't you? My dear Celia, it doesn't do to judge by appearances. Because a man presents a smiling face to the world, keeps a stiff upper lip. and conceals his feelings from others, it doesn't necessarily mean that he has no troubles. Because a man occupies an important position and has a host of so-called friends, it doesn't mean that he isn't lonely and in need of sympathy and understanding and—er—love." He sighed. "It's a terrible thing not to be understood, Celia—especially—especially by one's wife."

She gazed at him earnestly, her eyes full of understanding and sympathy.

"I'm terribly sorry, Richard," she said softly. "I had no idea. I always thought of you as a perfectly happy man."

"Happy?" He sighed again. "No man can be really happy, my dear, when he's starved. Starved for love, I mean," he added, helping himself to an olive. "If you only knew—"

The details were evidently too harrowing, for Anson concluded his sentence with a wave of his hand. "I'm terribly sorry," she repeated, "and I do think it's an awful shame. I can't understand how any woman—I mean, you're so attractive, Richard. I suppose I shouldn't say that—"

"Why not say it, Celia, if you think so?"

"Oh, it doesn't do for a woman to show her feelings too much; it isn't considered proper. But I do think you're attractive. I've always thought so. And I hate to think that you're not happy. It must be so terrible not to be understood. If only I could do something to help you—"

"Perhaps you could, Celia."

Damn that fellow! What the devil was he staring at again?

"Perhaps you could do a great deal."

She glanced at him eagerly.

"Could I?"

He nodded.

"If you would."

"Oh, but of course I would. I'd do anything to help. You've always been so terribly kind to me—so absolutely marvellous."

He gave her a searching look.

"I wonder if you mean that."

"You—you know I do."

"Anything?"

Her eyes were very soft as she gazed into his, and there seemed to be smouldering fires behind them. She nodded.

He gave her hand a squeeze.

"We'll talk about it," he said.

He paid the bill, including a tip which would have surprised the taxi man, and got up from the table. As he did so he remarked that the man at the near-by table did the same. Outside, as he got into a taxi, he noticed the same man come hurrying out and get into the taxi behind, and a sudden wave of uneasiness swept over him. Suppose that fellow were following him? Such things did happen. But he dismissed the idea as absurd. Nobody knew even that he was coming to London until he announced the fact this morning, and he was allowing his imagination to run away with him.

He turned his attention to Celia. She was not using face-powder and lip-stick on this journey, and somehow, after that talk with her at dinner, she seemed much more accessible and infinitely more desirable. But there was still a barrier to be negotiated, and time was short. Once they reached the theatre there would be no chance of breaking down the barrier, owing to that regrettable shortage of boxes, and it was more than time he was making some definite move. He glanced at her, met her gaze and hesitated. She turned her head away, looking out of the window, and courage returned. Her hand was lying on her lap; he laid his own on it.

"Celia—"

The taxi gave a sudden lurch as it rounded a corner, and the girl was thrown against him. Then somehow his arm was round her, her head was on his shoulder. He heard her give a little sighing gasp, felt her nestle closer to him, and the next moment was pressing his lips against the Cupid's-bow mouth.

"Oh, Richard—darling!"

He held her very close, noting the warmth and the softness of her, while her hair brushed his cheek.

"Listen, Celia," he said. "Let's call the theatre off, shall we? I want to talk to you. I'll tell the driver to take us for a drive, shall I?"

She nodded, her eyes closed, her lips parted. He got up, opened the window, leaned out and gave the necessary instructions to the driver; and the next moment she was back in his arms just as she had been before, except that he contrived to get her into a more comfortable position.

The taxi-driver evidently knew his job: he took them straight to Regent's Park and drove at a leisurely pace round and round the Outer Circle.

She was ravenous for kisses, clinging to him and pressing her lips against his almost savagely. It was some considerable time before Anson began to feel that there was something undignified in his position. Kissing in a taxi like any three-pounds-a-week clerk! Though he doubted if any three-pounds-a-week clerk would have progressed quite so quickly as he had done.

He effected a slight disentanglement.

"Celia!"

She opened her eyes.

"Yes, Richard?"

"Anything, you said."

"I know."

"Did you mean it?"

She turned, buried her face in his shoulder and nodded.

He kissed her again.

"We'll talk about it," he said. "We'll go away somewhere—" He fished around desperately in his mind. "Brighton, if you like. Will that do?"

Another nod.

"When?"

"I'll leave it to you, Richard. Just whenever you like."

"Soon, then," said Anson. "I'll fix things up. In the meantime, Celia, you understand, don't you, that at Dilchester—in the office—you must be very careful to give no hint?"

"Oh, of course, Richard. And, Richard, if we do go to Brighton, could we go to the Metropole? I've always longed to stay at the Metropole."

Anson did not commit himself. The Metropole was no more in accordance with his ideas of the right type of place for this kind of adventure than the Ritz had been. He said he would see about it, and she must leave everything to him.

There seemed no object in prolonging the taxi ride now that matters had been so satisfactorily arranged, and he suggested that they should go home. She agreed reluctantly, begged to be kissed again, and then, completing the disentanglement, began to make up her face as calmly and composedly as though nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

"We can't very well return to Dilchester together, Celia," said Anson. "We might be seen and—"

"You're ashamed of me?"

"That's ridiculous, Celia. But we've got to be careful. If we got out of the train together, anyone might see us—the station-master or anyone. You had better catch a train as soon as possible and I'll wait for a later one." There was, however, no need for that, she told him. A friend of hers—a girl—had a little flat in Town, and she would stay there for the night and go down to Dilchester in the morning. The flat was quite close—just off Baker Street.

He dropped her at the corner of Baker Street. As the taxi stopped, he did not notice that another taxi had pulled up about twenty yards behind his, nor, when his taxi re-started, was he aware that the other followed. He was too occupied with thoughts of Celia to note such trifles.

When he reached Dilchester Court he found that everyone had gone to bed. He went upstairs, saw that there was no line of light beneath the door of his wife's room, and entered his dressing-room. Crossing to the door that led into Elizabeth's room, he cautiously tried it. It was locked. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away—smiling.

CHAPTER XII

ANSON'S first thoughts when he awoke the next morning were not of the difficulties of Anson's Bank and the catastrophe that threatened his own fortunes, nor of Ted Moore, nor of the unsatisfactory state of affairs between himself and his wife. He awoke with a feeling of exhilaration, almost of excitement, and his first thoughts were of Celia Paterson—clinging to him, pressing her lips hungrily against his, offering him—everything.

Thinking over the events of the last evening as he dressed, he found that he had not the slightest feeling of remorse, of having done anything for which he need feel the least shame. He was, on the contrary, elated and rather proud of himself. After all, he was not so young as he used to be, but he still retained his attraction. Celia was obviously very much in love with him and had displayed a capacity for passion with which he would hardly have credited her.

He was inclined to think that if it had been some other man than himself who had held her in his arms in the taxi, she would have been very much less demonstrative. It was only he who could stir these secret depths in her—as he had stirred them in other women in days gone by. All women were not like Elizabeth—frigid, unresponsive, coldly acquiescent. She was the only woman who had ever been like that with him. That locked door....

He frowned as he remembered that gesture of defiance, but his frown was only momentary. Elizabeth was not the only woman in the world, and he was not the man to plead for his rights as if he were asking favours. A woman who behaved as Elizabeth was behaving had no right to complain if her husband set about finding someone more accommodating.

It was a pity Elizabeth could not be told the brutal truth about himself and Celia, a pity that she could not be made to realize that, if she did not appreciate her husband, there were others who did. That would bring her down off her high horse. She would find it pretty humiliating to know that she had been displaced by her husband's typist. She wouldn't look on it in at all the same way as she looked on her own affair with young Hackett. Women were like that: they could indulge in any sort of intrigue and deception and get on their high horse and play the injured innocent if they were suspected; but let them once get an idea that their husbands were doing the same, and there was the devil to pay.

He wondered now how he had managed to tolerate Elizabeth's high-handed way with him for so long. Ever since his marriage he had been strictly faithful to her, never giving a thought to another woman, and this was all he got for it. If he hadn't been so conscientious he would have kicked over the traces long ago. Other men did. He knew of half a dozen men in Dilchester,

highly respected citizens, who had been carrying on affairs for years. If their home life was anything like his own he didn't blame them. So long as they were not blatant about it, and preserved an outward semblance of respectability, it was their own affair, and he would be the last man to think the worse of them. Human nature, after all, was stronger than any mere moral code, and a man was never meant to be an ascetic.

Besides, Elizabeth, if ever the truth should become known, wouldn't have a leg to stand on. In view of her affair with young Hackett, she could hardly object to his claiming an equal liberty of action. The truth, of course, would not become known. It was just a question of being reasonably careful. There must be no going to such places as the Metropole at Brighton.

London was the safest. He must think things out carefully....

He was almost affable at breakfast. It amused him to sit there and watch Elizabeth and remind himself that she wouldn't be so calm and composed if she knew what he knew; it appealed to his sense of humour that she, playing the innocent and carrying on an affair with young Hackett, should have no suspicion that he was doing very much the same. What fools women were!

He went to the Bank eager for his meeting with Celia. He hoped she would not have changed her mind, and smiled confidently as he reflected that that was hardly probable. A girl in Celia's position would not be likely to get another chance such as he was offering her. If she turned down his offer she would probably end up by marrying a bank clerk and pinching and scraping for the rest of her life in some poky little villa. She would be bound to realize that an opportunity like this was not to be had for the asking. Besides, she really was very fond of him. Still, you never knew with women: they had a way of getting sudden attacks of conscience and shying off at the last minute, and the sooner he arranged matters the better. He would have a talk with her this moming....

As he entered his room he caught a glimpse of her golden head as she sat at her typewriter. He hung up his hat and turned towards his office. She had not noticed his arrival, and he stood for some moments watching her through the half-open door.

She looked very calm and self-possessed, and it was hard to believe that only a few hours ago she had been lying in his arms, nestling against him, begging him to kiss her again.

His determination to have a talk with her and fix the thing definitely as soon as he reached the office wavered. It seemed suddenly quite impossible to walk up to this self-possessed young woman and remind her that she had promised to go with him to Brighton.

It had been fairly easy last night when she was nestling against him, but here, in cold daylight, in the unromantic surroundings of an office, with Celia sitting at a typewriter... Suppose she snubbed him? Suppose she pretended not to understand? It would be damned awkward explaining. It might be better to await a more favourable opportunity—get her up to London again....

The matter was taken out of his hands. There came a knock at the door and he turned to see Marshall, one of his co-directors, entering the room. Marshall was a short, slight, fussy little man, with a white military moustache and a military abruptness of speech.

"Damn it, Anson!" he began. "What are we going to do?"

He was clearly excited, and it was part of Anson's technique always to become calmer and calmer in the face of another man's excitement. He strolled to his desk and seated himself, eyeing Marshall with a faint smile of amusement as he stumped up and down the room.

"What's the trouble, Marshall?"

Marshall halted and stared at him.

"Good God, Anson! What's the trouble? If the whole cosmos were crashing round your head I believe you'd still be sitting there asking what's the trouble."

Anson shook his head.

"I shouldn't sit still, Marshall," he smiled. "I should be doing my best to dodge the débris."

Marshall shot him a quick glance.

"You would, eh? Well, from the look of things there'll be plenty of débris before you're much older, and there'll be no question of dodging. None of us will be able to dodge anything. We shall have to stand up and face things."

"What sort of things?"

"You know as well as I do, Anson, but you probably won't admit it. You don't care about looking straight at things, do you? All the way along you've refused to face the fact that sooner or later we should probably find ourselves in a tight corner if we went on the way we were going on. You were ready enough to take the risks, but declined to look at the possible consequences because they weren't exactly pleasant. Well, you'll have plenty of unpleasant consequences to face before many days have passed."

"Such as?"

Marshall halted again and looked Anson in the eyes. "Fraud," he snapped. "That's a possibility, anyway—a charge of fraud—misappropriation—

negligence— criminal folly—speculating with money with which we'd no right to speculate. Damn it! You know it as well as I do!"

"Perhaps I do, Marshall, though I might be inclined to use less harsh terms. But I don't propose to get into a panic about it. It hasn't happened yet."

"It's started happening. People have got wind of something. I wonder you haven't discovered that. This morning several of my friends tried to pump me. There were rumours floating round, they said, that all was not well with Anson's Bank, and did I advise them to withdraw their deposits? I did not. I told them the Bank had never been in a sounder position and that the rumours were lies—may God forgive me!"

"Your friends won't thank you for that, Marshall, if things go as they look like going."

"If things go as they look like going I shan't have any friends in a few days' time. What else could I tell them? If there's to be a crash I don't intend to let a favoured few save their money—rich men who get off scot-free because they happen to know a director who gave them the tip. There are thousands of small depositors who've got their life savings in Anson's Bank, and they've as much right to save their money as anyone else. Have you heard from Doran?"

Anson shook his head.

"Doran is a human ruminant. I saw him yesterday and could get no definite answer. He's still chewing it over."

"Then if he doesn't soon stop chewing it'll be too late. People are beginning to talk, I tell you. And some of them are doing more than talking. I've just had a word with Kennish, our manager. He tells me that Fielding came in this morning as soon as the Bank opened and closed his account. Fielding's account was one of the biggest we had, and he wouldn't have done that if he hadn't got wind of something. That's only the beginning. There's bound to be others before the day's much older, and once it starts there'll be no stopping it. What about the E.T.C. people?"

Anson ran quickly through the letters on his desk, picked out one, read it and glanced across at Marshall.

"The E.T.C. people refuse to postpone their call," he said.

"Eh? Good God! We can't pay it. At least if we pay it we can't pay anyone else. Damn it, Anson, it's no use sitting there smiling. We've got to do something. You'd better get through to Doran on the telephone—"

"If I worry Doran any more," interrupted Anson, "he'll smell a rat and we shall get nothing. I had to pretend that the matter was not terribly urgent, though I did my best to hurry things up. As soon as Doran makes up his

mind he'll ring me." He smiled. "And in the meantime I don't intend to work myself into a panic."

"But if Doran won't help us—"

"In that case we shall stop payment and face the music. It looks as though we shall have to. If you take my advice, you'll withdraw your own money while the going's good."

Marshall gazed at him in amazement.

"Do you think I'd do a thing like that, Anson? Just because I happen to be a director and have inside information, do you think I'd take advantage of that to save my own skin? You don't know me if you think that. I'm a depositor and I'll take my chance with the rest of the depositors. If we crash and there's only a shilling in the pound for everyone else, then I'll take my shilling in the pound." Anson gave a cynical smile.

"Very admirable sentiments, Marshall, but quite unpractical. Personally, I see no advantage in being a director if I'm to be treated in the same way as someone who's not a director."

"You mean you'll withdraw your money?"

"Certainly—as soon as I decide that there's no chance of our weathering the storm."

Marshall stared at him, speechless, for some moments, as though unable to believe what he had heard; then he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

Anson, with a smile, turned his attention to his letters. Marshall was a sentimental old fool. To stand by and watch his money go down the gutter when he had a chance of saving it was sheer quixotic folly. It might be noble, but nobility at that price was too expensive a luxury for Richard Anson. If there was a smash he'd lose enough in all conscience. Practically every penny he possessed was invested in the Bank, and to all intents and purposes he would be a ruined men. Selling his stock now was out of the question, and if he could save the comparatively small sum that he had in his current account and on deposit, he certainly intended to do so.

But it might not come to that, though the fact that Fielding had closed his account was a disturbing one.

He became aware that Celia Paterson was standing beside his desk, and turned to her with a smile.

"Well, my dear?" he said, inspecting her keenly.

He saw at once that she had not changed her mind; there was still the same adoring look in her eyes, and she seemed say and a little nervous, unable to

meet his gaze for more than a second—all of which he interpreted as auspicious omens.

"Did you enjoy your evening?"

"Oh, Mr. Anson, it was marvellous I I've never had an evening like it before."

He felt flattered and hoped her statement was strictly true.

"We shall have plenty more of them, my dear—better than last night," he assured her. "Last night was only the prelude. I've been thinking things over and if you haven't changed your mind... Have you?"

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes.

"Then we'll go straight ahead," he said. "Just for the moment, I'm afraid, Brighton is out of the question. We've got to be discreet, my dear, and I've decided that London would be far more—suitable. The best way will be for you to take a holiday and go up to London. I shall be up there pretty frequently and can come and find you. You'd better take a small flat somewhere— furnished. There should be no difficulty in finding one, and of course I will be responsible for the rent. You might, perhaps, keep it on permanently—so that you can run up there whenever—er—whenever you feel like a night in town. Your absence from Dilchester will then arouse no suspicion. Naturally, if I am away, you are not required at the Bank and you go off to your little place in London. What do you think of that?" She thought it was adorable, but explained to him that there was no need for him to go to the expense of a flat, at least for the present. Her friend who had a flat just off Baker Street was going away that day for several weeks and had offered to let her use the flat during her absence. She could go there for the time being and Anson would only have to telephone when he would be in London. That would give her time to look round at her leisure and find just the very flat to suit them.

Anson agreed, squeezed her hand, and told her to get up to London that afternoon. There was a chance that he might he there himself the next day.

"And now, my dear, go and sit at your typewriter," he smiled, "and don't let anyone guess that I'm not still the terribly important Richard Anson to you, of whom you're just a little afraid."

But she still stood beside his desk, hesitating.

"What is it, my dear?"

"Mr. Anson—just now—when you were talking to Mr. Marshall—I was in my office and I simply couldn't help hearing."

He glanced at her quickly.

"Well?"

"I suppose I shouldn't say anything, should I? But I can't help it. I mean—after last night—it is just a little different, isn't it? What happens to you matters so terribly much to me now. I can't bear to think you're worried—"

"My dear, I am worried. I wouldn't admit it to Mr. Marshall, but I don't mind admitting it to you. I'm in a very difficult position, a very serious position. The Bank—er—"

"Is it really going to go crash?"

"That is a possibility, Celia. I can't explain to you—you wouldn't understand—but the Bank has had a spell of very bad fortune—through nobody's fault—and I am really terribly anxious. It's no use blinking at the fact that unless a very large sum of money is forthcoming from somewhere, within a few hours, the Bank will be finished. And so shall I."

"Oh, Mr. Anson! It doesn't seem possible!"

"Ruin, Celia, that's what it will mean as far as I'm concerned. And probably disgrace, too. People can be very hard, you know, Celia, on a man who's down and out. If the Bank crashes, they'll be looking round for a scapegoat, and it's almost inevitable that they'll pick on me."

"It's terrible! I can't bear to think of it. But I can't believe they'd do a thing like that, Mr. Anson. Everyone thinks so highly of you. I've heard people talk about you, and I'm sure there's no one in Dilchester who's so much admired and respected."

"All the same, Celia, it is quite possible that before long there will be no one in Dilchester—perhaps in the whole country—who is so much hated and despised." He smiled at her. "Are you going to be among the ones who hate and despise me?"

"Oh, you know I'd never be that, Mr. Anson. How could I be? It wouldn't matter to me what you'd done or what you were accused of doing, I should still believe in you. And I—I should still love you." He took her hand and patted it.

"I believe you would, my dear, and I assure you that means a great deal to me. To know that, whatever happens, I shall have someone who will understand and sympathize and believe in me—I can face it, Celia, if I know that."

"You do know it. But I can't believe it will really come to that, Mr. Anson. It must be possible to do something."

He shook his head.

"If I sat here till midnight, my dear, there's nothing more that I could do."

"But if it's just a question of getting money—"

"It is. But a very great deal of money. Fifty thousand pounds will only just about tide us over." She shook her head.

"I can't understand it," she said. "Why doesn't Mrs. Anson help you? She's a rich woman, isn't she? Surely, rather than see you ruined and disgraced- -"

He raised his hand.

"We won't discuss that, please, Celia. There's no need to drag my wife into it."

"It shouldn't be necessary to drag her in," she exclaimed passionately. "She should offer to help you. She should—she should... Oh, I know I wouldn't need making to help you. If I had fifty thousand pounds I'd give it to you gladly. I'd be proud to give it to you. If she pretends to love you... Oh, I'm sorry; I shouldn't talk like that, should I? But it does seem so unfair—"

"My dear, the world is an unfair place. I do sometimes get very weary of everything. A man does, you know, when he's—lonely. I've sometimes been tempted to cut free from everything. I'd cut free now if I had the money. But I haven't. I'm going to be a poor man by the look of things."

"It's unfair," she repeated. "Why should you be poor? You've worked so terribly hard, and there's all that money in the vaults—thousands of pounds—

"That doesn't happen to be mine, Celia."

"But it is yours, Mr. Anson, really. You built the business, you worked to make Anson's Bank what it is, and if anyone has a right to the money, surely you have? Oh, I wish I could do something. I'd do anything—go anywhere—"

There came a knock at the door and a clerk entered. "Mr. Edward Moore asking to see you, sir."

Anson frowned. Recent incidents had crowded thoughts of Edward Moore from his mind, but he realized that the man had got to be dealt with. He had thought, when he had dismissed him from his study the other night, that he had probably put an end to Moore's game by calling his bluff and daring him to do his worst; but apparently the fellow meant to have another try. Well, if he could risk Moore's carrying out his threat then, he could certainly risk it now. The position of the Bank was definitely worse than it had been, and if the crash came, as seemed inevitable now, Edward Moore's story, even if he spread it all over Dilchester, would make not the slightest difference as far as Anson was concerned. He would be a ruined and discredited man in any case, and it would not matter to him in the least if all the world were convinced that Anna Rita Rymer had been what Moore claimed she had been. In any event, he had no money to spare for Moore or anyone else now;

if there was any money to be salved out of the wreckage, he would need it for himself.

"Show him in," he said.

The clerk withdrew, and Anson turned to Celia.

"Run away, my dear," he said, "and shut the door. And get up to London this afternoon. Where's the flat?"

She scribbled the address and telephone number on a slip of paper, and with a nod Anson folded it and slipped it into his pocket.

"I'll join you as soon as possible," he smiled. "To-morrow, if I can. I'll ring you first. Will that be too soon?"

She shook her head.

"Tomorrow seems such a long way off," she sighed, went into her office and closed the door.

Moore entered jauntily, with an insolent smile on his face, and planted himself in front of Anson's desk.

"Well, Mr. Anson?"

"So you've had the audacity to call again!"

"I've come for your answer."

"I was under the impression that I gave you my answer the other night. I've nothing to add to what I said then."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite sure. You can do as you please. If it will amuse you to spread your ridiculous story abroad, as far as I am concerned you are at liberty to spread it. I certainly do not propose to pay twenty pounds a week—or even twenty pence a week—for the sake of preventing you."

"It will cause a good deal of unpleasantness."

"For you, Moore—ryes; but not for me. As I have already told you, nobody will believe you. At the best, you will be laughed at; at the worst, you will land yourself into very serious trouble."

"H'm!" said Moore. "Well, perhaps you're right, Mr. Anson. I realize that people would be more likely to accept the word of the Chairman of Anson's Bank than the word of a drunken waster like me."

"I'm glad you've grasped that at last, Moore."

"Oh, I grasped it all right from the very beginning," the man assured him, "but I thought it was worth trying. I'd have thought myself lucky if it had come off. You'd hate to look a fool, but you'd hate still more to have to part

with a few pounds a week to a man whose life you've ruined. I knew that all along. I knew that if you had the pluck to call my bluff the game would be up."

"Then the best thing you can do, Moore, is to go away and pull yourself together and try to make a living by some more creditable method than blackmail." Moore smiled.

"And leave you in peace, Mr. Anson?" He shook his head. "I advise you not to count on being left in peace. You've still got those debts to pay, and if I can't make you pay one way I'll make you pay another." Anson pressed the bell on his desk and a commissionaire appeared.

"Show this gentleman out, please."

Moore strolled across to the door.

"All right, Anson," he said; "I'm going. But don't run away with the idea that you're getting off scot-free. I'll get you yet."

As the door closed behind the man, Anson leaned back in his chair and became thoughtful.

One phrase from his conversation with Celia had kept passing through his mind during his interview with Ted Moore. "Why doesn't Mrs. Anson help you?" Celia had asked.

Exactly. Why shouldn't Elizabeth help him? She was his wife, and she was a wealthy woman. She could let him have the fifty thousand pounds without causing herself the slightest inconvenience, and in the circumstances it was her obvious duty to do so. It had not occurred to him before to ask her. Between his home and his business he had always kept a great gulf fixed, and had made a rule never to discuss the affairs of the Bank with his wife. She knew nothing of his business activities, and he had never even told her what his income was.

But in circumstances like the present, even though it went against the grain, the rule must be broken. Elizabeth had the money, and his obvious duty was to sink his pride and ask her to make the necessary advance, just as much as it was her obvious duty to come to his assistance and save him from disaster.

It would not be easy, of course, in the present strained conditions of their relations. It would be a humiliating experience for him, particularly if Elizabeth chose to be unpleasant about it. And she very well might. She had been furious with him when he had taxed her with that Hackett business, and she wouldn't forgive him for that very easily. But he had no doubt that he could calm her down—use his will and personality and charm to smooth things over. After all, he had no definite proof about Hackett, and in any

case, in the circumstances, he could not afford to be too squeamish. He would apologize if necessary, beg her pardon for having doubted her. Elizabeth was not the sort to bear malice if he asked for her forgiveness, and provided he got the money he would swallow the humiliation somehow. Besides, once he had got the money, he could deal with the Hackett affair later. He decided that he would see Elizabeth that evening and do all he could to patch things up.

CHAPTER XIII

AS the red-winged two-seater entered the Square, Elizabeth brought it to a standstill and turned to John, who was beside her.

"There's the statue, John," she said. "I thought you'd like to have a look at it. Anna Rita Rymer, missionary, saint, and martyr." She gave a little laugh. "You never know, John, if you go to China they may put up a statue to you one day."

John glanced at her, frowning slightly.

"Are you laughing at me, Beth?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm just trying to picture what a statue of you would look like, John. The martyr—in plus-fours. But perhaps they'd put a cassock on you. I shall certainly suggest it, John, because statues of men wearing trousers never manage to look dignified. They are always such terrible trousers—baggy at the knees, and without the sign of a crease in them. If you believe the sculptors, no man who had a statue put up to him ever used a trouser-press."

John smiled.

"You're laughing at me, Beth, and that's not quite fair of you, is it? I'm serious about this missionary business—and you don't laugh at Anna Rita Rymer."

"Don't I? Would you be surprised, John, if I told you that the other day, at the unveiling ceremony, it was all I could do not to burst out laughing? Everybody being so grave and solemn, and Richard making his pompous speech—he really was terribly pompous, John—and the crowd singing hymns—they were terribly flat, especially mother—and then in the middle of it all, that man, Ted Moore, who had had quite six over the eight, stepping forward and shouting, 'Bunk'."

"I know; I heard about it. The fellow ought to be ashamed of himself."

"I suppose he ought," she admitted, "but it really was funny. You mustn't lose your sense of humour, John, or the Chinese won't like you. You must see that it was funny. You'd have seen it if you'd been there, anyway; it was just as if everybody there had balloons under their clothes and Ted Moore had stuck pins in all of them at the same moment. But it's all right, John, I didn't laugh; I fixed my gaze on the face of Anna Rita Rymer and she looked back at me, and I'd defy anyone to laugh if Anna Rita looked at them that way. You won't look like that, John, will you, when you're a saint and a martyr? Not at me? Don't look pained, John. If you'd had as much of Anna Rita Rymer as I've had, you'd feel like putting your thumb to your nose at

her statue. Would you like to go and look at it? There's a beautiful inscription, guaranteed to bring tears to your eyes. Richard composed it, and was terribly touchy while he was doing it. Come and see."

They got out of the car, crossed the Square and went round to the front of the statue to inspect the inscription. Ted Moore was there, standing with his feet planted well apart and his head thrown back, staring up at the face of Anna Rita, who stood gazing with a rapt expression at the Town Hall clock, serenely unaware of his existence. Just as well, perhaps, since Moore had obviously been drinking.

As Elizabeth and John approached, he turned, stared at them and advanced unsteadily towards them. "Good morning, Mrs. Anson," he said.

"Good morning, Mr. Moore," replied Elizabeth pleasantly. "I've brought my friend to see the statue."

"Ah, yes, certainly," said Moore. "It's a pleasure. I'm sure." He flung out a hand in the direction of the statue. "Allow me to introduce you, sir." He put his lips close to John's ear. "I didn't catch your name, sir," he whispered.

"My name's Hackett," John told him.

Nodding, Moore half turned towards the statue again. "Allow me to introduce you to my wife, Mr. Hackett. My wife—Mr. Hackett. Mr. Hackett—my wife, Anna Rita Rymer."

Elizabeth smiled. Like most other people in Dilchester, she knew Edward Moore's reputation, but, unlike most others, she was prepared to make allowances.

"But that's a secret, isn't it, Mr. Moore?" she humoured him. "And you must be careful not to tell other people."

"That's all right, Mrs. Anson. It's not a secret any longer. I'm goin' to tell a lot of people. I'm goin' to tell everyone in Dilchester. Anna Rita Rymer was my wife, so why shouldn't I tell them. Some say 'Good ol' Anna Rita Rymer'. Not me—I knew her. I was married to her. Limelight—that's all she wanted."

"Listen, Mr. Moore," interrupted John, "you've no right to say things like that—"

"You listen to me, Mr. Hatchett," interrupted Moore. "I know what I'm saying. Anna Rita Rymer was my wife and she got bitten by the missionary bug and went off to China, leaving me and the kid flat. Took every bean I'd got, too—three hundred quid I'd saved for the kid. That's what she did. Damn her!" He waved a hand towards the statue. "And that's what she's got for doing it. You didn't know that, did you, Mrs. Anson? But Mr. Anson knows. Ask him if you don't believe me. He knows and keeps his mouth shut." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, that's all right. We've gotta be

reasonable, Mrs. Anson. We can't expect a man to chuck mud at his own sister. Not when he's a tin god. But I'm not a tin god, and if I like to chuck mud at my wife it'll take more than Anson to stop me."

John grasped Elizabeth's arm.

"You'd better come away, Beth."

She was about to go with him when she heard footsteps, and the next moment Dr. Ewell came striding up.

"What's all this, Moore?" he said. "Bless me, you've been drinking again."

Moore turned towards the doctor, beaming.

"No 'arm meant. Doctor," he said. "Jus' been introducing Mrs. Anson and this gentleman to my wife. No need to introduce you. You knew 'er. Tonsils and adenoids—you took 'em out for 'er. That was a very gen'lemanly act. Dr. Ewell, and I respect you for it." The doctor laid a hand on Moore's shoulder.

"Yes, I remember, Moore," he smiled. "Get along home now and go to bed. I'll come and have a look at you later."

Ted Moore nodded.

"All right, Doctor. What you say goes. You're a gen'leman and I'm a gen'leman, and when one gen'leman tells another gen'leman to go to bed, then if he's a gen'leman, he does it." He raised his hat. "Good-bye, Mrs. Anson."

He lurched off across the Square, and Elizabeth turned to the doctor.

"Poor Ted Moore!" she said. "He seems to have a bee in his bonnet about Anna Rita Rymer."

"A swarm of them," said the doctor, "and he's setting them buzzing all over Dilchester. What's he been telling you—that Anna Rita Rymer was his wife who took all his money and deserted him?"

"It's scandalous," said John angrily. "The fellow should be stopped from spreading such statements." The doctor regarded him keenly.

"You take a big responsibility, Mr. Hackett," he said, "when you try to stop a man telling the truth."

"But you're not suggesting, Dr. Ewell," said Elizabeth, "that there's any sort of truth in the wild statements Ted Moore's been making about Anna Rita Rymer?"

"I'm not so sure," snapped the doctor. "As a matter of fact, I am pretty sure that there's a good deal of truth in them. The fellow's got proofs— marriage certificate and a whole bundle of papers. He's showing them to everybody. He's been to the vicar."

"The vicar should be able to silence him," said Elizabeth. "He knows all about Anna Rita Rymer. He was out in China when she was."

"That's the whole point," replied the doctor. "Did you remark, Mrs. Anson, that the vicar wasn't present at the unveiling ceremony the other day? Well, he wasn't, nor was I. Shall I tell you why he wasn't there? Because he agrees with Ted Moore, that all this statue business is so much bunk. He didn't want to tell me, but I got the truth out of him. He was out in China and knows all about the Rymer woman. She was just a damn' nuisance out there; totally unfitted for the work, made all sorts of mischief, refused to learn the language, disgusted everyone with her craze for publicity, then caused no end of trouble by getting herself murdered. I suppose I've no business to have told you, but you'll be bound to hear it sooner or later, as Moore's spreading the story everywhere. It's not very nice for your husband, Mrs. Anson, but I don't see how the fellow can be stopped, and I've no doubt Mr. Anson can look after himself."

"Something should be done to stop him," said John.

"To spread libellous statements like that—"

"How do you know they are libellous, Hackett?" demanded the doctor. "Moore was her husband—I know that's true. What do you know of Anna Rita Rymer, anyway?"

"I've read about her," replied John. "I've read Truscott's life of her. According to Truscott, she was an intensely spiritual woman—"

"Has it struck you, Hackett, that Truscott's a poet, who took a poet's licence? He imagined qualities and idealized them."

"So he may have done, Dr. Ewell, but there must have been some foundation. He must have accumulated facts—"

"Oh yes, he did that. He spent three days in Dilchester doing it." The doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid we've got to agree with Ted Moore that there's a good deal of bunk in this business."

John shrugged his shoulders.

"It sounds pretty rotten to me."

Elizabeth smiled at him.

"It's always rotten, John, to have one's dreams disturbed, isn't it? But you'll have to get used to that, you know. It's no good going as a missionary if you're not prepared to have your ideals shattered a good many times."

"I'm fully trained in that respect, Beth."

There was no answering that, since it was she who had been responsible for his training.

"I must be off," said Dr. Ewell. "Bless me, if they want to put up a statue, why don't they put one up to me—Dr. Guy Ewell, who was martyred by mumps, scarlet fever, chicken-pox, indigestion, and the damn'-fool carelessness of his patients, and never had a minute to call his own. By the way, Mrs. Anson, I saw that poor woman, Burns, this morning—the one who killed her husband. I want you to go and see her. She's asking for a visitor and I told her I'd send you along."

"To the prison?" said Elizabeth. "Must I, Doctor?"

"There's no must about it, but you're on the Prison Visiting Committee, aren't you, and you're not much use there if you're not prepared to visit the prison." And then he laid his hand on her arm and his abrupt manner changed. "You'll be doing a great kindness, Mrs. Anson. The poor soul needs somebody, and you'll do her more good than the rest of the bunch put together. It's an extraordinary thing the way charitable work always seems to get in the hands of grim-faced spinsters. The marvel to me, Mrs. Anson, is that the rest of the Committee didn't blackball you. Go along and see Mrs. Burns. It'll do her good. You too, perhaps."

"All right, Doctor, I'll go," Elizabeth promised.

With a nod, the doctor hurried off. John and Elizabeth returned to the red-winged car, and a few moments later were out of the town, heading at fifty miles an hour for the open country. After half an hour's run they left the car by the roadside and began climbing the steep slope of the Downs that half encircled Dilchester. In the shelter of a clump of gorse bushes they seated themselves on the grass, lighted cigarettes, and for some time were silent, John frowning thoughtfully at the countryside spread out below him, and Elizabeth, lying in her favourite position, with her hands beneath her head, gazing up into the blue of the sky, and every now and then raising her head just far enough to take a quick look at John's grave face.

"I wonder, John," she said at last, "I wonder why you're really going to China."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't be laughed out of it now, Beth."

"And is that why you're going—because you've told everybody so and don't like the idea of being laughed at if you back out of it now?"

"You don't believe that, Beth?"

"No, I don't think I do. It wouldn't be like you to mind being laughed at. You never used to mind, anyway, when I laughed at you. But if it isn't that, what is it? Whatever made you think of rushing off like this to preach to the heathen? It's terribly sudden, isn't it?"

"As a matter of fact, I've been thinking about it for a year, Beth. I heard a fellow lecture all about Central China, and the work to be done out there, and that put the idea into my head. I'd pretty well decided before the lecture was over to go out east."

"And it didn't strike you, John, that you'd find just as fine work to be done if you went down east—in London?"

"That's different, Beth."

"No limelight, eh?"

He glanced round at her quickly.

"You've no right to say a thing like that, Beth. You know—you ought to know—I don't care a damn about the limelight. If I go to China—"

"If, John? Shouldn't it be when?"

"Oh, very well, then—when I go to China, it will be because—well, because I must go."

She smiled faintly.

"You know what that is, John, don't you? It's what Anna Rita Rymer suffered from. Richard told us all about it in his speech the other day. It's the evangelistic urge."

He swung round so that he faced her.

"I don't understand you, Beth; you're behaving so queerly. It's not like you to try to damp me down and jeer at me—"

"I'm not jeering, John. I'm only just poking a little bit of fun at you, but I won't do that any more if it hurts you. I only wanted to make you think, to be quite sure that you have thought it all out and aren't just rushing into this out of—well, pique."

"You know I shouldn't do that, Beth."

"Oh, but you might. Lots of men have done it and regretted it afterwards, and I don't want to feel that you've thrown your life away like that. I'd feel sort of responsible."

"And you think I should be throwing my life away?" She nodded.

"I've talked to Mr. Tanner, our vicar, about China. He was out there, you know. When he was there, John, thousands of people were dying of starvation, and parents were even selling their children for food. What are you going to do about that? Have you discovered a method to stop parents selling their children for food?"

"Perhaps I haven't," said John, with a touch of impatience, "but that doesn't mean I can't do something to help. I can give them hope and sympathy—Good Lord, I'm talking like a prig!"

"Like a child, John, not a prig." She laid her hand on her diaphragm. "Ever had a pain here?"

"Heartache?"

"Come down to earth, John. Not heartache—tummy-ache. Would you want hope and sympathy when you'd got a pain in your tummy?" She smiled. "Especially if you'd got the pain through eating too many children."

John made a gesture of impatience.

"All this is pretty serious to me, Beth," he said.

She sat up and looked at him.

"And don't you think it's all pretty serious to me? Do you really believe I've been laughing at you and trying to persuade you that you're throwing your life away and won't do the least bit of good out in China just because I want to hurt you?"

"You're doing your best to put me off, aren't you? Why don't you want me to go?"

She smiled as she watched his grave, troubled face. "Look me straight in the eyes, John, and I'll tell you."

He raised his head.

"I don't want you to go to China," she said, "because I'm absolutely certain that you don't want to go." She raised a hand as she saw that he was about to speak. "Don't deny it, John, because you never could tell fibs with your eyes. You're only going to China because—oh, well, there's no need to go into that. I know why and you know why, and we shall only hurt each other if we talk about it." She leaned forward and laid a hand on his arm. "But, my dear, you mustn't do it. I'd never forgive myself. I'd think of all the things you might have done, all the wonderful things you were going to do, and I'd hate myself for having stopped your doing' them."

He shook his head.

"You're wrong, Beth. I must go."

"And all those wonderful things—must they all go? Your books—you were going to do such great things with your books, John, with his flaming pen, was going to purge the world of injustice, burn up all that was unworthy and light mankind to a newer, better world. That's better work than going to China— better for you, I mean, because it's work that you could do, work that you were meant to do—work I want you to do." She was silent, watching

his face, awaiting his reply. But he made no reply and only sat there, gazing out over the valley.

"Your first novel," she went on. "There was to be a special copy—bound in calf—for me. I'm still waiting for it. All this time I've kept a space empty for it in my own specially private bookcase beside my bed. How much longer have I got to wait for it?"

Again he looked towards her and seemed about to say something; then his hand found hers, as it lay on his sleeve, lingered there for a moment, raised it and placed it on her lap.

"I must go, Beth."

As he turned away, she lay back and clasped her hands beneath her head. She knew John. It was no use arguing with him any more. He meant to go to China, and nothing she could say would stop him. After all, what right had she to try to stop him? She knew what he was doing—running away to lick his wounds in secret, the wounds which she had given him—and since there was no other means of healing his wounds, why should she try to prevent his going?

Again, as she had done two days ago, she tried to be frank with herself. Why was she so anxious to stop John going? Was it really because she believed he was unfitted for the work, that he was going in a fit of pique which he would regret later, that he would be better employed using that flaming pen of his to purge the world of injustice? All these arguments which she had used against him, were they really any more than excuses, pretexts, camouflage to hide her real reason for wanting him to stay, because her real reason was one which she had not the pluck to acknowledge?

But why not acknowledge it? Why not admit what deep down in her she knew to be true—that she still loved John, more than she had ever loved him—so much that she could not bear the thought of his leaving her?

That was the truth. That at least was half the truth, and the other half was that John loved her.

It was queer the way things worked out: because she loved John, she wanted him to stay; because he loved her, he was determined to go. And admitting that all this was the truth, what then? Was not John perhaps right? If this love of theirs brought them only unhappiness, wasn't it wisdom to run away from it? She saw suddenly that if John wanted to run away she had no right to try to prevent him. It was she who had shattered their wonder world, and the least she could do was to allow John to go away and forget, if he could, that it had ever existed. It was not fair to keep him here in England if she had no wonder world to offer him. And she had nothing to

offer him. Friendship, yes. But what would John want with a friendship that only served to remind him of all that might have been?

She sat up and got to her feet.

"Come on, John," she said; "let's go home."

CHAPTER XIV

IT was not Elizabeth's first visit to the prison. As a member of the Prison Visiting Committee—one of the many committees to which, as the wife of Richard Anson, it was her duty to belong—she had been there a good many times; but never before had she felt such a wave of depression sweep over her as she did today when the gates were shut behind her and she followed the warder along the corridor towards the governor's office.

Her talk with John that morning, when she had realized that he must go to China and that she must make no effort to prevent him, had left her discouraged and dispirited, and the gloomy atmosphere of the prison building oppressed her and gave her the feeling that nothing in the world was really worth while. The world was so full of unhappiness that the best one could hope for was to get through it as quickly as possible.

The governor, an upright military figure of a man, with a neat military moustache, greeted her cordially. The wife of Richard Anson was entitled to cordiality.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Anson," he said. "You've come to see the Burns woman, haven't you? Dr. Ewell was here this morning and told me you'd be coming."

Elizabeth forced a smile.

"That's like Dr. Ewell. When he told you that, he hadn't even asked me. But the doctor has a way of making people do what he wants them to do. I didn't want to come."

"Not a very cheerful experience, I'm afraid, Mrs. Anson, but that wouldn't trouble Ewell. He's something of a sentimentalist, you know. He always talks to me as if I were a wicked ogre and the prisoners a set of injured innocents. I'm afraid he wasn't thinking of your feelings, but only of Mrs. Burns. However, you needn't stop many minutes. The woman's in the infirmary—a bit queer in the head, I fancy. The matron tells me that her mind seemed to be wandering this morning and they couldn't stop her singing. She doesn't seem to realize her position; at least, if she does realize it, she's not at all concerned about it. She just lies there smiling and singing."

"Perhaps she's happy," said Elizabeth.

The governor shook his head.

"I can't imagine anyone being happy, Mrs. Anson, after committing a crime like Mrs. Burns has committed. I've had a good deal of experience of this sort of thing, you know, and I've come to the conclusion that a man or woman of that type must not be judged by the same standards as we apply

to other people. We're rather inclined to credit them with having the same feelings, the same instincts as we have—"

"And don't you think they have?"

"I'm quite certain they have not. Experience has proved to me that criminals are of a definitely lower order of beings than ordinary men and women. They are less sensitive, less responsive—often entirely unresponsive— to those finer influences by which we are affected. Only the sentimentalist would want to treat them as normal, civilized human beings."

"I see," smiled Elizabeth. "Then if I had murdered my husband, that's what you'd say about me, is it? Or perhaps that's what you really think of me now."

She shook her head. "I'm quite sure you're wrong. It seems ridiculous to you to talk of my murdering anyone, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid you won't convince me, Mrs. Anson, that you're a potential murderess."

"I know; and that's where you're making your mistake. You think that because a woman is what you would call civilized—well educated, nicely dressed, refined, with charming manners—she isn't capable of committing a murder, that she couldn't possibly ever want to murder anyone. But you're wrong. She might. I think so, anyway. I don't believe my feelings and instincts are any different from those of poor Mrs. Burns. Judy O'Grady and the Colonel's lady—Kipling was quite right—they're sisters under their skins. Am I a terrible sentimentalist?"

The governor gave a shrug.

"You wouldn't be for long, Mrs. Anson, if you had my job. If you really want to see this woman—"

"Yes, I do—now."

"Then I'll get the matron to take you."

She followed the matron to the infirmary. Mrs. Burns was in bed. Beside the bed sat a hard-faced wardress, who gave Elizabeth a stony stare. But Elizabeth had no eyes for her: her gaze went at once to the face of the woman in the bed—lined, pale, drawn, the dull grey hair pulled back from her wrinkled forehead. She was a woman of about sixty, but what instantly struck Elizabeth, as she walked up to the bed and stood looking down at her, was the expression of serenity on the worn face. The woman was gazing up at the ceiling, with her lips slightly parted and a far-away look in her eyes. Elizabeth remembered her words to the governor: "Perhaps she's happy."

"Here's Mrs. Anson come to see you, Mrs. Burns," said the matron.

Mrs. Burns turned her head, and as she saw Elizabeth she smiled.

"This is kind of you, Mrs. Anson," she said. "Fancy you taking the trouble to come to this place and see me!"

"How are you, Mrs. Burns?" asked Elizabeth kindly. "I met Dr. Ewell this morning and he told me you weren't very well and would like to see me."

"Ah, there's a real gentleman for you, Mrs. Anson. He's that kind to me I might be one of his lady patients. Thank you for coming, Mrs. Anson. I felt I'd like to see you—and talk with you."

Elizabeth nodded and turned to the matron.

"Mayn't I speak with her alone?"

"If you wish it," said the matron curtly, and turned away.

Elizabeth glanced at the grim-visaged wardress seated beside the bed.

"You don't have to take any notice of her, Mrs. Anson," she said. "She's got to stay there—to keep an eye on me." She smiled again. "You weren't afraid to come and see a woman who'd killed her husband?"

"We won't talk about that, Mrs. Burns; we'll just forget—"

"I'm not going to forget it. I killed him—with an axe. He was lying on the bed—drunk. He always was drunk. I saw the axe and I did it. It was a new one. He'd bought it two days before—at Mason's in the High Street. He was going to cut down a tree in the garden."

Elizabeth made no reply. She had an uneasy feeling that, with that stony-faced wardress sitting there, she should not allow Mrs. Burns to talk like this, but she didn't know how to stop her.

"I killed him; Mrs. Anson," the woman went on, "and I'm not sorry. It was no worse than killing a hog. Thirty-five years I was married to him. I was teaching in a school in those days. You wouldn't think that to see me now, would you? But I was. I never did like it, though—always wanted to get out of it and do something a bit more exciting, and when Alf came along and asked me to marry him, I didn't want asking twice." She sighed. "Thirty-five years I had of it, Mrs. Anson, living in the same room, in the same house; never doing anything I wanted to do; always having to be something I wasn't. Just the same thing year after year—having children and washing and cleaning and cooking, and all the time seeing myself getting older and older. But there, you can't understand what that means."

"I think I can," said Elizabeth quietly.

"Never being yourself, Mrs. Anson—always having to be what someone else wants you to be. That was the hardest part of it. Choking things down that come rising up from your heart; being something you're not, so as to seem to be what people think you are. And there was Alf—always drunk. Nothing behind me to think about and make up for things, and nothing in front of me to look forward to."

"I'd try not to think of all that now, Mrs. Burns, if I were you."

The woman shook her head.

"I'm always thinking of it. I do a lot of thinking, lying here. I see now how it all happened. There was a devil in me, Mrs. Anson. I've an idea there's a devil in all women, and the longer we keep him in our hearts the bigger he grows. And I'll tell you what makes him strong—worrying about what other people will think of us and what they'll say about us. I was always thinking about that. I got an idea once that I'd run away and leave Alf—leave everything and make a fresh start. There was a man—" She sighed. "But it's no good talking about that now; that was twenty years ago. I didn't go—I hadn't got the courage. I went after the good opinion of people I didn't even know, who'd never heard of me and wouldn't have cared if I'd been in hell. I just went on sticking to a man who wasn't worth sticking to, when, if I hadn't been afraid of what people might think of me, I could have left him and been happy. And made someone else happy too. I suppose I'd have gone on doing it if I hadn't happened to see that axe. Something happened to me then, Mrs. Anson. I just couldn't help myself. I had to kill him. I hit him with all my strength, and as soon as I saw I'd killed him I was really happy for the first time in thirty-five years. I'm happy now and I know why that is: it's because the devil's gone out of me. They can do what they like to me now, Mrs. Anson—I don't care. They can't stop me being happy."

She rambled on for some time; then, as she seemed to be falling asleep, Elizabeth wished her good-bye and hurried out of the prison.

CHAPTER XV

AFTER tea that afternoon Elizabeth excused herself from tennis and sought sanctuary in her bedroom. She felt uneasy, restless, depressed and in need of solitude. Her interview with Mrs. Burns had been a trying ordeal of which she found it impossible to shake off the effects; and that, coming on top of her talk that morning with John, had left her thoughts in a state of hopeless confusion. She wanted to be alone and sort things out. It was no use trying, as she had tried, to dismiss from her mind the thought of Mrs. Burns and what she had said to her. The thoughts persisted as if determined not to give her a moment's peace until she took notice of them and dealt with them.

The extraordinary thing was that Mrs. Burns, in spite of the terrible thing she had done, and the certainty that she would pay a terrible price for having done it, had seemed to feel no remorse. More than that, she had actually seemed happy, with a serene sort of happiness, as though, after shirking a disagreeable task for a long time, she had suddenly found the courage to perform it and so had gained peace.

That devil in women of which she had spoken—it was queer that she had used that phrase, the very phrase which Dr. Ewell had used when he had talked to her the other evening in the garden. A woman was probably the better for letting it out, the doctor had said, and Mrs. Burns had said much the same. Mrs. Burns had let it out, and now, in spite of everything, she was happy.

It was true, she supposed—all women had it; all men too, perhaps. But a man could let his devil out, and a woman couldn't. She crushed it down, repressed it, because she hadn't the courage to set it free. Worrying about what people think of you and what they'll say about you, clinging to a life that wasn't worth clinging to, for the sake of appearing respectable. Misplaced loyalty, that's what Dr. Ewell had called it—sticking to a man and being unhappy when the man wasn't worth sticking to, and it only needed a little courage to grasp your happiness.

After all, what else was she herself doing? Was Richard worth sticking to? She tried to view her husband dispassionately and saw him now more clearly than she had ever seen him: pompous, self-righteous, hypocritical, selfish, valuing all those things which in her heart she knew to be valueless. She had felt a kind of respect for Richard when she had married him, but it had rapidly waned; and when he had flung at her his accusations the other morning he had shattered the last remnants of it. He had no further right to her respect, and if she had the courage of Mrs. Burns, even a fraction of her courage, she would not go on sacrificing her happiness.

But it wasn't, she told herself, entirely a question of courage. After all, she had made a bargain with Richard, and there was such a thing as honesty even in a commercial transaction. If she did as she pleased, there was no doubt now in her mind as to what she would do: she would leave Richard and go to John—cast out her devil and grasp her happiness. But even if she found the courage to do that, and could persuade herself that she would be justified in doing it, there was still the question of John. Would John think her justified? Would he consent to have any hand in what he would regard as a shady transaction?

She shook her head, smiling faintly. She knew John better than that, and because she knew him so well she had refrained that morning from tempting him with the offer of her love to abandon his trip to China. She was quite sure now why John was going to China: because he wanted to forget; because he was afraid of that very temptation; because he felt that, even though she might be ready to go to him, he could not be responsible for allowing her to make that sort of mess of her life. John would still have gone to China, and by pleading with him to stay for her sake, she would only have made it the harder for him to go. It looked as though her devil must remain imprisoned.

There came a tap at the door, and she turned round to see her husband standing in the doorway.

"May I come in, my dear?"

She faced her mirror again, picked up her lipstick and became engrossed in applying it.

"I'm just dressing for dinner, Richard."

"I want to have a talk with you."

"Leave it till later, Richard, will you? We can have a talk after dinner."

He closed the door, crossed the room and stood beside her.

"I want to talk to you alone, Elizabeth," he said. "I've been wanting to speak to you for several days, but I don't seem to have had a chance to get you to myself. I've things to say to you—confidential things—and one can't speak confidentially through a closed door."

She shrugged a shoulder.

"In the circumstances, Richard, you can hardly blame me if you find the door closed. What do you want to say to me?"

She leaned back in her chair, glancing up at him as he stood over her. Suddenly he bent forward and pressed his lips against hers. She thrust him

from her and placed the back of her hand against her mouth, as if to protect it from further outrage.

"Richard—please!"

"Did that surprise you?"

"Very much."

He smiled.

"It shouldn't, my dear," he said. "If I were a woman as beautiful as you are, I shouldn't be surprised if my husband wanted to kiss me."

She picked up a wisp of a handkerchief from her dressing-table and drew it across her lips.

"If you were a woman, Richard, who had been insulted by her husband as I have been—if you had had the foul things said to you—"

He raised his hand.

"My dear, can't we forget all that?"

She glanced at him in surprise.

"Forget?" She shook her head. "You don't know very much about women, Richard, if you think they can so easily forget that sort of thing."

Pulling up an arm-chair, he seated himself in it.

"Listen, Elizabeth," he said. "I admit that in the heat of the moment I said a great many things the other morning which I had no right to say. I—er—exaggerated."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Is that all? When it comes to dealing with yourself, Richard, you don't err on the side of harshness, do you? I'll tell you what you did. You made the most abominable charges against me that you could possibly make against a woman, and if I had there and then walked out of your house you'd have had no right to complain. You can't expect a woman to live in the same house as a man when he has shown himself to her as you showed yourself to me—capable of thinking that sort of thing about her, capable of harbouring that sort of suspicion—"

Again he raised his hand.

"I've admitted that I was wrong, Elizabeth. I've admitted that I let my tongue run away with me—"

She banged the dressing-table with her clenched fist.

"You were foul—beastly—obscene. Will you admit that? Of course you won't. Because you aren't capable of realizing how foul you were. If you weren't

foul, if you hadn't the sort of mind that can't help thinking foul things, you could never have said what you did say." She turned away from him again. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm afraid we must, my dear. You can hardly expect me to leave matters in their present unsatisfactory condition. You don't seem to understand—"

"I understand quite well. You think a man can insult his wife as you insulted me and then put everything right by apologizing. Some things cut too deeply for the wound to be healed by an apology." She swung round and faced him again. "Do you think I don't know why you're apologizing? It may hurt your pride to do it, but it would hurt your pride a good deal more to come upstairs this evening and find my door locked. You didn't expect that, did you? You think a woman must put up with any insult and still play her part as the dutiful wife, don't you? And so long as she's willing to be accommodating, you're ready to be broad-minded and magnanimous and forgive her. The other night, Richard—I saw the handle of your dressing-room door turn, and I've never despised and hated you so much as then."

Anson sighed.

"You're being most unfair to me, Elizabeth. I come here prepared to make an apology to you, to admit that I said things which I shouldn't have said, and all you do is to turn on me and abuse me. I can only hope that you have said a great many things that you don't really mean. We're all liable to do that, you as much as I. But I do think, my dear, that we should try to make allowances. I should never have said what I did say if I hadn't been worried and anxious. Believe me, Elizabeth, I'm extremely sorry if what I said offended you—"

"Did you expect it not to offend me?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suggest, my dear, that you should be generous enough to say no more about it. I am more than ready to meet you halt-way. I have felt lately that we have wot been on quite the same happy footing as we used to be on. We've been drifting apart, and I think we should both make an effort to stop the drift. It has probably been largely my fault. I have been so fully occupied with my business worries—very grave worries—that I have perhaps devoted less time and attention than I should to my home and my wife. But I'm asking you to overlook that and—er—be friends again."

"Friends? Very well, Richard; I am perfectly willing to be friends—but no more. If you've been so worried, why didn't you tell me?"

"For the simple reason, my dear, that I had no wish to worry you. Business worries are for the husband, not for the wife, and there was no object in distressing you."

"And now there is?"

He frowned.

"I am extremely anxious," he said, "and matters have reached such a pitch that I feel I should not be justified in disguising the true state of affairs any longer."

She glanced at him sharply.

"You mean the Bank?"

He nodded.

"The Bank has been passing through a very critical time. There's no need for me to go into details; you wouldn't understand them. But the fact remains that things are in a—er—distinctly precarious condition."

"Then it is true, Richard, what people have been saying?"

"What have they been saying?" he demanded sharply. "What have you heard?"

"Oh, just rumours, here and there. I meet so many people in Dilchester and I hear all sorts of rumours without paying much attention to them. I didn't pay much attention to these."

"What rumours?"

"Well, I've heard one or two people speaking about the Bank. Not to me, of course; they wouldn't. And they said nothing very definite. You know the sort of thing—someone had heard someone else say that things weren't quite right with Anson's Bank."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"It didn't seem worth while. People are always saying something isn't quite right with something, and I felt quite sure that you'd have told me if anything were really wrong. Just how bad are things, Richard?"

"Pretty bad. I'm afraid, my dear. And if these rumours have got about they'll very quickly be worse. If there's any sort of a run on the Bank—well, we shall have to close the doors, that's all. It's nobody's fault. I've done my very utmost to meet the situation. I've asked Doran to lend a hand."

"Doran?"

"Fifty thousand pounds is nothing to Doran, but he hesitates and procrastinates, and in the meantime Anson's Bank is smashed. There's not

a moment to be lost. A run on the Bank may start at any time, and if we can't get our fifty thousand, we're down and out." She was gazing at him thoughtfully.

"And what exactly will that mean, Richard?"

"Mean! It'll mean ruin—ruin for me, ruin for the other directors, ruin for the thousands of depositors who've put their money in the Bank."

"But I don't understand, Richard. How did things get into this condition? I always thought Anson's Bank—"

"Good God! What does it matter now? I'm telling you that I'm faced with ruin and disgrace and all you do is to ask me how, and why, and when. That doesn't help."

"Disgrace?" repeated Elizabeth. "But you said just now, Richard, that if the crash came, it would be nobody's fault. I don't understand. If it's nobody's fault, where does the disgrace come in?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Elizabeth, don't quibble. I didn't come here to be put through a cross-examination. I've told you all that it's necessary for you to realize that the position is very serious."

"All that you think it's necessary for me to know," said Elizabeth. "I don't doubt that. All that you wish me to know. But how much is there that you don't wish me to know? Why not tell me the whole truth, Richard?"

"Good God!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Haven't you heard enough? What more do you want to know?"

"I want to know—I think I've a right to know—just what you meant just now when you spoke of disgrace. If you've done anything you're ashamed of—anything that's going to land you into trouble—anything illegal—"

"So that's what you think of me, is it? I'm a crook and a criminal now—a fraudulent director—"

"I haven't said so, Richard. I'm just asking you to tell me whether you are or not. After all, I'm your wife, and if there's that sort of trouble ahead, I'm entitled to know what I've got to face."

"If you care to be sensible you'll have nothing to face. I've done nothing that hundreds of other men haven't done. Perhaps I've taken risks, but there's no crime in that. You've got to take risks these days to make money."

"Then you have done something—risky?"

"Oh, for God's sake stop arguing, Elizabeth I The fact is, I'm in the very devil of a hole. I've got to have fifty thousand pounds—at once; and as Doran's still humming and hawing and I can't possibly raise it anywhere else, I've no

other course open to me. It goes against the grain, I can tell you. No man likes having to go to his wife for money, but in the circumstances—"

"You want me to give you fifty thousand pounds?"

"No, I don't. I want you to lend it—to Anson's Bank. It's the only way out of the mess that I can see, and your money will be perfectly safe. It'll tide us over this bad patch and you'll get every penny of it back when things get better. It's a perfectly sound business proposition, and it can all be done properly by your solicitor."

"I see," said Elizabeth thoughtfully. "And suppose I do give you fifty thousand pounds—will that put things right?"

"It will tide us over."

"Will it put things right—permanently?"

"It's all I want at the moment. If once we can get through this bad patch- -"

"And how much will you want ultimately? I don't mean just to tide you over, Richard, if you're going to get into another bad patch as soon as you're out of this one. What sum do you require to put Anson's Bank in a really sound position again?"

"Offhand, Elizabeth, I'm afraid I really can't say."

"You don't know? Wouldn't it be as well to find out?"

"That's not the point at the moment," he said irritably. "The question now is, can you advance me fifty thousand pounds? You don't know how it hurts to have to ask my wife for a—loan. It's not exactly dignified—"

"If fifty thousand will only just keep your head above water, what will prevent your drowning?"

"There's no question of drowning!" exclaimed Anson impatiently. "There's no need to go into all that. I don't intend to submit to a cross-examination about the Bank's finances. Will you lend me the fifty thousand or won't you?"

She shook her head.

"No, Richard, I don't think I will. There's nothing to be gained by lending you the money if it's just going to disappear down the drain and do no real good."

"You mean—you refuse?"

She nodded. Anson rose to his feet.

"My God I You good women! You're not human!" She shrugged a shoulder.

"I'm not a fool, Richard, anyway," she said. "I'd let you have the fifty thousand if I thought it would be of the least use—permanently, I mean. But it wouldn't. It would only stave off the evil day a little longer, and if the crash has got to be faced, you may just as well face it now as later. That's not being hard, Richard; it's just being sensible."

"It's just being damnably callous. You—my wife—when I come and tell you I'm faced with absolute ruin—you won't raise a finger to help me—"

"You won't raise a finger to help yourself, Richard. You haven't even the courage to face the facts, to and out what the facts are, what you're up against. That's cowardice. And if you don't know what you've got to face, what right have you to ask me to face it with you? You won't even tell me the truth. You're afraid of being disgraced, but you won't tell me why you're afraid, what you've done that might bring disgrace on you. You haven't got enough faith in me for that. Yet you expect me to have faith in you—fifty thousand pounds' worth of faith. That's not a fair bargain."

"Bargain!" exclaimed Anson angrily. "Here am I, your husband, worried out of my life, up to my neck in trouble, asking you to help me, fand you calmly sit there and talk about a bargain! I suppose I should nave expected it. I suppose I should have known you'd be as vindictive as you could just because I said a few hasty words to you when I didn't know which way to turn. That's like a woman. She'll take and take and keep on taking, but as soon as a man asks her to eve anything, then it's quite a different story. Where does she come in? What will she get out of it? You're all the same—fair-weather friends. You've no idea of loyalty."

Elizabeth smiled.

"Have you ever heard of misplaced loyalty, Richard? Someone was talking to me about that the other day—loyalty to someone who isn't worthy of loyalty."

He strode to the door and flung it open.

"So that's it, is it?" he exclaimed furiously. "I'm unworthy of loyalty, am I? I'm not worth helping when I'm up against difficulties? Even though I am your husband, you'd rather see me drown than hold out a hand to help me. But you'd help Hackett soon enough, wouldn't you? If Hackett wanted fifty thousand pounds he wouldn't have to ask twice. How much has he had already, eh? How much do you have to pay him to keep him dangling round you—"

She sprang to her feet.

"Richard—you're intolerable!"

"Intolerable, am I? But Hackett isn't intolerable. You can lock your door against your husband, but you'd never dream of locking it against Hackett. Your husband doesn't count. You can trick and deceive him and laugh at him behind his back and not feel you're doing anything wrong so long as you can carry on your nasty little intrigue with Hackett. You wouldn't wipe your lips after Hackett had kissed you, would you? Oh yes, I noticed that. I'm not quite blind; I see more than you think I see. I've seen all along." He flung out a hand and shook his fist at her. "But it's got to stop. Understand that. You're mine, not Hackett's, and what's mine I keep. Get that into your head. Lock your door again tonight and you'll soon see whether you're mine or his. I'll break it down. If it rouses the whole household, I'll break it down. I'm your husband, and Hackett or no Hackett, I'm going to be your husband."

There came the sound of footsteps in the corridor, and

Elizabeth caught a glimpse of John as he passed along it towards his bedroom. As he reached the door of her room, she saw him pause, and just for a moment she was afraid that he had heard what her husband had said and was about to interfere. But after a momentary hesitation he went on.

She turned again to her dressing-table, seated herself and picked up her lipstick. Leaning forward, she began to apply it to her lips, studying the effect closely in the mirror, while her husband stood glaring at her from the doorway.

"Well?" he demanded.

She did not turn her head, and the lipstick still moved slowly along her lip.

"Hadn't you better get dressed for dinner, Richard?"

Without a word he turned, strode from the room and noisily slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XVI

DINNER was not a comfortable meal for Elizabeth. Richard made no attempt to be agreeable, rarely spoke, and, if he did say anything, somehow contrived to put a double edge on his remark so that, whichever way Elizabeth took it, she could not escape a cut.

John, too, was inclined to be silent, and once or twice she caught him looking at her with a puzzled, troubled expression. She wondered how much he had heard as he had passed along the corridor during her husband's tirade. Not much, she hoped. There was no need for John to know into what sort of a hell she had landed when she had declined to enter that wonder world of theirs with him. There was nothing to be done about it now, and nothing to be gained by letting John know, by letting John suspect that she was not perfectly happy. And then the thought came to her that if John realized how unhappy she was he might be tempted not to go to China.

She dismissed the thought instantly. So far, she had resisted the temptation to use herself as a bait to keep him in England; partly because she was afraid that he might not take the bait, which would hurt her, and partly because she feared that he might take it, and she would feel that she had kept him in England under false pretences, because she had nothing to give him.

She did not intend to start using that bait now. Suppose she too played a swindling trick—left her husband and offered herself to John? But she knew, as soon as the thought occurred to her, that she could never do it. Richard would not divorce her. He had told her so, and Richard, no matter what complaints she might have against him on other scores, had at any rate the merit of being a faithful husband. If she went to John at all, it would mean that she could offer him nothing better than a makeshift intrigue, and she would rather offer him nothing than that. She caught herself wishing that Richard were not quite so virtuously faithful, because in that case she could leave him without a qualm, without the least feeling that she was playing a swindling trick and backing out her bargain.

She glanced across the table at her husband and smiled. Somehow she couldn't picture Richard as an erring husband....

"And I'm sure you're not listening to a word I'm wring, Elizabeth," came Mrs. Stellman's voice. "Mrs. Hilliard seemed quite worried about it."

"Worried about what, mother?"

"My dear, I've just been telling you. I met her this morning in the town, and she put me through a regular cross-examination. 'My dear Agatha,' I said, 'it's no use asking me. If you want to know anything about the Bank you should go and ask Richard.'—"

Anson glanced up quickly.

"What had Mrs. Hilliard to say about the Bank?"

"Well, she didn't exactly say it, Richard. She only told me what she'd heard other people saying. So ridiculous, the things people do say."

"And what are people saying, Mrs. Stellman?"

"Oh, all sorts of terrible things, Richard, according to Agatha Hilliard— and of course she's rather worried because she doesn't know whether she ought to take out her money or not. She asked me what I thought about it, and I said that if she didn't feel comfortable about the Bank the sooner she took her wretched money out of it the better."

"You told her that? Do you realize, Mrs. Stellman, 'hat Mrs. Hilliard's is a very valuable account?"

"Is it, Richard? I'm sorry if I shouldn't have said it, but she would keep talking, and I was in a dreadful hurry, and I felt sure you wouldn't want anyone to keep money in your bank if they couldn't trust you to look after it. She said she should take it out tomorrow, and all her friends were going to do the same. They'd heard things, so Agatha said. It's ridiculous, because I'm quite sure, Richard, that if the Bank weren't absolutely sound, you wouldn't leave your money there for five minutes."

"No, Mrs. Stellman, I certainly shouldn't. If you hear any more such talk, please contradict it. Everything is perfectly right with Anson's Bank."

"Of course, Richard. I knew it was. I was really very annoyed with Agatha Hilliard for suggesting that it wasn't. But of course her husband is only an estate agent...."

Anson did not suggest bridge that night. Immediately after dinner he went to his study, without troubling to excuse himself. The other three went to the drawing-room, and Elizabeth seated herself at the piano and began to play, while her mother talked incessantly to John. Presently John got up from his chair and came to stand by the piano, watching her as she played. She glanced up at him and smiled. "Bored, John?"

He nodded.

"Don't you feel like Chopin?"

"I want to talk to you, Beth," he said gravely.

"I'm listening."

"I can't talk to you here. Stop playing and come in the garden."

"Do you really think, John," she laughed, "that that's a proper proposal to make to Mrs. Richard Anson?"

"I'm not making it to Mrs. Richard Anson: I'm making it to Beth."

"And what do you want to talk to Beth about?"

"About Mrs. Richard Anson."

She shook her head.

"Mrs. Richard Anson's reputation is beyond reproach. I'm not going to listen to you."

With a shrug, he turned away, crossed to the open French windows, paused a moment to glance back at her and went out into the garden.

For some minutes Elizabeth continued playing, a little pucker showing between her eyebrows. She didn't want John to talk to her—especially out there in the garden. She didn't want to be alone with him. It wasn't—safe. She might say things which she knew she mustn't say, let him see more than she wanted him to see. This morning, when they had sat together on the downs, it had been almost more than she could to hide her feelings from him. John still loved her. But because he was John, it would not occur to him that she, who was Richard Anson's wife, could possibly love him. That was John's simple, direct way of looking at things. And she didn't want him to see things in any other way. There was safety so long as that barrier was between them, but she could not trust herself not to say something, or do something, or look something, if she were alone with him, which would not break the barrier down or bring him leaping over it. And then suddenly she stopped playing, got up from her seat and went out into the garden.

She found him in the summer-house and sat down beside him.

"I knew you'd come, Beth."

"So did I, John," she laughed. "But I'm rather surprised at Mrs. Richard Anson. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Richard Anson has been giving me a few shocks lately, and if you're going to find fault with her I shall probably agree with you."

"I'm not going to find fault, Beth, and you probably won't agree with me. Mrs. Richard Anson isn't happy."

"She has everything to make her happy. Money, a beautiful home, an honoured position, a husband who is respected Besides, how do you know she isn't happy?"

"Oh, all right. Let's forget Mrs. Richard Anson," said John. "Let's talk about you, Beth. You're not happy."

"Is that a question, John?"

"I don't have to ask questions to know whether you're happy or not. I've watched you ever since I came, and if you looked me in the eyes and put

your hand on your heart and said, 'S'elp me bob', like you used to say, and told me you were happy, I still shouldn't believe you."

"Sure you're not imagining things, John?"

"Quite sure. I know what you're up to. You're squashing your unhappiness down, trying to keep it out of sight, refusing to admit it's there, even to yourself. But it is there. You can't hide it from me, Beth; I know you too well. I know every expression on your face, every look in your eyes, every little gesture. I've—remembered them."

He was climbing the barrier now, and Elizabeth was in a panic of indecision. She wanted to stretch out a hand and help him over, and at the same time she wanted to push him back. Before she could decide, he went on speaking.

"This evening, Beth, upstairs, as I went along to my room—I couldn't help hearing. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to say something—something to help you."

She laid her hand on his arm in the way that was so familiar to him.

"I'm glad you didn't, John. You'd have done no good. You'd only have made matters worse."

"Worse? Then they are bad, are they?"

She was silent for a moment, and he waited for her reply.

"I wish you hadn't come, John," she said. "I didn't want you to come. I begged Richard not to let you come, but he wouldn't listen to me. He was afraid of offending Mr. Doran, and he said he couldn't afford to to that."

"Why didn't you want me to come?"

"Oh, a hundred reasons. I can't explain them all. But one reason was that I didn't want you to see what you have seen. I didn't mean anyone to see. I don't think anyone but you has seen. But you're quite right, John; it's no use trying to hide it from you. I'm not happy. I wouldn't have told you the truth if I'd thought you'd have believed a lie. But I knew you wouldn't."

He laid his hands on hers.

"I'm sorry, Beth."

"You shouldn't be," she answered. "You shouldn't be the least bit sorry for me. It's all my own fault. If you refuse to enter heaven, you mustn't complain if you find yourself in hell."

"As bad as that, my dear?"

"Just at this moment, while I'm sitting here and thinking just what sort of heaven I did throw away, it seems as bad as that. I shouldn't be saying this

sort of thing to you, John, should I? But I can't help it. You shouldn't have seen things you weren't intended to see. But it doesn't always seem so bad. It's just seeing you again, I suppose, and remembering and regretting—and wishing. Why do we have to wish, John? Wishing only makes things worse. Sometimes, when it seems extra bad, I get away from it all—go off to my island for a couple of days and play my piano, and dream about... Oh, never mind what I dream about! I'd like to take you to my island, John—just to see what you really look like sitting on the verandah. Did you know I'd got an island?"

He shook his head, and she launched into a description of it—of the beach and the bungalow and the motor-boat and old Jim Huggett, and how she sat cm her verandah and tried to calculate how many gallons of salt water separated her from the mainland and her life at Dilchester Court. She told him, too, how, gradually, when she was alone in her sanctuary, serenity came to her and fresh strength flowed into her, so that she could come back to Dilchester Court and carry on again as Mrs. Richard Anson.

"I'm always Beth on the island, John," she said. "I'd like you to see it. Perhaps before you go I could run you over to Whitbourne; it's only fifty miles."

He nodded.

"I wish I could do something, Beth."

She shook her head.

"There's nothing to be done. It's just a grand old mess, and I caused it, and I've got to grin and bear it. You mustn't worry; I shall be all right."

"But surely—of course, I don't know much about it, and if you don't choose to tell me I'm not going to press you. But if things are as bad—well, as bad as they seem to be—surely something can be done? I mean, it's not as if you were dependent on Anson. You've got money of your own and you might make some sort of arrangement—"

She cut him short.

"There's nothing to be done, John—nothing that wouldn't be—cheap."

"I see," he said. "Sorry I butted in. Just forget, will you, that I saw things I wasn't intended to see." He felt the pressure of her fingers on his arm, and then he heard her voice, hardly more than a whisper: "No, John, I won't forget. I think I'd like to remember that."

CHAPTER XVII

WHILE Elizabeth and John were together in the summer-house, Anson was pacing the floor of his study. His blaze of resentment against his wife, which he had been obliged to damp down during dinner, flared up again as soon as he was in the privacy of his own room. The more he thought of her treatment of him, the more fuel was added to his bitterness against her.

He wished now that he had not asked her for the fifty thousand pounds; it had only given her another opportunity to humiliate him. But when Celia had suggested it, it had struck him as the obvious way out of his difficulties. He had been quite confident that if he tackled her diplomatically the money would be forthcoming, and the discovery that Elizabeth could stand up to him as she had done and refuse to do anything to help him had come as a shock to his pride. She had been as obstinate and intractable as Doran, and—also like Doran—had somehow contrived to make him feel small and ineffective.

He had probably tackled her in the wrong way. There shouldn't have been any of that apologizing and pretending that he hadn't meant what he had said when he had accused her the other morning. Generous gestures like that were not appreciated by a woman; she always took them to be signs of weakness.

He should have asserted his authority, issued his instructions, and made it clear to her that he intended to be obeyed. The apology had done no good. Elizabeth had graciously agreed to be "friends" with him, but she had made it pretty clear that her door would remain locked, and to admit to her, as he had done.

That he had never really doubted her, had given her the whip hand and put him in an impossible position.

If he doubted her, he was insulting, beastly, obscene; if he didn't doubt her, he was a fool, whom she had tricked and could go on tricking with impunity. That's how she'd look at it. She'd think she had him caught now either way, and her refusal to lend him the money was her typically feminine way of getting back at him for having dared to suspect her of what she knew to be true. She was vindictive and wanted to hurt him, and if he apologized a dozen times she would still refuse to help him and still be careful to lock her door. Well, two could be vindictive. He wasn't quite so powerless to hurt her as she seemed to think.

He paused in his pacing, glancing across at the telephone that stood on his desk, and slowly a smile came to his face. That would be one way to hurt Elizabeth. Not just at the moment, but it would be something to keep up his sleeve and, when the right time came, fling in her face. It would hurt her

more than anything. A woman was like that. She could carry on any cheap little intrigue behind her husband's back and persuade herself that she was justified in doing so, but if he dared to look at another woman, she was insulted, outraged, wounded as she could be by nothing else. It would give him great satisfaction to tell Elizabeth one day the truth about himself and Celia.

He crossed to his desk, seated himself at it and took from his pocket the slip of paper on which Celia had hastily scrawled the address and telephone number of her friend's flat. He lifted the telephone receiver, asked for the number and smiled as he waited for the connection to be made. There was a touch of humour, he told himself, in the situation: Elizabeth and young Hackett in the next room, secretly congratulating themselves on the way they had fooled him, and he in here, under the same roof, making an appointment with his mistress. It was a pity Elizabeth couldn't know.

"Hullo!"

There was no mistaking Celia's soft, slightly husky voice, but Anson was taking no risks.

"Is that Miss Paterson's flat?"

"It's Miss Paterson here. Who's speaking?"

"It's Mr. Anson."

"Who? I can't hear you."

"Mr. Anson." He lowered his voice and put his lips close to the mouthpiece. "It's Richard."

"Oh!" It was a long-drawn, sighing, ecstatic "Oh", which brought a smile of satisfaction to Anson's face.

"Oh, I'm terribly surprised, Richard. I wasn't expecting you to ring me up." Anson's smile vanished.

"Who were you expecting to ring you up?"

"Why, nobody, of course. I mean, I didn't expect you to ring me up so soon."

"Listen to me, Celia. I've something to say to you. Are you alone?"

"Why, of course, Richard. All alone—and just a tiny bit lonely."

"Well, perhaps we can put that right. I have to come up to London on business tomorrow."

"Oh, business!"

"The business won't take me long, and I thought that afterwards I might run along and see you. Would you like me to?"

"Oh, Richard, I'd adore it; you know I would."

"Very well, then," said Anson. "I can't stop to talk to you now, but I shall have quite a lot to say to you tomorrow. I'll be with you about four. Will that do?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I'll be ready for you, Richard."

"Then good-bye, my dear, until tomorrow."

"Good night, Richard. Oh, Richard!"

"Well?"

"Listen."

There came to him over the wire a strange sound which he did not remember having heard before on the telephone; but before he could decide what could have caused it, he heard Celia's voice again: "Did you get it, Richard?"

"Get what?"

"Why, the kiss. Didn't you hear it?"

"Oh, I see. Yes, my dear, I heard it. And now—good night, Celia."

"Oh, Richard!"

Anson made no reply.

"Richard—aren't you going to send me one?"

Good God! He—Richard Anson—blowing kisses on the telephone! He replaced the receiver and pushed the instrument away from him. He would have to talk to Celia very seriously. Suppose the girls at the exchange were listening in!

In Anson's mind, the word "flat" connoted a palatial building with uniformed porters, lifts, an impressive entrance hall and names in gold letters on a name board, and as he stood on the opposite side of the road and surveyed the old-fashioned three-storeyed house, whose fanlight bore a number which corresponded with that on the slip of paper Celia had given him, he bestowed on it a slight frown of disapproval.

This was not at all the sort of place that he had intended. If he had realized that Celia's friend was living in apartments, he would certainly not have agreed to her going there. He would have to knock at the front door, interview the landlady and ask for Celia, and that was just the sort of thing he wished to avoid. A man of his position had to be careful, discreet. His photograph had been in the papers several times, and there was the possibility of the landlady recognizing him. One chance in a million,

perhaps, but experience had taught him that the millionth chance had an unhappy knack of coming off when it was important that it shouldn't.

The sight of three bells, ranged one above the other beside the door, relieved his anxiety a little. It might not, after all, be necessary to interview the landlady. In any case, now he was here, he had better see the thing through.

He was about to cross the road when it struck him that a would-be lover paying his first visit could hardly arrive empty-handed. Celia would expect something or other, and it was important that she should not get a wrong impression of him. He glanced at his watch, found that he was ten minutes ahead of time, and strode off in the direction of Baker Street.

He found shops at the station, bought a large bunch of roses and a blatantly expensive box of chocolates, and returned to the front door uncomfortably conscious of the white paper cornucopia of roses in his hand. He felt that for Richard Anson to be standing on a doorstep with a bunch of roses in one hand and a box of chocolates tucked beneath his arm was only a shade less undignified than blowing kisses down a telephone. Why the devil hadn't he had the things put in a box?

Celia had told him that her friend's flat was on the top floor, and, as there were no names beneath the bells, he pressed the topmost button. He heard quick footsteps on the stairs, and the next moment the door was opened and Celia was smiling at him.

She was wearing a garment which he described to himself as "a loose kimono sort of thing"; a mass of highly coloured flowers, like no flowers that he had ever seen, on a black background. He was not quite sure whether it was a dressing-gown or not, but he was quite sure that he would have preferred her not to come to the front door in it, where any passer-by might see her.

Her golden hair looked more than usually golden, as though she had just been dipping it in a bath of sunshine; her eyes looked larger and softer and more like the eyes of a heifer than he had ever seen them; and the aura of perfume was definitely more heavily laden than it had been in the taxi.

"Oh, Mr. Anson—Richard—are those for me?" she exclaimed ecstatically, gazing at the bunch of roses. ".How perfectly adorable!"

He thrust the bunch into her hand. Of course they were for her. Did she imagine that he was in the habit of walking about London carrying a bunch of roses for his own pleasure?

She held the flowers to her nose, sniffing them daintily; he wished to goodness she'd stop sniffing and not keep him waiting on the doorstep. Someone might come out of one of the other flats and see him....

"I was terribly afraid you weren't coming, Richard," she smiled. "You're dreadfully late. But do come in. I'm longing to show you the flat; it's too perfectly sweet."

With a sigh of relief he stepped inside, hurriedly closed the door behind him, and followed her up the stairs. The staircase was steep, and by the time he reached the second floor Anson was breathing rather rapidly.

She led the way into the sitting-room. He would not have called it "perfectly sweet", but it was a pleasant room, tastefully furnished, and he noted with approval the two deep arm-chairs and the comfortable-looking settee.

She was watching him anxiously as he stood just inside the door, glancing round.

"You do like it, Richard, don't you?"

"Charming, my dear," he assured her. "Of course, a little later I should like you to have something of your own—one of those modern places—with a lift. But I'm sure we shall be very comfortable here for the time being."

He presented her with the box of chocolates; she opened it and put a chocolate in her mouth.

"Scrumptious! You really are an angel, Richard."

She led him to one of the big arm-chairs and settled him into it.

"And now I'm going to make a terrible fuss of you, Richard," she told him.

She took a cigarette from the box on the mantel-piece, placed it between his lips and gave him a light. He detested cigarettes, but he made no protest. She stood beside the chair for a few moments, smiling down at him, and then she suddenly stooped and brushed his cheek with her lips.

Anson sat upright and tried to slip his arm round her waist, but she stepped quickly away, shaking a linger at him reproachfully.

"Tea first, Richard," she said coyly. "I'm just going to make it, and you're to stay where you are and try to be a good boy."

She hurried out of the room. Anson was conscious of a sense of frustration. It hadn't turned out at all as he had planned it. He had made up his mind that the first thing he would do when he met Celia would be to kiss her. Ever since that ride with her in the taxi he had thought a good deal about kissing Celia, and had felt that he would very much like to kiss her again at the first possible moment. But downstairs, on the doorstep—he couldn't kiss her there; and as soon as they had come upstairs she had put a chocolate in her mouth....

Celia brought in the tea, handed him a cup and seated herself, with her own cup, on the big settee. He made a move to join her, but she shook a finger at

him again and told him he must be a good boy until lea was over, and he subsided in his chair, vowing to himself that he wouldn't sit on the settee with her for a thousand pounds.

Taking his cup from him, she set it down, returned to the settee and began nibbling chocolates, glancing at him every now and then with that look in her eyes which he found so attractive.

There was an awkward silence; he got the impression that she was waiting for something, and that if any move was to be made it must be made by himself.

He smiled at her. She came and perched herself on the arm of his chair and held a chocolate to his lips.

"Bite, Richard."

He did not bite. He disliked chocolates intensely, and if she intended munching them all the time he wished he hadn't bought them. But she was pushing the chocolate against his lips, urging him to take it, and he didn't want to disappoint her. He took it and swallowed it whole.

He waited impatiently while she wiped her fingers on a tiny wisp of a handkerchief. Then, with a sudden movement, he put his arm round her, pulled her on to his knee and pressed his lips against hers.

She gave a little sighing gasp, just as she had done in the taxi, and he felt her arm creep round his neck.

"Oh, Richard—at last!" she breathed.

Again he found her hungry for kisses; she clung to him as if afraid to let him go, pressing her mouth against his. Then, suddenly releasing him, she lay back limp in his arms, her eyes closed, her moist lips slightly parted.

"Oh, Richard—darling!" she whispered huskily, and the next moment she was clinging to him again, pressing herself against him.

Anson was too absorbed in her—in the touch of her lips, the scent and softness of her, the smoothness of her round white arms, to be aware of anything else. He was not, for instance, aware of the noiseless opening of the door and of the entrance of two figures that paused just inside the room.

It was the flash that suddenly wrenched his attention from Celia—a white, blinding flash, accompanied by a little splutter, which made him sit up abruptly in his chair and glance across the room. The room was half filled with a whitish, acrid smoke, and through the smoke he saw the figures of two men. One of them was Ted Moore; the other, though there was something familiar about him, Anson did not recognize for a moment. Then it dawned on him that it was the man who had stared at him in the

restaurant when he was dining with Celia. Both men were smiling and seemed to be amused.

Anson thrust Celia from him and sprang to his feet.

"What the devil do you mean by this, Moore?" he demanded.

He felt Celia slip her hand into the crook of his Arm.

"Mr. Anson—who are these men?" she asked nervously. "I don't know them, and they've no right in here—"

He patted her hand without looking at her.

"Leave this to me, my dear, and don't worry."

"But what do they want?" she persisted.

"That's all right, miss," said Ted Moore. "We don't want you. Our business is with Mr. Anson. I'm sorry to burst into your flat like this, but in the circumstances it couldn't be helped."

Anson led her to the arm-chair.

"There's nothing to be frightened of, Celia," he said. "Just stay there and leave this to me."

He turned and faced the others.

"And now, Moore, perhaps you'll be good enough to explain what you mean by forcing your way into a lady's flat."

Moore cut him short with an impatient gesture.

"You can come off the high horse, Anson; it won't get you anywhere this time." He held up the camera which he was carrying and tapped it with a finger. "That's what we came for—evidence. And we've got it. I fancy the Dilchester Gazette will be ready to pay a big price for that photograph. 'Mr. Richard Anson in a new pose.'" He grinned maliciously. "You've got a lot to learn at this sort of game, Anson. You should have come to me and I'd have given you a few tips."

Anson strode angrily across the room.

"Get out of here, Moore!" he ordered. "Get outside that door before I put you out!"

Moore raised his camera again.

"And take this with me? That suits me, if you're agreeable. There's plenty of people in Dilchester who'll be interested to see that photograph, and if you've no objection to their seeing it, that suits me down to the ground."

Anson held out his hand.

"Give me that camera, Moore!"

The man shook his head.

"Oh, no, Mr. Anson, that's asking too much. I've been put to considerable trouble and expense to get that photograph; what with taxi fares and dinners and tracking you all round London, it's cost me and my friend Arthur quite a lot of time and money."

Turning to his companion, he handed him the camera.

"Go outside, Arthur, and keep that safe," he said, "while I have a chat with Mr. Anson."

Arthur went out and closed the door.

"Now, Anson," said Moore, "we can get down to business. If you want that photograph—and it's a real good one, I promise you—you've got to pay for it."

"I see," said the banker furiously. "More blackmail, eh?"

"Photography—professional photography. I'm afraid you'll find my prices rather high. If you want that particular photograph, it's going to cost you a thousand pounds. That's for the negative, of course. I don't suppose you've got a thousand pounds in your pocket. Young ladies are an expensive hobby but not as expensive as that."

Celia rose from her chair and crossed to Anson.

"Mr. Anson, you're not going to pay him, are you?" the said. "I wouldn't. Why, you don't even know that he's taken a photograph, and if he'd taken fifty photographs I wouldn't pay him. I know what I'd do—I'd send for the police."

"That's all right, miss," said Ted Moore. "I've got the photograph all right. If you're a good girl, perhaps I'll send you a copy, and if Mr. Anson buys the negative no doubt he'll get one printed for you."

"I'd send for the police if I were you, Mr. Anson," she repeated. "It's much the best thing to do, if people try to blackmail you. I've read that in the newspapers, and you don't have to give your name, you know. They call you Mr. X—"

"Leave this to me, Celia, please. I know how to handle this blackguard. My answer to you, Moore, is the same as it was last time. You can go to hell! You're getting no money out of me and you can do what you like with your photograph."

"Thanks, Anson. I intend to. Shall I call and see you at the Bank tomorrow?"

"Call if you like. It will give me great pleasure to have you kicked out. And if you're not outside this room in ten seconds, you'll be kicked out of here." With a shrug, Ted Moore turned to the door and opened it.

"All right, Mr. Anson; have it your own way. But I've got you this time, and don't you forget it."

He went from the room, and a few moments later the front door was slammed, and Anson, striding to the window, saw the two men sauntering off along the street.

He turned from the window and picked up his hat. "Oh, but, Richard, you're not going yet?" exclaimed Celia.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid I must," replied Anson. "Those two fellows—I'm most distressed, Celia, that anything like this should have occurred. You must try to forgive me, my dear, and believe that I wouldn't have dragged you into this sort of business for anything in the world. I can't think how the fellows got in."

"Oh, I dare say the door was open. People often do leave it open. But I'm not worried, Richard, because I know you'll look after me."

"You may be quite sure of that, my dear. Whatever happens—whatever course I may decide to adopt with regard to Ted Moore and his fellow blackguard, I give you my promise that your reputation shan't suffer."

Celia sighed.

"I just couldn't face that, Richard. I think I'd die of shame."

He smiled.

"You're not going to die, my dear, and there's no need to upset yourself about this. I'll soon put Moore in his place, and then we'll find another flat—some place with a lift. Why not run round tomorrow and look at a few?"

"May I? Really?"

He nodded.

"I'll ring you up in the evening and see how you've got on. And now, my dear, I really must be off. I've business to attend to."

"Very well, Richard," she sighed. "If you must. But, Richard!"

"Well, my dear—what is it?"

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she stood on tiptoe and put her lips close to his ear.

"Richard, I'm terribly—disappointed," she whispered.

Because of those whispered words, Richard Anson definitely strutted as he walked towards Baker Street in search of a taxi.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE face of Graves, the butler, as he came sedately across the lawn towards Elizabeth, was eloquent of contemptuous disapproval. Elizabeth, ostensibly reading a book, but actually absorbed in watching John as he lay on his back on the grass, gazing up at the sky, looked up as he approached.

"Yes, Graves?"

"There's a person asking to see you, madam," he told her. "A party of the name of Moore."

"Edward Moore? He wants to see me?"

Graves inclined his head.

"I expressed the doubt, madam, as to whether you were at liberty, but the man was most insistent. 'Urgent and private' were his words."

Elizabeth wrinkled her forehead.

"Is he sober?"

"I should say so, madam. In view of the unfortunate incidents of a few days ago, I paid particular attention to that point. He appears to be quite compos mentis."

Elizabeth got up.

"Where have you put him, Graves?"

The butler raised his eyebrows.

"In the circumstances, madam, I did not care to put him anywhere without your permission. I left him in the porch."

"I suppose I'd better see him, Graves. Take him into the library."

The butler turned and made his way sedately towards the house. With a "Shan't be long, John", Elizabeth went across the lawn and entered the library by the french windows. A few moments later, Graves, looking as if he were showing in the personification of plague, pestilence and famine, opened the door and Ted Moore came in.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Anson."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Moore. I think Graves must have made a mistake; it's my husband you want to see, isn't it?"

Moore shook his head.

"No, Mrs. Anson, I don't want to see your husband. He's at the Bank, and if I'd wanted to see him I should have gone there. It's you I want to see—without your husband. If your husband had known I was coming, I'd never have got into the house."

She gave him a puzzled look.

"Hadn't you better explain?"

"I'm going to try to, but it's a pretty difficult thing to say to a woman. You see, Mrs. Anson, I like you. I fancy everybody in Dilchester does. That's why it was hard to make up my mind what I ought to do about it. I didn't want to hurt you, but at the same time it didn't seem right to me to let things go on as they are. If you'd been my own sister I'd have told you right enough, and what would be a good turn to my own sister can't be a bad turn to you."

"It all sounds very mysterious, Mr. Moore."

"You'll understand in a few moments," he assured her. "It's not an easy thing to tell you, Mrs. Anson, and I'll be glad if you'll let me do it in my own way. I've always liked you and I've always been sorry for you."

"Sorry?"

Moore nodded.

"A good many people in Dilchester are sorry for you, Mrs. Anson. I know what's being said. I hear them calling you 'Poor Mrs. Anson', and it's not for me to disagree with them."

Elizabeth was watching him closely, but he seemed to be perfectly sober.

"I never pay attention to what people say, Mr. Moore. They probably say all sorts of things about me, but I'm really not a bit interested. I certainly don't want people to be sorry for me."

"Ah! That's what you would say," replied Moore. "You would put a brave face on things, Mrs. Anson, and try not to let people guess. I've often seen you smiling and talking to people just as if you were perfectly happy, and I've always admired you for it."

"I haven't the least idea what you're talking about, Mr. Moore. I can assure you I don't need anybody's sympathy."

He shook his head.

"You won't persuade me of that, and everyone in Dilchester agrees with me. Everybody knows that the wife of Richard Anson must need a great deal of sympathy."

Elizabeth stared at him in amazement.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Moore," she said coldly, "but I've no more time to waste listening to this sort of thing. If you've anything to say about my husband, please have the courage to say it to his face."

Moore smiled. "Don't you worry about that, Mrs. Anson—I've said it to his face. I've said a good many things to his face that he won't forget in a hurry."

"Perhaps you have, Mr. Moore, but you're not going to say them to me."

"Well, that rests with you, of course," replied Moore. "You can call the butler and have me thrown out if you choose to, but you'd be very much wiser not to choose. Throwing me out won't alter facts, and you'll have to know the facts sooner or later. They'll be all over Dilchester before long, and that won't be very nice for you, especially if you're the only person who didn't know about them. You'd much better hear them now. You may be able to do something to put things right."

"If there are any facts which I should know, Mr. Moore, my husband will tell me them."

"Oh, no, he won't; you can be quite sure of that. They're not the sort of facts Anson would tell his wife."

"If you're referring to the silly rumours about the Bank—you needn't trouble to tell me those. I've heard the ridiculous things people are saying, and so has my husband."

"It's nothing to do with the Bank, though you can take it from me, Mrs. Anson, the rumours about Anson's Bank are a long way from being ridiculous. You'll be hearing some unpleasant facts about the Bank before many more days have passed—and some unpleasant facts about your husband."

Elizabeth knew that she ought to refuse to listen to him. She should call the butler and have Moore shown out of the house. But somehow she could not do it. Moore, perhaps, knew the true facts about the Bank—the facts which her husband had refused to disclose to her—which she had a right to know. "Disgrace," Richard had said, and had declined to explain. Ever since she had had an uneasy feeling, a suspicion that had quickly become almost certainty that the precarious condition of Anson's Bank would prove to be due not so much to misfortune as to mismanagement and perhaps something worse. And if Richard refused to tell her, refused even to face the truth himself, wasn't she justified in finding out for herself? This loyalty to Richard—pretending to Ted Moore to have complete faith in her husband when she had nothing of the sort—was only hypocrisy, misplaced loyalty....

"But I didn't come to talk about the Bank," Moore went on. "I came to talk about something which concerns you much more intimately than the affairs of the Bank, Mrs. Anson. It's something you ought to know, something you're bound to know sooner or later. Someone will tell you—though it won't be your husband. It's not the sort of thing any husband would tell his wife."

She shot him a quick glance, and Moore smiled.

"It's the sort of information, Mrs. Anson, any husband would take great pains to keep from his wife. You know Celia Paterson, don't you?"

"Naturally. She's my husband's secretary?"

"Secretary? Well, we'll let that pass. But it isn't so natural as you think, Mrs. Anson. Lots of business men never allow their wives to meet their secretaries. She's a good-looking girl, is Celia Paterson, and Anson always had an eye for a good-looking girl. Celia Paterson isn't the first good-looking secretary he's—"

"Mr. Moore!" interrupted Elizabeth angrily. "I refuse to listen to another word. Please go."

But something told her that Moore was speaking the truth, and she realized as she spoke that she did not really want him to go until she had heard all he had to say. More hypocrisy! More misplaced loyalty!

Moore showed no signs of going.

"You'd better hear me out now, Mrs. Anson. It's not pleasant hearing, and it's not pleasant for me to have to stand here and tell you, but it's only right that you should know."

"I don't see how it concerns you in the very least, Mr. Moore. I wonder you're not ashamed to come here and make these wicked, disgusting insinuations."

"Then I'll tell you why," said Moore with sudden vehemence—"because if there's one man in the world I hate and despise, it's Richard Anson. I've good reason. He robbed me of everything I had. He began with Grace Marlow. I was only a young man then—an employee of the Bank, and Grace Marlow was your husband's secretary. We were fond of each other. I was going to ask her to marry me. But Anson didn't mean that to happen. Grace Marlow wasn't for me—he had marked her down for his own amusement. He knew he could get her if I was out of the way. Grace was like that—weak, rather empty-headed, easily dazzled with a few trinkets and pretty clothes—and I suppose it flattered her to be noticed by a man like Anson. He got her, anyway—kicked me out of the Bank and took what he'd set his heart on taking. And when he'd finished with her he kicked her out—left her flat. You can guess what happened to her—what would happen to a girl like Grace."

She shook her head, and Moore, with a shrug, tossed it on to the writing-desk.

"I'll leave it for you," he said. "You may be glad to have it when you've thought things over. It was taken yesterday afternoon—-about five o'clock." He smiled. "I meant to get him sooner or later, and I've got him this time. I've been waiting for this chance—watching him, trailing him around—"

The door opened and Graves appeared.

"Show Mr. Moore out, please, Graves."

Moore had no objection to going.

"Good day, Mrs. Anson. Only too glad to have been of service to you," he said, and went from the room.

For a time Elizabeth stood motionless, gazing at the door through which he had gone, trying to reduce her thoughts to some sort of order. She was furiously angry with Moore, angry and scornful. What contemptible sort of a man was he to come to her with a story like that, just to vent his own vindictiveness? What sort of a man was he to harbour a grudge all these years and then to go sneaking and spying and peeping through keyholes to get his own back?

She was angry with herself, too. She should not have listened to him. At the first word he had said against Richard, she should have ordered him out of the house. But somehow she hadn't been able to do that. Once Moore had planted the seed of suspicion in her mind, she had felt that she must let him go on; that, however unpleasant the truth might be, it would be better to hear it and face it than leave that seed of suspicion to grow in her mind.

And as she had listened to Moore's story, she had somehow known that, no matter how much she might despise his motives in telling her, he was speaking the hard, unvarnished truth. She knew it now, as she stood by the fireplace, thinking over what Moore had said. Grace Marlow—and the others.

She had been under the impression that she knew Richard through and through. She knew him to be in some respects very much as Moore had described him—selfish, hypocritical, with an inflated idea of his own importance and perhaps a little unscrupulous—but it had never entered her head that he was capable of the sort of thing of which Moore had accused him. She had always taken it for granted that he was not interested in any woman but herself. Most wives, she supposed, took that for granted as regards their husbands, and it came as a shock to them when they discovered their mistake.

It had come as a shock to her—not because she had put Richard on a pedestal and had now found that the god had feet of clay; she had never raised Richard to any god-like eminence—but because the idea of Richard Anson so far departing from the conventions by which his whole life was governed as to carry on an intrigue with a woman, refused absolutely to fit into the picture she had made of him in her mind. The impeccable, irreproachable Richard Anson, Chairman of Anson's Bank, future knight and Member of Parliament, conducting a liaison with his secretary. It struck

her as so absurd, so humorous, that a smile came to her lips at the thought of it.

But Moore had been very definite about it and had given her the impression that he was quite prepared to give her more detailed information if she gave him the least encouragement. He had spoken of proofs. That flat—just off Baker Street. A fact like that could so easily be confirmed that he would hardly have mentioned it if it had not been true. His friend, too, who was ready to confirm everything he had said.

But, whatever proofs Moore might have, the facts would still remain so amazing as to be almost incredible. Celia Paterson, with her golden, empty head, her pretty, unintelligent face, her lavish use of lipstick and nail-varnish! How could Richard have found anything in her to interest him? How could he possibly have been attracted by her? How could he have brought himself to choose her in preference to his wife?

Elizabeth was conscious of a little twinge of pain, and smiled at herself for having felt it. Most women in her position no doubt felt as she was feeling, could not understand how their husbands had failed to appreciate their obviously superior charm. Actually, however, in her own case, that did not altogether surprise her. Richard had always found her rather unsatisfactory. He thought her cold, unresponsive, as no doubt she had been. What surprised her was that her husband, if he wished to take a mistress, had not taken one of a better type than Celia Paterson.

She noticed the photograph lying on the desk where Ted Moore had tossed it, and stood for a few moments frowning, undecided whether to look at it or not. If the photograph was the proof, she was not sure that she wanted to see it. She was not sure that she wanted to touch it or have anything to do with the sordid business. Moore could only have got the photograph in some contemptible, underhand way. To hive taken it at all stamped him as a despicable sort of creature, and she felt that to pick it up and look at it would in some way soil her.

And then her sense of humour got the better of her. Richard as the ardent lover—walking along the street perhaps with a big bunch of flowers that made him look ridiculous—and Celia Paterson clinging to his arm—Richard hated anyone to hold his arm—smiling up at him adoringly. It really was too good to miss.

With a smile, she crossed to the desk, picked up the photograph and looked at it. It was a picture which paid tribute to Edward Moore's skill as a photographer, and as she glanced at it Elizabeth's smile vanished.

Every detail was clear: Richard—-there was no question about its being Richard—sitting in an armchair. Lying in his arms, gazing up at him with a

rapturous expression on her face, Celia Paterson, her hair disordered, her dressing-gown in disarray, her white arm encircling Richard's neck. And on Richard's face, unnaturally white in the glare of the flashlight, there was a look with which she was very familiar—painfully so.

With a sudden movement she grasped the photograph with her other hand and was about to tear it into pieces, but she had done no more than just split the edge of it when she hesitated and stood gazing at it thoughtfully. Then, going from the room, she went upstairs and slipped the photograph in the drawer of her dressing-table.

CHAPTER XIX

ANSON picked up the decanter of whisky, tipped out a stiff drink, swallowed it at a gulp and set down the glass. It rattled as he placed it on the table, and Anson frowned. He was drinking too much; but a man needed something at a time like this.

He flung himself into an arm-chair and glanced with disapproval at his shaking hand. He was all to pieces, his nerves on edge. No wonder, after what he'd been through today. All those accounts being closed, and Marshall nagging at him all the time, telling him to do something, getting in a panic and tramping up and down his room until he had felt that if he didn't stand still he'd throw something.

Do something. Good God, what more could he do? If people were fools enough to close their accounts he couldn't stop them. It wasn't his fault. If anyone was to blame it was Doran. Why couldn't the man say yes or no and have done with it? But that wasn't Doran's way: he must chew and chew and chew, as if fifty thousand pounds were all the money in the world. Twice today he'd been on the telephone to him, asking for a definite decision, and all he had got was more delay, more evasion. The most he had been willing to promise was that he would telephone his definite decision tonight.

Anson glanced at his watch. Nearly ten o'clock.

Why the devil didn't Doran telephone? He glared at the instrument on his desk as though it were responsible for Doran's dilatoriness. Probably he didn't intend to ring at all—had decided not to lend the money and was sending a letter to say so. That would mean the end of Anson's Bank. The end of him, too, as far as Dilchester was concerned.

It was damnable, just when everything looked so promising. And, as if that weren't enough, that fellow Moore must start making a nuisance of himself again. The man was a blackguard, a common blackmailer and not a very clever one at that. A thousand pounds for a photograph! He could do what he liked with his photograph.

He had been just a little too late for that scheme to succeed. If the Bank smashed, the name of Richard Anson would stink anyway, and a bit more scandal attached to him would make no difference one way or the other. Besides, the Dilchester Gazette would never risk publishing a photograph like that. Moore must have thought him a first-class fool if he believed that sort of threat would frighten him. He only wished the Gazette would publish it; heavy damages for libel might come in very useful a little later.

It was quite obvious how Moore had managed it. That other fellow, Arthur, had been following him round. He was working in with Moore, no doubt, expecting a share in the proceeds; but there wouldn't be any proceeds. It

had been an unpleasant experience for Celia, though, and it was damned annoying, Moore turning up like that just when he was getting on so well with her. Still, there would be plenty more chances; whatever happened, he'd keep in touch with Celia.

He liked her. She was just the sort of young woman a man liked to go home to after a hard day's work at the office. None of that keep-your-distance business like there was with Elizabeth.

His frown deepened as he thought of Elizabeth. This evening at dinner she had puzzled him. It was difficult to say just what it was about her, but there was something different. Once or twice he had caught her looking at him almost as if she were amused. Perhaps it did amuse her to see how troubled he was about the Bank. Well, if it amused her to see him threatened with ruin, she'd probably get a damned good laugh in a few days' time when he was face to face with it. Celia hadn't been amused; she had understood, sympathized, wanted to help.

The telephone bell rang. Anson sprang to his feet, crossed to his desk and snatched off the receiver.

"Hullo!... Who? No, it isn't!"

He slammed the receiver down and began pacing the room. Damn the telephone! That was the second wrong number this evening. Sheer incompetence.

He halted abruptly and frowned in the direction of the door as he heard the handle turned. The door was opened and Elizabeth came in. It struck him that she seemed very composed and self-possessed, and noticed, as she glanced across at him, that her eyes still held that look of mild amusement.

"Can you spare me a few minutes, Richard?"

"What is it?" he asked irritably. "I'm extremely busy—"

"I shan't keep you long." She hesitated. "It's about Ted Moore."

"I don't want to hear anything about Ted Moore. He's a low-down, blackmailing scoundrel."

"He came here this afternoon, Richard. He said he wanted to see me—urgently."

"And you saw him? You let him into the house?"

"I couldn't very well refuse, Richard. He was quite sober and was most insistent to Graves that he must see me at once."

"What did he want?"

"I think his chief object was to do you as much harm as he possibly could. As a matter of fact, he admitted as much. Apparently he has some grudge against you—-something about a girl called Grace Marlow."

He wrinkled his forehead.

"Grace Marlow?"

"He said she used to be your secretary."

"Grace Marlow?" repeated Anson. "Ah, yes; I remember her now. A pretty little thing—-dark. The most inefficient secretary I ever had. In the end I was compelled to dismiss her, and Moore took it rather badly. Apparently he was in love with the girl and seemed to think that a sufficient reason for my employing an incompetent young woman. I remember he was quite abusive about it."

Elizabeth was smiling faintly.

"That's not the story Mr. Moore told me, Richard."

"Eh? It's the true story, anyway."

"What Mr. Moore told me was that, thanks to you, Richard, Grace Marlow is now earning her living—well, in the way that's easiest for a pretty young woman."

"Then Moore's a damned liar!"

"And that's not all he told me, Richard."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Elizabeth," he interrupted, "I'm worried out of my life and up to my eyes in work, and I've no time to waste listening to Moore's ridiculous stories. I'm surprised that you listened to them."

"I was rather surprised at myself," replied Elizabeth. "Just at first, when he began abusing you, I thought of calling Graves and having Moore turned out of the house."

"That's exactly what you should have done."

"I know. But I didn't do it because, somehow, while he was talking, I got the impression that he was telling the truth."

"Moore couldn't tell the truth if he tried, and I've never known him try."

"I've a feeling that he did tell it this afternoon. Somehow that story of Grace Marlow rang true. Or it may have been something in Ted Moore's manner. Anyway, I found I couldn't disbelieve him and I let him go on talking."

"Huh! Well, if you believe that story of Grace Marlow, you'll believe anything."

"It's no use refusing to believe a thing, Richard, just because you don't want to believe it, or even because it strikes you as utterly incredible, when the proof that it is true is staring you in the face."

"Proof! He can prove nothing about Grace Marlow. It all happened years ago. Until you mentioned the girl I'd completely forgotten her. In any case, Elizabeth, even if what you're hinting at were true, I don't see that it's any concern of yours. I've never set up to be a saint, and if women would only marry men with spotless pasts none of them would ever get married. If you were interested in my past, the right time to inquire into it was before you married me—and you're hardly one, Elizabeth, who is entitled to be too fastidious over anyone's past."

"I dare say you're right, Richard, and I'm really not very interested in anything you may have done before you married me. And since our marriage it has never entered my head that you could be anything but the model, faithful husband. Never, that is, until this afternoon. Even then I couldn't bring myself to believe it. The idea of you, Richard, keeping a mistress struck me as—well—too funny for words. I somehow couldn't picture you as the ardent lover, buying her flowers and chocolates."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"I don't know what the devil you're getting at, Elizabeth, with all this rigmarole. I've told you that I'm extremely busy—"

He seated himself at his desk and picked up his pen, and Elizabeth, crossing to the desk, placed on the blotting-pad in front of him the photograph which Ted Moore had given her.

"However busy you are, Richard," she said, "you must try to find time to explain that."

Anson's hands gripped the arms of his chair as he sat staring at the photograph in silence.

"Quite a good one of you, Richard, don't you think? Of course, the pose is rather unconventional, but then perhaps Miss Paterson is a rather unconventional young woman. Judging by this picture, I think she must be. And did you really go to town with your hair like that, Richard, or did she rumple it?"

She waited, watching his face, as he continued gazing at the photograph.

"That's the sort of proof, Richard," she said at last, "which forces one to believe the most unbelievable things. When Mr. Moore gave me that picture— "

He glanced up at her.

"So Moore gave it to you, did he? And on the word of a man like him—on the word of a drunken swine like Moore—you dare to come here and accuse me— "

"The photograph accuses you, Richard. Don't answer me, answer the photograph."

"I should have imagined that the answer to the photograph was quite obvious. The thing's a fake—a blatant, clumsy forgery. Any photographer can turn out this sort of thing."

He paused abruptly as he saw that she was shaking her head.

"That won't do, Richard," she said. "It's not a fake."

"I see. I'm a liar, am I? You'd rather take the word of a skunk like Moore than the word of your husband, would you? Then let me tell you—"

The telephone bell rang and Anson snatched up the receiver.

"Hullo!... Yes, Mr. Anson speaking.... A message from whom? Oh, from Mr. Doran. Yes, I was expecting it.... What's that? He regrets he can't be of any assistance..."

He sat for some moments with the receiver to his ear, his face a shade paler than usual and his lips pressed together. Then he suddenly flung the receiver aside and sprang to his feet.

"Now perhaps you're satisfied!" he exclaimed furiously. "That was Doran's secretary. Doran will do nothing, and you know what that means, don't you? Ruin, disgrace, the end of everything—and you don't care. You're glad. You knew how things were—-I told you. Sank my pride and came and confided in you and asked you to help me. If a man can't ask his wife for help, who can he ask? But you wouldn't raise a finger. Not you. I'm only your husband, not your lover. You'd have been ready enough to help if it had been young Hackett who asked you."

"Richard, this isn't going to help you. If things are really so serious— "

"Serious—Good God! I've told you they're serious, but you didn't care, you wouldn't help."

"That's not quite fair, Richard. I asked you to tell me how much money you wanted to put the Bank in a really sound position, and you either couldn't or wouldn't tell me."

"I told you all it was necessary for you to know—that I needed fifty thousand pounds, and you argued and quibbled and cross-examined me. You call that being a wife to a man! All right, keep your money. I don't want it; I wouldn't take it now if you offered me a hundred thousand. I wouldn't take a penny of your money, even if you are my wife. Wife! You've never been a wife to me.

You've been a fraud, a sham, taking everything and giving nothing. Tricking and deceiving me, carrying on your nasty little intrigue, like a servant girl."

He picked up the photograph and flourished it in her face.

"And then you're cheap enough to get a swine like Ted Moore to spy on me—to peep through the keyhole and supply you with this sort of scurrilous trash. Where's your sense of decency? And who are you to complain if I choose to take a mistress? You, who lock your door against me and who had a lover even when you married me."

He tore the photograph into fragments and tossed them aside.

"All right, I won't deny it. I'll tell you the truth. The biggest mistake I ever made in my life was to marry you. Within a week I regretted it, and within a month I was sick of you—sick of your damned airs of superiority, your superciliousness, your pose of refinement. Oh, I know what you thought of me—I was coarse, uncouth, not quite a gentleman—and I hated you for thinking it. And then you have the nerve to complain because you think I haven't been faithful to you. My God! It would be easier to be faithful to a lump of frozen mutton. I haven't been faithful to you—I'm not dependent on you. Celia's worth ten of you. She's human, anyway. And she hasn't been the only one: there have been others—plenty of them, since Grace Marlow—and everyone of them was a better wife to me than you've been. What else did you expect?"

He was striding up and down the room, clenching and unclenching his hands, almost beside himself. Suddenly he stopped.

"For God's sake, woman, don't stand there looking like a saint!"

He flung out a hand towards the door.

"Get out of my sight, do you hear! Get out of my sight before I strike you!"

Without a word Elizabeth went from the room and hurried upstairs to her bedroom.

Flinging herself into a chair, she closed her eyes. She felt bruised and battered. She had expected an angry scene when she had gone to the library, but she had not expected the savage assault that Anson had made on her. He had lashed her unmercifully, and although she had somehow managed to hide her feelings, a good many of the lashes had cut deep.

Had she really been anything like a real wife to Richard? Apart from everything else, hadn't she failed him pretty badly when he had told her about the Bank and asked her to help him? True, she had been feeling very bitter with him then, smarting under the accusations he had made about John and herself; and she really had felt that he should face up to things, tell her frankly how much was required to put the Bank out of all danger,

and not expect her to throw away fifty thousand pounds merely to stave off the disaster for a little longer. But hadn't Richard perhaps some right on his side when he said that if she had been a real wife to him she would not have acted like that? Shouldn't she really have given him the money without question, have forgotten her own resentment against him, refrained from flinging his faults in his face, and thought only of helping him?

That was what she would have done if she had loved him. It was perhaps what she should have done in any case, as his wife. But even now it might not be too late. She could do nothing with Richard, of course; in his present mood it would be useless to try to talk to him about it. If she talked to anyone it would have to be Mr. Marshall. She would see about it tomorrow. Richard might by then have recovered himself, and, if not, Mr. Marshall would tell her the truth.

She was glad in a way that Richard had lost control of himself. If he had remained calm and composed, as she had expected him to do, she might never have got at the truth. He had begun by tying to her, declaring the photograph to be a fake and denying her accusations with a show of righteous indignation; but when he had lost his temper the truth had slipped out, and now she knew where she stood.

It was useless pretending to herself that, when once the first shock was over, she felt any regrets. She had never loved Richard, and would have left him long ago but for the feeling that, so long as he kept his side of the bargain, she was bound to keep hers. She had kept it and had intended to go on keeping it, b it this confession of Richard's altered everything. She no longer felt that in leaving him she would be playing a swindling trick. If one party to a contract breaks it, the other party to it is free. She was free—free to go to John....

CHAPTER XX

WHEN Elizabeth got down to breakfast the following morning she found that Anson had already gone out.

"So ridiculous," said Mrs. Stellman, "rushing off like that without a mouthful of breakfast. I'm sure he can't possibly do his banking properly if his stomach's empty, but he wouldn't listen to me when I told him so. Terribly snappy, my dear. I don't think he can have slept very well."

Probably not, thought Elizabeth. She had not slept well herself; and John, judging by the look of him when he entered the room, might have been awake all night. She was quick to notice the tired look about his eyes and an unusual gravity in his manner. He was silent, too, during the meal, and seemed anxious to avoid meeting her glance.

"And he won't be in for dinner, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Stellman; "perhaps not until quite late tonight, he said. He's probably going up to London today, and he doesn't know how long he'll be kept there." She turned to John. "Such a pity you can't stay any longer, John. Richard was telling me that you simply must leave this morning."

Elizabeth glanced quickly at John.

"You're going, John?"

He nodded.

"But why?"

"So sudden," exclaimed Mrs. Stellman. "I thought you would be down here for at least a fortnight."

"I hoped so too, Mrs. Stellman," replied John, "but something has happened—business—I've a good many things to do, you know, before I sail, and I've got to get up to London. I explained to Mr. Anson last night."

"But you didn't tell me, John. Why not?"

"You'd gone to bed, Beth, when I—decided I must go."

"But I'm sure it can't be so urgent as all that, John," said Mrs. Stellman, "and Elizabeth will be terribly disappointed if you run away so soon. There'll be just as many Chinese to be converted in a week's time, and we're having such beautiful weather, and Richard seemed to be most upset that you'd decided to leave us. I really do believe that's why he couldn't eat any breakfast. Once upon a time you wouldn't have deserted us like this. I remember it was all I could do to get you out of the house when I wanted to lock up for the night. Why don't you put off your business in London and stay with us a few more days?"

"John knows his own business best, Mother," said Elizabeth. "If he won't stop for me, he won't stop for anyone."

The subject was dropped; but when breakfast was over, Elizabeth went out into the garden and signed to John to follow her. He went with obvious reluctance, and they walked together across the lawn.

"Are you really going, John?"

He nodded.

"I'm catching the eleven-fifteen."

"Why?"

"It's the first fast train, Beth."

"I mean, why are you going?"

"I've told you. I've all sorts of things to attend to before I sail."

"Which you suddenly remembered last night? There's still a month before you sail."

He made no reply, and it was not until they had covered the whole length of the lawn that either of them spoke again. Then Elizabeth stood still and faced him.

"What did Richard say to you last night, John?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"But I want to know."

John took out his cigarette-case and lighted a cigarette.

"Was he very abusive?"

"He was rather—upset, Beth. Apparently he wanted my uncle to do something for him and he had refused."

"And so today you're leaving for London?"

He nodded again. It was evident he did not intend to explain further. But Elizabeth needed no explanation. She could guess what had happened last night: a stormy scene in Richard's study; Richard, violent, abusive, giving vent to all his pent-up bitterness, flinging his vile accusations at John and ordering him out of the house; and John, shocked, bewildered, and then furiously angry. She might have guessed that something of the sort would happen, when Richard had told her that Doran had refused to help. John was only here on sufferance, because it would have been impolitic to risk offending Doran just now; but with Doran's refusal there was no longer any need to be politic, and John could safely be insulted and sent about his business.

"I can guess what happened, John," she said. "If you won't tell me, I'll tell you, shall I? Last night, after I had gone upstairs, Richard invited you to his study. Yes, I think he'd do that; he's always at his best in his study, always his most impressive. It was the study, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And when he got you there, he seated himself at his desk, put an ominous, forbidding look on his face, and began to say bitter, biting, sarcastic things to you. He always begins like that. Then he suddenly lost his temper and said all kinds of things, made all sorts of accusations. I know just what those accusations were, John; I've heard them all—a few days ago and again last night." She smiled. "Were you terribly shocked?"

"I wanted—I wanted to smash his face, Beth. I don't know how I stopped myself. You and I—it was all so beautiful, so—so bright and shining, and he made it all so cheap, so nasty."

She nodded.

"I know. And then he ordered you out of the house."

"I'd have walked out there and then, but I couldn't go without seeing you again. I suppose it's my own fault. I shouldn't have come; I should have known— "

"How could you possibly know, John? You'd never met Richard. You had no idea what sort of man he was. If anyone's to blame, I am. I know what sort of man Richard is, yet even I never dreamed he could be capable of acting as he acted, saying the things he said."

"I hoped he hadn't said them to you, Beth. As he has, that only makes it still more impossible for me to stay here. You see that, don't you? I must go."

"To London?"

"To London first, anyway."

"And then to China? I wonder, John, if anything in the world could persuade you not to go to China?" He gave her a quick, searching look.

"Nothing, Beth."

"You can't think of a single thing that might tempt you to stay in England?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing that's possible."

She was silent for a few moments.

"Suppose—" she began.

"Oh, for God's sake, Beth, don't let's start supposing!" he exclaimed. "We can suppose all sorts of impossible things, but supposing won't make them possible, and it's no use building castles. It'll only make us wretched. What time do I have to leave for the station?"

She ignored the question.

"Suppose, John," she repeated, "just suppose for a moment that what you think so utterly impossible weren't so impossible as you think it. Suppose—oh, John, let's be frank with each other. Would you stop in England for me? If I were ready to leave Richard, to throw in my hand and come to you.... There you are, John, I've said it—-what I've been thinking and you've been thinking ever since you came here. I suppose it had to be said. You have been thinking it, haven't you?"

"I've been trying not to, Beth."

"Oh, yes, I don't doubt that. I've seen you trying. I've tried, too. I didn't mean to tell you, I meant to go on pretending. Perhaps it wasn't pretence—I don't know. In any case, I can't pretend with you, John, and I can't let you go until you've answered my question. Suppose I were ready to do as I say, would you still go to China?"

He looked at her gravely for some moments before he answered.

"Beth, my dear," he said, "you know I should have to."

"Because of me?"

"Because of you."

"But if I didn't mind, John? Suppose I thought that the consequences didn't matter? Suppose I found the courage to face them? Suppose I thought that divorce—"

He made a quick gesture.

"Don't let's talk of that, Beth. We don't want that sort of—-slime. I can't have you without... Oh, you know how I feel about it. I'm not just being priggish. That sort of thing wouldn't do for us, Beth. You—mixed up in that kind of mess! I couldn't stand that; I wouldn't ask you to stand it. Bright and shining, Beth, or not at all. You know I'm right; you know I'm not just posing. You feel the same yourself really. I know. If I asked you to throw up everything and come to me, you'd come; I don't doubt that. But you'd think just a little bit less of me for having let you do it."

"I see," said Elizabeth thoughtfully. "Then you're going to China?"

He nodded, laid his hand on her arm and gave it a little squeeze.

"Bless you, my dear, all the same."

Elizabeth glanced at her watch.

"I'll take you to the station in my car, John. We must start at eleven."

The red-winged two-seater, with Elizabeth at the wheel and John seated beside her, hummed along the High Street. At the cross-roads it was held up by Dilchester's new traffic lights, and John noted the blue sign with the white lettering which pointed to the right bearing the words: "To the Railway Station". But when the lights changed, the red-winged two-seater did not turn to the right; it shot across the road with a roar from its exhaust and leapt straight ahead.

John glanced at Elizabeth.

"Shouldn't we have turned there?"

She kept her gaze fixed on the road ahead.

"No, John."

"There was a notice that said: 'To the Railway Station'."

"Was there? We're not going that way."

She drove on, and as the note of the exhaust mounted the scale and the needle of the speedometer swung round the dial, John glanced again at Elizabeth with a puzzled frown. She was still gazing straight ahead, very calm and composed, with just the faintest trace of a smile on her lips. They were out on the main road now and the speedometer marked fifty.

"I say, Beth, are we going the right way?"

"Oh, yes, John—the right way."

He glanced at his watch.

"It's ten past, and the train goes at eleven-fifteen."

"You're not catching the eleven-fifteen p.m., perhaps, but not a.m."

He sat upright in his seat.

"What are you up to, Beth?"

She nodded towards the speedometer, smiling.

"Fifty-six. Don't worry, John; the road's de-restricted and we'll do seventy later."

"Later?"

"Before we get to Whitbourne. Sorry, John, but I couldn't let you go without showing you my island. Do you mind?"

He made no answer, and her voice sank almost to a whisper.

"Just one last day," she said, and he was not sure whether she was speaking to herself or to him.

He leaned back again in his seat.

"Have it your own way, Beth."

They did not talk much during the trip. They did their seventy, and at that speed, with the windscreen open, conversation is difficult and dangerous. John leaned back in his seat, rarely turning his eyes away from Elizabeth's face.

Elizabeth was different. There was a brightness in her eyes, an air of eager excitement about her, and always just that suspicion of a smile about her lips. This rush through the air, with the wind whipping her cheeks, roaring past her ears and playing havoc with her hair, seemed to be sweeping all her worries away from her, and when she spoke, it was gaily, carelessly, and once or twice she gave that merry little laugh which he had always remembered as characteristic of her.

At Whitbourne she pulled up in the village street and they went shopping together. It was to be a picnic, she announced. There was nothing to eat in the bungalow and they must take their provisions with them. They would have a banquet, a festal banquet. He was to be the chief of a lonely desert island, and she was to be—oh, well, she was to be there anyway. She prattled on about the desert island. There was a beach of golden sand and a lagoon of blue water. They would go swimming in the lagoon, but as it wasn't really a lagoon at all, they went and bought him a bathing costume, because Elizabeth was sure that her green one, which was much too big for her, would be much too small for the chief of the island.

Having made their purchases and piled them in the car, they went in search of Jim Huggett. Jim, she explained to him, was the man who looked after her "canoe". It was quite the latest thing in canoes, but it hadn't been running too well lately, and the last time she was down here she had told Jim Huggett to get the engine overhauled. She hoped he had done so.

They found him on the beach, varnishing a boat; and no sooner did he see them than he took off his cap and began scratching his head.

"Well, now, what are we going to do about it?" he said. "That there engine of yours, missie—a nice old mess it was in. Young Bill Hide up at the garage, he said he never did see an engine in such a mess. 'I'll have to take her all to bits,' he said, 'and give her a real good cleaning.' And all to bits she is, missie. If you're wanting to go out to the island—"

"I am."

"Ah!" said Jim Huggett. "I had an idea you might be. Well, there's my boat. In you get and I'll take you out. Maybe the gentleman will take an oar."

Elizabeth instructed John to carry the provisions from the car to the boat, and while he was doing so she stood talking earnestly to Jim Huggett, who kept nodding his head and saying: "Yes, missie"; and when the conversation was over, all three of them got into the boat and they set off, at Jim Huggett's leisurely pace, towards the island.

They unloaded the boat, dumping the various packages on the sand, and then stood together at the edge of the water and watched Huggett as he pulled back towards Whitbourne. There was a faint haze over the sea, so that the mainland was only a dark shadow. They waited until Jim Huggett was well on his way, waving to him every now and then and seeing him wave in reply.

"A quaint old stick," said John. "What time is he fetching us back?"

"About six, I told him." She turned towards him and smiled. "Only just here, John, and you're already worrying about getting away. Didn't you want to come?"

"Of course I did."

"Then just for a few hours, John, let's try to forget that there is such a place as the mainland. Look!" She pointed. "It's only a sort of shadow. It doesn't look real today. And soon we shan't see it at all; the mist is getting thicker. It's often like that—a sort of soft curtain, a mile thick, just round the coast. But we're beyond it here—in the sunshine—with goodness knows how many millions of gallons of water between us and... Come on, John, carry things. I'm dying to show you my bungalow."

She led the way up the steep path, her arms laden with parcels, and John, carrying his bag and more parcels, followed. When they reached the top she made him stop and inspect the bungalow from the distance, pointing out to him that it was built so as to catch every scrap of sunshine. "Because we don't get much of it, John, unless we set about catching it, you know," she said, and John gave her a quick look and made no reply.

They went up to the bungalow. At the door, when she had inserted the key, she turned and faced him. "Do you realize the tremendous event that is about to take place, John?" she asked, with a smile. "You're going to be the first man to enter the bungalow since I took possession. What have you to say to that? But don't tell me now; you shall tell me later."

She opened the door and went in, beckoning to him to follow. For the next half-hour she kept him busy admiring the sitting-room, with the big settee and the deep arm-chairs and the grand piano which they had made such a

fuss about bringing to the island; the bedroom, with the antique four-poster bed—because she had always wanted to sleep in a four-poster, though she had now come to the conclusion that it wasn't any different from sleeping in any other bed—the dressing-table with the long oval mirror, at which she sat and watched herself getting older and older; the tiny bathroom that led out of the bedroom, with its white bath which she filled by pumping the water up from the well; the kitchen with its patent oil-cooker.

He wandered round with her, inspecting and admiring everything. Then they went outside and she showed him her garden, in which she could persuade no flowers to grow, because the salt air, she was sure, was too strong for them.

From time to time, as she talked to him, John glanced at her curiously—much as he had glanced at her during the drive to Whitbourne—and told himself again that Beth today was somehow different. He tried to discover just where the difference lay, but could get no nearer than that she somehow seemed more alive, more like she used to be in the old days. When he had met her again at Dilchester Court she had seemed listless, as though the springs of her bubbling spirits had dried up, and there had been that look of rather wistful sadness in her eyes. Yes, that was it—her eyes. It was in her eyes that the difference lay. They were bright, eager, excited, confident—he could find a dozen words to apply to them and still fell short of describing what he saw there.

She suggested a bathe, and while she changed into bathing kit in her bedroom he wandered down the path to the beach, got into his costume, and lay on the warm sand, smoking a cigarette and waiting for her to join him. He heard her call and looked up. She was standing at the top of the path, with her bathing-gown over her arm, waving her bathing-cap—dark hair, scarlet costume, golden-brown skin....

She sat beside him on the sand, accepted a cigarette, and was silent for a time, gazing thoughtfully out to sea. Then she spoke, more to herself, it seemed, than to John.

"It is good for us to be here," she murmured. "'Let us build two tabernacles...' Look, John, the mist is getting thicker—creeping towards us. But it won't reach us for a long time yet. I know the habits of this particular mist. You can't see the mainland now; it's not even a shadow." She sighed—a scarcely perceptible sigh. "But the trouble is, John, that we know it's there even though we can't see it. Let's bathe."

She pulled on her cap and got to her feet, and a few moments later they were in the water. They swam straight out, side by side, for about a hundred

yards, and then turned on their backs and lay there, basking in the sunshine.

"Deep waters, John. I wonder how deep."

"Full fathom five," smiled John.

"Suppose I went down and down and down, John, right to the bottom—and stayed there—should I—you know—that bit in Shakepeare's Tempest—'suffer a sea-change', isn't it, 'into something rich and strange?' I think I should, you know. I think I'd be ever so much more wonderful if I were dead. To you, I mean, John."

"You're talking rot, Beth."

"Perhaps. But I've often thought it would be rather a wonderful experience—just to throw up my arms and let myself sink down and down—gently—without any effort—just sinking away from everything. They say it's marvellous—people who've been nearly drowned, I mean. There's wonderful music in your ears—-the sea singing to you, calming you, telling you not to be afraid, saying you've only to keep your eyes shut and be rocked to sleep—
"

"Beth, you're talking rot," he repeated. "In any case, you couldn't do it. It isn't a bit like that really—especially if you're a swimmer. You wouldn't have sunk far before you'd start struggling—trying to get to the top again. I doubt if a swimmer could deliberately let himself drown."

She thought that over.

"Perhaps you're right, John," she admitted. "I think you are right—about me, anyway. If I found myself in deep waters—out of my depth—I shouldn't just lie still and drown; I'd struggle and keep on struggling until I fought my way to the top again. It's terribly easy to slip into deep waters, John. Just one false step and you're there. And getting out again can be the very devil—especially if no one will lend a hand."

He raised his head and looked at her. But there was nothing to be learned from her face as she lay smiling up at the sky, and he let his head fall back again, telling himself that Beth was queer today, talking as he had never heard her talk, looking as he had never seen her look. And Elizabeth, as she floated and basked, was saying to herself: "He mustn't go. He mustn't go. I can't let him go."

When they had finished their swimming, they settled on the sandy beach and let the sun beat down on them, Elizabeth lying on her back with her hands beneath her head, resting on a rolled-up towel, and John sitting cross-legged beside her; Elizabeth, apparently, absorbed in studying the sky,

John staring at the bank of mist and digging his fingers in the sand and letting it run through them.

But Elizabeth was not in reality absorbed in a study of the heavens; every now and then her eyelids were slightly lowered, her eyes turned, and she gazed at John's face. Such a solemn face, she thought it this morning, with his jaw stuck out just a little further than usual and his forehead like a piece of corrugated iron. And he wasn't looking like that just because he was angry with her for having brought him here instead of letting him catch the 11.15 train to London. John couldn't be angry about a thing like that.

He was angry—oh, with everything. With her, perhaps, for the nice old mess she had made of things. She didn't blame him for that; he was entitled to be angry with her. Just a little angry with himself, too, perhaps, for feeling that he couldn't bring himself to get her out of the nice old mess. For her sake. Oh, yes, she would grant him that; he was being strong and self-controlled and upright and honourable chiefly for her sake.

"Bright and shining!" He couldn't stand the thought of his Beth having just a tiny spot of tarnish on her; and he couldn't stand the thought that she might never be able to shut her eyes to just a tiny spot of tarnish on him. But it wouldn't be tarnish; that was where John was wrong. Try as she would, she could not see it as tarnish. It was the last two years that had added the tarnish, making it thicker and thicker, hiding their love under a dull veneer of pretence, and all they would be doing would be to rub the tarnish off and restore its former brightness.

But John was not able to see that, and was going to China.... He must not go. She couldn't let him go. Perhaps, if she brought herself to tell him the whole truth, if she confided to him about Richard—that photograph... But she didn't want that. She didn't want John if she could only get him by playing on his pity. He must come to her because his love for her swamped all other considerations, as did her love for him; because nothing else, not even honour, counted. Honour—codes, conventions, prohibitions—what did they matter— really? They could never have been intended, she was sure, to cripple such a love as hers and John's. John didn't understand that. But she couldn't let him go. She couldn't....

"Stupid John!"

He glanced round at her, his forehead still wrinkled, his jaw still thrust forward just a little further than usual.

"Why stupid, Beth?"

She did not answer for a few moments, and when she spoke she did not answer directly.

"Are you really going to China?"

He turned away again.

"You know I am."

She smiled at that, because she knew that he could not see her smile.

"So sure and certain and immutable you sound, John."

"I am. It's no use, Beth. You know how I feel—how you feel yourself really. What's the good of talking about it? I'm going."

"You'll hate it, John. You don't think so now, because just at the moment you're seeing yourself as something rather heroic, something self-sacrificing and noble, something of a martyr—"

"That's rot, Beth. You know it is."

"Year in and year out, John, teaching dirty little Chinese boys to be clean and say their prayers—"

"There's more in it than that, my dear."

She sat up.

"Oh, I know that, John. I'm not laughing at mission work; I'm only trying to make you realize that it's not the work for you. But I've said it all before, haven't I? All right, John; I'll say no more about that. I won't pretend any more that I don't know why you're going to China. I do know. It's so like you, John, and I love you for it—in a way."

"I'm going because I must go."

"Because you think you must go," she corrected. "But suppose I tell you, John, that—-well, that whether you go to China or not I'm not going to stay with Richard? Suppose I say that—oh, I don't know. I might get a divorce or I might not. I've had no time to think, no time to ask anyone's advice. But suppose I told you that, what then? Would you still go?"

He turned towards her again and gave her a long, searching stare. Then the ghost of a smile touched his lips.

"Don't try pretending to me, Beth. That's quite a beautiful lie, but it's a lie none the less."

She lay back again and smiled up at the sky.

"So be it, then, John," she said.

They lunched in the bungalow; after lunch they sat on the verandah and watched the mist slowly advancing towards the island. She made him sit in a long, low wicker chair, stretching his legs out, because that was how she had always pictured him on the verandah, and she wanted to see if she had

pictured him accurately; and she lighted his cigarettes for him and arranged a cushion behind his head, because she had so often imagined herself rendering him these little services.

They did not talk much, but just sat there in their wicker chairs, John frowning a good deal, and Elizabeth with that hint of a smile on her lips which had been there as she drove him to Whitbourne. He noticed also that her eyes were still the same—bright, eager, excited, confident.

"The mist is getting thick, Beth. I hope old Huggett won't funk the trip."

"It would take more than a bit of mist to frighten Jim Huggett."

"Six o'clock, you said?"

She nodded, and he glanced at his watch.

"It's past five already."

"Tea," said Elizabeth, and disappeared into the bungalow.

By the time tea was over the mist had reached the island and was wrapping it round like clinging white wool. John showed signs of anxiety. Suppose Jim Huggett didn't come?

"I've never yet known Jim fail to keep a promise," she told him.

He looked at his watch again.

"It's past six already, Beth. I'll go out and see if I can spot him, shall I?"

"If you like, John."

He went out, and Elizabeth remained seated in her big arm-chair, smiling that confident smile, until, ten minutes later, John came striding into the room.

"Not a sign of him. The mist is really thick now. You can't see a yard ahead."

She went to the window and looked out.

"I can see quite a long way ahead, John. Why worry? Jim Huggett will arrive in due course. Sit down and smoke and talk to me."

He sat down. But he was obviously restless, glancing at his watch every few minutes. Twice more he journeyed to the top of the cliff, returning more restless than before. There was, however, nothing restless about Elizabeth; she was very calm, very self-possessed, very composed—except for her eyes.

At seven o'clock she admitted that perhaps Jim Huggett might have lost his way and was taking longer than he expected to locate the island; at eight o'clock she was willing to agree that there was, of course, the possibility that the mist was so thick that Jim Huggett had not ventured to set out.

"But we can't stop here all night, Beth!"

"Tell that to the mist," she laughed. "If Jim Huggett doesn't turn up, what else can we do? Unless you feel you could swim two miles in a fog, John. I couldn't, anyway. But why worry? It makes no difference whether you get to London tonight or to-morrow, and if Jim Huggett doesn't turn up you can camp down here. You'll manage all right on the settee if you bend a bit."

She suggested supper, and raked up a very creditable meal from the remnants of their lunch. By the time they had eaten it, it was nine o'clock. The mist was thicker than ever. She complained of feeling chilly, and set John to work to light a fire while she changed into something more comfortable. They looked like being there for the night, she said, and might just as well make themselves as much at home as possible Why didn't he get his slippers out of his bag? He said he would, and set about making a fire while she went into her bedroom.

When she returned to the sitting-room she had changed into a rest gown of rose-pink silk. She found John, wearing his slippers, sitting on the settee in front of a blazing fire. Crossing to the piano, she opened it and seated herself.

"I'll play to you, John, shall I?"

For almost an hour she played to him—the music she had so often played to him when they had been planning their wonder world together. At first, as she played, she kept glancing at him, as though searching his face for some sign that he was remembering as she was as he sat there staring into the fire. After a time, however, she found that she could not study his face any more, because each time that she glanced at him she found that he was gazing at her, and there was an expression on his face which made her want to turn her head away, though it set her heart singing. John was remembering, seeing all the pictures that were rising up before her own eyes, finding them beautiful— pictures of that wonder world which they had painted together, which one day they had meant to turn into reality.

She stopped playing, crossed to the fireplace and seated herself beside him on the settee facing the fire. There was darkness in the room now except for the light from the fire, a thin sort of darkness through which the furniture showed dimly like shadows.

For a time she stared thoughtfully into the fire. Then:

"Are you sorry this has happened, John?"

"I'm thinking of you, Beth. It's not the sort of thing—"

She silenced him with a gesture.

"I'm not sorry," she said; "I'm glad. I shall always be grateful to Jim Huggett for having been afraid to set out in the mist. He has given us just the few last precious hours together."

He made no answer, and after a time she went on.

"You and I, John—alone—like we used to be—with the mist all round us, wrapping and enfolding us, shutting off everyone else, keeping us in a world of our own. I shall never forget tonight. Whatever happens in the future—but don't let's think of the future. We shall hurt ourselves so much if we talk of that. The past, too—that's going to hurt if we talk about it. And it doesn't matter. It's only now that matters."

She leaned back on the settee and again both of them were silent. They had always been like that—content to be with each other, feeling no need of words.

"Like old times, John," she said at last. "Almost."

"Almost?"

She nodded.

"Remember how we used to sit?"

She saw from his face that he did remember.

"Just this once more, please, John."

He placed his right arm round her shoulders; she linked her right hand in his, and a moment later his left hand clasped hers.

"Like that, wasn't it, Beth?"

"Exactly like that."

So for some time they sat, gazing at the fire and saying nothing.

"John, my dear," she said at last, "why can't things last for ever? If we could only catch a moment and make it go on and on—"

"If!" said John, and smiled. But she had heard the little shake in his voice and felt the slight tightening of his grip on her hand.

"It's terribly human to talk like that, John, isn't it? And you're not terribly human like me."

She laid her head against him and felt the grip on her hand tighten again.

"Happy, John?"

"Beth, dear, you know I'm happy—as happy as I ever can be."

She shook her head.

"Oh, no." She freed her left hand and laid it on his, caressing it with the tips of her fingers. "You're not sorry—about Jim Huggett?"

She glanced up at him as she spoke and saw him smilingly shake his head.

"Glad," he said.

Lifting his hand, she pressed it against her heart.

"John, dear," she said, "there's happiness—and sunshine—and we've got to catch them and keep them and... How can I tell you what I mean?"

For some moments she was silent and very still. Then again she lifted his hand, slipped it beneath the rose-pink silk of her rest gown and laid it on her breast.

She felt him try to withdraw it, but she held it there firmly, and it seemed to her that her hand was pleading with his not to desert it. Gradually she felt his resistance weaken, until at last she knew that his hand had surrendered and would surely not desert.

She lifted it again and touched it with her lips.

"Dear hand!" she whispered, slipped it back beneath the rose-pink silk, and closed her eyes.

She felt him bending over her.

"Beth—"

Opening her eyes, she smiled at him.

"John—my dearest," she said softly, "our wonder world—it's waiting for us. Let's go into it—together."

As she closed her eyes again she felt his lips crushed against hers.

CHAPTER XXI

ELIZABETH awoke the next morning to find the sunshine streaming into her bedroom. For a few moments she lay very still, gazing at the window with her eyes half-closed. Then, as memory came back to her, she sat upright in bed and glanced at the pillow beside her own, hollowed where a head had lain. She laid her hand on it with a caressing movement; the pillow was just slightly warm, and she sat there for a time gazing at it, soft-eyed and smiling.

She got out of bed, slipped on her dressing-gown and went to the window. The mist had gone and she saw the sea sparkling in the sunshine, and, beyond the sea, clear-cut against the sky, the line of the mainland.

But the mainland didn't matter now. She went out on to the verandah and glanced towards the clump of tamarisk that marked the spot where the steep, narrow path led down to the beach. John was there, standing on the edge of the cliff, with his bathing costume in his hand, looking out to sea. She wished she could see his face.

She called to him, but the slight breeze that was blowing carried her voice away, and it was not until she had called three times that he turned his head in her direction. As he saw her leaning over the rail of the verandah he smiled, and it seemed that something in her began to sing again. He waved his bathing costume, pointing to the beach; she nodded and signalled to him to go and have his bathe. With another wave, he went down the pathway.

She waited until his head disappeared, and then, going back into her bedroom, she dressed quickly. She went through the sitting-room into the kitchen and took stock of their resources. Breakfast would have to be a frugal meal. There was bread left and butter and just enough milk to give them a cup of tea. She filled a kettle and put it on to boil, and then busied herself laying the table in the sitting-room.

She was conscious of a wonderful feeling of serenity, as if she were in tune with the universe and in the whole cosmos there was not one discordant note. She wondered if John were feeling the same, or whether now, as he was thinking things over, he was letting discordant thoughts disturb his harmony; codes, conventions, prohibitions—she and John had killed so many of them last night, and she wondered if John was finding it possible to look on the havoc without regret. She wondered if he had come to realize that it was not a case of tarnishing their love but of rubbing off the tarnish that had accumulated and making it bright and shining again.

She herself was aware of a sensation of freedom, a lightness, a feeling that in some mysterious way she had become less earthbound, less material; she

had something in common with the wind and the sunshine and wondered if every woman who had cast out her devil felt as she was feeling.

That, of course, was what she had done—given up pretending, given up playing a part and become herself. That was what Mrs. Burns had said would happen if she could find the courage not to care what other people thought of her, not to cling for the sake of respectability to things which were not worth having, to withdraw her misplaced loyalty and give it to some worthier object.

No, it was Dr. Ewell who had spoken of loyalty. She smiled as she thought of him. Dr. Ewell at any rate would understand, even if he did not approve, and she rather fancied he would approve, even though he might hesitate to say so. In any case, it didn't matter what Dr. Ewell thought. It didn't matter what anyone thought—except John.

Actually she had no fear of what John might think. This morning fear could not touch her; she was sure of herself, sure of the future, sure of John. He would not leave her now; she had not asked him. Last night, as he had held her in his arms, she had been tempted to ask him, to plead with him to stay with her, but she had not uttered the words. It would have been so easy then to extract a promise from him, so hard for him to refuse her anything. Lying there in the darkness, he had been blinded by his love to everything that lay outside it, and she had realized that she did not want him to promise to stay with her simply because he had not seen things clearly. She had not wanted love to close his eyes, but to open them and reveal itself to him, and show him that it was bright and shining as it had always been. But he would not leave her now—she was utterly certain that he would not leave her.

The kettle was boiling. She went out on to the verandah to see if John was coming. He was nowhere in sight, and she walked along to the top of the footpath that led to the beach. From that point she could see almost the whole of the little cove, and her eyes scanned it eagerly. John was not there, however. She looked out to sea, thinking he must still be swimming. But there was no sign of him. With a little frown she began to go down the path.

She was half-way down when she heard him call her name. The voice came from below her, and there was something in the sound of it, a note of urgency, that made her quicken her steps and go running down the few remaining yards of path. As she stepped on to the sand, she glanced towards the foot of the cliff and saw him. He was sitting, propped against a lump of rock, and though he smiled at her as she ran towards him, she saw that his face was pale.

"Is anything wrong, John?"

He waved a hand towards his right leg.

"It's my ankle, Beth. I slipped as I was coming down the path, and landed on the beach. I've been yelling for ten minutes."

Going down on her knees, she inspected the ankle. Already it was badly swollen, and as she gently touched it he winced.

"Something's broken, I'm afraid, Beth. I can't stand up, anyway. Another nice old mess. Now what do we do?"

She rose to her feet and stood for a few moments frowning thoughtfully, her finger pressed against her lip.

"Stay where you are, John," she said suddenly. "Don't try to move. I won't be long."

She ran up the pathway, into the bungalow, and went into her bedroom. Opening her wardrobe, she took out the telephone, plugged it in and lifted the receiver.

"Hullo! Is that the Exchange?... Put me through to the doctor, please.... I don't know his name. Just put me through to the doctor—any doctor."

She waited, and a few moments later she heard a voice.

"This is Dr. Gordon's house."

"Oh! Is Dr. Gordon there?"

The doctor was not there. Yes, he was the only doctor in Whitbourne. It might be possible to get at him if the case was really urgent. He was playing golf at the Whitbourne Golf Club. The number was seven eight. If she rang through and spoke to the secretary...

Within a minute she was speaking to the golf club secretary, who informed her that the doctor was somewhere on the links and he would send him along as soon as possible if the case was urgent.

"It is urgent," she assured him. "There's been an accident—on the island. Please send him at once. If he can't be found, you'll send another doctor, won't you? Any doctor will do."

She replaced the receiver and hurried back to the beach.

"It's all right, John," she said. "You've just got to sit tight and wait for the doctor. He won't be long; he's playing golf, but I've just telephoned the golf club—"

He jerked his head round and stared at her. "Telephoned?"

She nodded.

"You've got a telephone here?"

"Oh, yes, John. Didn't you know? I thought I'd better not be absolutely cut off from everybody, so I had the 'phone fitted. But nobody knows about it—not even Richard."

"I see," said John thoughtfully. "Then last night, Beth, when the boat didn't turn up, you could easily—"

"Have telephoned for another? Oh, yes, quite easily."

"But you didn't."

She shook her head.

"No."

"You didn't even let me know you had a telephone."

"No, John. I hid it—in the wardrobe."

"I see," said John again.

"And there's worse than that, John. About Jim Huggett. I told him not to come back. You understand, John, don't you?"

"I think so, Beth."

"It was the only way."

He considered that for a moment and nodded. Then he turned to her.

"Bless you, Beth—for everything."

She smiled into his smiling eyes.

"And China?"

The footprints of laughter became deeper round his eyes as he took her hand in his.

"China?" he said. "Where's China?"

They sat there until they heard the chugging of an engine and saw a motor-boat coming rapidly towards the island. Then Elizabeth got up and went down to the water's edge, staring at the two figures in the boat. It was the one sitting in front that interested her, and long before the boat reached the shore her first impression was confirmed. The man sitting in the front of the boat was Dr. Ewell. She had no time to wonder how he came to be there before the boat grounded in the sand and he was striding towards her.

"So it is you, is it, Mrs. Anson? I guessed as much. I was up at the golf club—in the bar—when I heard them say a doctor was wanted on the island. Gordon was playing, so I came in his place." He looked her up and down. "Well, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," she assured him. "It's John—Mr. Hackett."

"Here—on the island?"

She nodded, and the doctor's keen eyes twinkled.

"The answer to my question, eh, Mrs. Anson? Well, come along; let's have a look at him."

He stumped up the beach, and, with a nod to John, went down on his knees and ran his fingers over the swollen ankle, while Elizabeth stood watching him.

"Fracture," he announced. "Bless me, the trouble you young people cause! If you must fracture your ankle, why choose to do it on a desert island? When did it happen?"

"This morning," John told him.

"I could have told you that," replied the doctor. "How long ago?"

He glanced up at Elizabeth and her eyes met his steadily.

"Quite early, Dr. Ewell," she said; "before breakfast."

"Huh! Well, I'll patch you up for the moment and then we must get you aboard. The fellow in the boat must help me carry you. You'd better run away, Mrs. Anson; I'm probably going to make him swear."

With a smile at John, she went up the path and spent ten minutes in the bungalow closing windows and gathering their belongings. When she returned to the beach, John and the doctor were already on board. She got into the boat, the engine started up, and they set off towards the mainland.

Once or twice during the trip Elizabeth caught the doctor watching her closely.

"What is it, Doctor?" she asked. "More irisoscopy?"

He smiled.

"Perhaps it is, Mrs. Anson."

"And the verdict?"

"Well, I should say the patient is definitely better."

"No prescription necessary?"

He shook his head.

"Not from me. I fancy you've found the right prescription yourself." He nodded towards John. "What about this patient? What are we going to do with him? You won't be wanting him at Dilchester Court. He'd better come to my place; I'll be glad of his company, and I can keep an eye on him. How will that do?"

John was about to protest, but the doctor cut him short.

"I'm not asking you, young man; I'm asking Mrs. Anson. You belong to her—salvage on her island—and she's at liberty to dispose of you as she thinks fit. Besides, you owe me something for having robbed me of a day's good golf; or perhaps I ought to say a good day's golf; my handicap's been steady at eighteen for the last ten years. What with my patients and the clubhouse, I never get any practice. You'll stay with me."

It was arranged that Elizabeth should return to Dilchester in her own car and that John should travel in the doctor's, because his car was a car, with plenty of room in it for John to rest his leg on the seat, and not one of those absurd things that were all pop and pep and could only be entered with a shoehorn. They would be longer getting there, but there was at least a practical certainty that they would get there and not finish up in a ditch.

"And I've an idea, Mrs. Anson, that the sooner you get back to Dilchester the better," he went on. "I'm afraid there's going to be trouble. They were queueing up outside the Bank when I came through the High Street at eight o'clock this morning."

The Bank! During the last twenty-four hours, since she had decided to take John to the island and play her trump card in an effort to persuade him not to go to China, she had not given the Bank a thought. She had intended seeing Mr. Marshall yesterday, but John had filled her mind to the exclusion of everything else, and in any case she had not realized that the matter was of such urgency. A queue outside the Bank—she must get back at once, find Mr. Marshall, see if there was anything to be done....

As soon as they reached shore she hurried to her car, which she had left standing beside Jim Huggett's boathouse, and got into it. As she started up the engine, the doctor came across to her.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Anson," he said. "You can trust me to look after him."

"I know that, Doctor."

He was about to turn away, but paused and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"If it's a case for discretion, Mrs. Anson," he said kindly, "you may rely on me."

Just for a moment her hand covered his, and then, as he stepped away from the car, she let in the clutch and set off towards Dilchester.

As soon as the car reached the town, it was clear to Elizabeth that something was happening. People were standing about in little groups, talking excitedly, and she could not help noticing the hostile glances that were given her as she drove along the High Street. There were few people in Dilchester who did not know Mrs. Richard Anson and her red-winged car,

and she was accustomed to attracting a certain amount of attention when she took it through the town, but until today it had always been friendly attention.

As she came in sight of the Bank she drew the car into the kerb and got out. Outside the Bank building, stretching for a good hundred yards along the pavement, was a queue of people. On the steps of the Bank stood two policemen, and around the doors was collected a large crowd. So it was true—the run had begun. She could see that the Bank doors were closed and that there was a notice fastened to them. Stray remarks reached her from the people who passed her.

"Every penny I'd got in that bank—"

"No, Anson isn't there. He's disappeared."

"He'll get ten years if they catch him."

And time and again she caught the words "fraud", "swindle", "robbery".

She went to the edge of the crowd that jostled around the doors of the Bank. The police were trying to persuade the people to move on.

"There's no sense in you folks waiting here. The Bank won't be open today."

She thrust her way through the crowd until she was almost at the front of it. People recognized her. She was aware that they were nudging one another, pointing to her, telling one another who she was. She read the notice on the doors:

The Board of Directors announces that Anson's Bank will not be open for the transaction of business until further notice.

It bore Mr. Marshall's signature.

She went forward to the steps on which the policemen were standing and spoke to one of them.

"You know me, don't you? I'm Mrs. Anson. Is Mr. Anson here?"

The policeman hitched his belt and gave her the smile of one who possesses superior knowledge.

"No, Mrs. Anson, he's not here—and not likely to be."

"Is Mr. Marshall here?"

"Oh, yes, he's here."

"Then please tell him I want to see him—I must see him, at once. He'll see me if you say it's Mrs. Anson."

Two minutes later she was facing Mr. Marshall across his desk.

"It's a bad business, Mrs. Anson," he said. "Bad for all of us, and especially bad for those people out there in the street. There are thousands of them who've got every penny they possess in the Bank, the savings they've worked for all their lives, and now we, Anson's Bank, have let them down. It hits me pretty hard, Mrs. Anson. I've given the best years of my life to the Bank and now this—"

"I know," she said. "Have you seen my husband?" He looked at her curiously.

"That's a queer question to come from you, Mrs. Anson. When did you see him last?"

"Two nights ago. I've been—away. Where is he?"

Marshall got to his feet.

"My God, I wish I knew! If there's one man in this world I'd like to lay my hands on—" He stopped abruptly. "You must forgive me, Mrs. Anson; I was forgetting myself. I was forgetting that Anson is your husband."

"As his wife, Mr. Marshall, I am entitled to know the truth. I want to know it."

He gave her that keen, penetrating glance of his. "Then I'll tell you," he said. "Anson has disappeared—run away, deserted, like a rat from a sinking ship. No one has seen him since yesterday morning. And that's not the worst; he's taken money—a great deal of money—-the Bank's money—the money of those poor people standing out there on the pavement. That's the truth, Mrs. Anson, and I'd like to say I'm sorry for you. This thing's going to hit you harder than anyone else and you'll need to be a brave woman to stand up to it. Anson may get away—abroad—but even if he does, they'll fetch him back if they can find him; and the police will strain every nerve to find him. There'll be charges against him—against some of us others, too, perhaps, though God knows I've done my best to stop the crooked business. That's what you've got to face, Mrs. Anson. It's not a nice thing to have to tell you—
"

She cut him short.

"What can be done, Mr. Marshall?" she asked. "Is there any way in which matters can be put right, and the Bank saved?"

"There's only one thing can save the Bank, Mrs. Anson—money."

"How much?"

"A very great deal. More than we can get. The men who've got it don't like us and they won't lend."

"How much? How much to put Anson's Bank firmly on its feet again?"

He smiled.

"If it interests you, Mrs. Anson, I don't mind telling you. It would take the best part of a hundred thousand pounds." He made a helpless gesture with his hands. "Why talk about it?"

"A hundred thousand pounds," repeated Elizabeth. "And if you had securities worth a hundred thousand pounds, that would do just as well, would it?"

"Securities are as good as money, but in view of the Bank's financial condition there isn't a soul in the country who'd be willing to risk—"

"I'll risk it, Mr. Marshall. I've got it—securities—in my bank. You must get into touch with them immediately...."

She left the Bank, got into her car and drove to Dilchester Court. She went straight to the library, hoping to find her husband there. If Mr. Marshall had told her the truth—and he would scarcely have said what he had said unless it were true beyond all possibility of doubt—then she must see Richard and somehow persuade him not to do what he was intending to do. Somehow she must make him stand up and face things, and not run away, as Mr. Marshall had put it, like a rat from a sinking ship. And that money, the Bank's money, the money of those poor people waiting in the street—he must give it back. If it was money he wanted, she would rather give him hers, rather strip herself of everything she possessed, than have him play the coward and the thief.

Anson was not in the library, but, as she glanced round the room, she saw that he had been there. His desk was littered with papers, the drawers were open, and the safe that stood in the corner had the appearance of having been hastily rifled.

She went upstairs to his dressing-room. There she found the same signs of hurry—drawers left open and garments strewn about the room.

She went to her bedroom and took off her hat and coat, trying to persuade herself that there was still a chance that it might not be true. She knew Richard, she told herself, and though he was capable of many things she had never believed him capable of this. But the more she thought of it, the more she was forced to the conviction that Mr. Marshall had told her no more than the truth.

She remembered how Richard had sat there beside her dressing-table and spoken of the disgrace that would come if he could not get his fifty thousand pounds. Just for a moment that had given her an uneasy qualm, but she had instantly dismissed the idea that he had meant more than the feeling of disgrace which any man would have at the realization of even honest failure.

But she saw now that he had meant more than that, and understood why he had been so eager to avoid explaining what he had meant.

She heard the door opened and turned to see her mother come bustling into the room.

"My dear, I'm so glad you're back," began Mrs. Stellman. "I'm sure last night I wondered what was happening to everybody. What with you away and Richard away and nobody in the house but the servants, there was no knowing what might happen. Where's Richard? I haven't seen him since yesterday morning, and then he wouldn't eat any breakfast. What's become of him?"

"Oh, he's probably up in London, Mother. He said he might be going, you know—on business."

"Business! It's a nice business at the Bank, I must say! My dear, you should see the crowds in the High Street. Anyone would think there was a sale on. And the things they're saying—about Richard, I mean."

"What are they saying, Mother?"

"That Hilliard woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Stellman. "Such insolence! She walked up to me in the High Street and told me to my face that she considered Richard no better than a common swindler. She said he'd taken money from the Bank and run away with it. My dear, I'm afraid I forgot myself. 'Such lies, Agatha,' I said. 'Such wicked, malicious lies!'"

"Perhaps they're not lies, Mother."

"My dear Elizabeth, what do you mean?"

"Perhaps Richard has taken money from the Bank and run away with it."

"What nonsense, Elizabeth! Besides, even if Richard had borrowed a few pounds, I'm sure he'd pay it back, and it's perfectly ridiculous for that Hilliard woman to make such a fuss about it."

"There are hundreds of people standing outside the Bank, Mother, all eager to make a fuss about it." She turned to her mother and took her hand. "I'm afraid we've got to face it, Mother. I've seen Mr. Marshall and he told me very much the same as Mrs. Hilliard told you. Everybody knows it. As I came through the town, I heard them talking. If I heard the word 'swindler' once, I heard it fifty times."

"But, my dear—Richard, a swindler! They'll probably arrest him and put him in prison!" She sighed. "You know, Elizabeth, I always did hope you were going to marry John. I'm sure he could never be a swindler."

Elizabeth patted her mother's hand.

"Don't worry, Mother. It'll all come right somehow." There came a knock on the door.

"Come in."

It was Graves, dignified as ever, but with a startled, rather shocked expression on his face, as he glanced towards Elizabeth.

"You're wanted on the telephone, madam."

"Who is it, Graves?"

The butler seemed to take a very deep breath.

"The police, madam."

Elizabeth started.

"The police?"

Graves inclined his head.

"I understand, madam, that they have news for you of Mr. Anson."

CHAPTER XXII

IT was just after ten o'clock that the big Rolls-Royce car purred along Baker Street, swung off to the left and came to a halt beside the kerb. Anson had purposely waited until darkness fell to make the trip because he felt that at night the Rolls-Royce would be less likely to attract attention, and attention was the last thing he wanted attracted to himself. Not that there was much risk of his car being identified without a thorough inspection; a few minutes had sufficed to effect a change of number-plates and there must be hundreds of machines similar to his own about the streets of London at any hour of the evening, but in the circumstances it was as well to take every possible precaution.

He got out of the car and glanced quickly to right and left; then, satisfied that no one had been following him, he took a quick look up at the windows of Celia's flat, saw that a light was burning, and with a smile mounted the steps and pressed the bell-push.

Celia, he reflected as he waited, had seemed very willing to fall in with his plans when he had had that brief conversation with her on the telephone. He had not of course divulged the whole of his plan; it was advisable to be careful even on the telephone, but she had shown herself ready to fall in with his wishes, whatever they might be, and he had not the least doubt that she would receive his plan with characteristic ecstasy. She would probably consider it "adorable".

He frowned slightly. There were one or two points about Celia that would have to be corrected if the plan were to prove a success—that use of the word "adorable", for instance, and those terribly red finger-nails. But he would soon knock her into shape and make her into something which he could take about with him without feeling ashamed to be seen with her.

There was no reason at all why they should not be very happy. He had always been reasonable where women were concerned, never expecting too much intelligence in them and realizing that if they had physical appeal they had almost all that a man had any right to expect of them. And in that respect Celia was not likely to disappoint him.

He heard her footsteps on the stairs; the next moment the door was opened and Celia was gazing at him with her big eyes and inviting him in. This evening she held up her face and he gave her a quick kiss as soon as the door was shut behind him.

She led the way upstairs to her sitting-room, settled him in an arm-chair and lighted a cigarette for him, just as she had done before. This time, however, she did not sit detached on the settee: she placed herself unblushingly on his knee and slipped her arm round his neck.

"And now tell me, Richard," she said. "I've been terribly excited since you spoke to me on the telephone. You were so fearfully mysterious about what you wanted me to do. Of course, I simply can't imagine anything I wouldn't do for you. I told you that day at the Bank, didn't I? There's nothing I wouldn't do and nowhere I wouldn't go to help you."

"I'm sure that's true, Celia. Well, I'm going away—out of England."

"Oh, Richard!" There was consternation in her voice. "You can't surely mean—"

"I mean, Celia, that I want you to come with me. I shall be away for— well, perhaps for a very long time. I tell you that because I want you to realize that I'm not asking you to come with me just for a holiday; I'm offering you a—er—permanency. If I were in a position to offer you marriage— "

"Oh, Richard, as if that matters!"

"I'm glad you feel like that about it, Celia. None the less, if I could do so, I should certainly ask you to marry me."

He glanced at her as if to note the effect on her of his magnanimity.

"As I am unable to do that," he went on, apparently well satisfied with her adoring expression, "I suggest that we should—er—ignore the conventions and throw in our lots together. I have known many cases in which such unions have turned out most satisfactorily. I should, of course, regard you as my wife in fact if not in law, and—"

She giggled, and he stopped abruptly, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"I'm sorry, Richard," she apologized. "I didn't mean to laugh, but I've never heard of a wife-in-law. Is there such a thing?"

He made no reply to that.

"I am leaving at once—for Paris," he went on, "and if you are ready to accept my offer, you must be prepared to leave within about half an hour. We are travelling by 'plane from—er—in any case, it is all arranged, and the 'plane will be leaving at midnight. You must just pack up a few things and we can get anything else you may require when we reach Paris."

"I've always simply ached to go to Paris," she said wistfully. "But it's terribly short notice, Richard. Couldn't you possibly wait a few days and give me time—"

"I can't even wait a few hours, Celia. It is a matter of extreme urgency for me to leave—to be in Paris early tomorrow, and if you're coming, you must come tonight. You've probably heard that the Bank is in very grave difficulties—you can hardly have failed to hear; all the papers are full of it."

"Yes, I've seen the papers, and I think they're perfectly terrible, Richard. The awful things they say about you! Anyone would think you'd done something wrong."

"I am not the first man, my dear, to be unjustly accused. Because someone has been carrying on fraudulent business, it is taken for granted that every director of the Bank is necessarily involved in the same malpractices."

"They say, Richard, that the police are searching for you everywhere, and the ports are being watched and—"

"I have no doubt that is true, Celia. They've got to have a scapegoat, and as I'm the most influential person on the board of directors, I should naturally make the best one. But I'm not worrying, my dear. Provided a man's conscience is clear he has no cause for worry, no matter what unjust charges are made against him. As for watching the ports—" He smiled. "They can't very well watch every field in the country from which an aeroplane might take off, and I have made all arrangements to ensure a safe departure. I have my car outside, and once we have started we shall be safe in Paris within a few hours."

She thought that was marvellous of him, she said, and she had always longed to go in an aeroplane. But he wouldn't mind if she were just a little bit nervous, would he? He assured her of large-minded toleration of any such weakness, and then took her hand in his and regarded her solemnly.

"There is just one thing that troubles me, Celia," he said gravely. "These charges that are being made against me, these wicked accusations, these contemptible aspersions on my honour—how much of them do you believe, Celia?"

She opened her eyes very wide.

"Why, Richard, how could I possibly believe any of them?"

He smiled and patted her hand.

"That is a great relief to me, my dear," he said. "If I felt that you were not utterly convinced of my innocence, I could not dream of asking you to link your life with mine. But if you believe in me and are ready to trust me, then I can start again, make my way again, and come out again on top. My career is shattered, Celia, but I shall 'stoop and build it up with worn-out tools', as Kipling puts it."

"I think that's wonderful of you, Richard."

Anson was obviously glad that she agreed with him. He bent and kissed her.

"Then you'll come, Celia?"

"Why, of course, Richard."

"Then you'd better go and get ready, my dear. I can't give you very long." He glanced at his watch. "We must be off in about a quarter of an hour. Just pack a few necessities and leave it at that."

She got off his knee, went to the door and paused. "Richard," she said softly, "couldn't you come and help me?"

He got up, followed her along the corridor and into the bedroom. Rummaging under the bed, she produced a suit-case, opened it and told him to pack the things in it as she gave them to him; and for the next few minutes Richard Anson, ex-Chairman of Anson's Bank, was busily engaged in stowing away flimsy article after flimsy article, none of which he felt it was quite proper for him to be handling. "Pyjamas!" she announced, tossing him a bundle of flowered filminess; and then, as she threw him another wispy garment: "Don't ask me what that is, Richard, because I simply couldn't tell you."

He stuffed the anonymous garment into the suit-case. As he did so the door was opened, and he turned abruptly to find the man Arthur—that fellow who had stared at him in the restaurant and was a friend of Ted Moore—standing in the doorway, staring at him with hostile eyes. He glanced at Celia, who was smiling.

"Come in, Arthur," she said, "and be introduced. This is Mr. Richard Anson. You know—the man who stole the money from Anson's Bank. This, Richard, is Arthur—my husband."

Anson's mouth dropped open and he stood there, gaping, staring first at Celia and then at Arthur, and then again at Celia's smiling face. He was aware that Arthur was advancing towards him aggressively, and backed away a couple of steps.

"May I ask, Mr. Anson," said Arthur in a dangerously quiet voice, "what you are doing here in my wife's bedroom?"

For a moment Anson could think of nothing to say which would not seem absurd. He felt instinctively that to tell an outraged husband—if, indeed, the fellow was her husband—that he was merely stuffing his wife's filmy and anonymous garments into a suitcase, would sound a pitifully thin excuse which would be no more likely to soothe his feelings than would the statement that he was proposing to fly to Paris with her.

"He has been helping me pack my bag, Arthur," explained Celia sweetly. "And what do you think? He's going to take me to Paris—by aeroplane. I think that's too perfectly adorable of him—"

Anson swung round and faced her.

"Celia, is this man your husband?"

"I've told you so, Anson," said Arthur in that same quiet voice, "and you can take my word for it that I know my own wife."

"But you mustn't be too angry with him, Arthur," she went on, "because he's going to be perfectly marvellous to me. It's to be quite a permanent arrangement, and he'll treat me exactly as if I were his real wife—"

"Celia!" interrupted Anson furiously. "I suggest that you owe me some sort of explanation—"

"You'll get it all right, Anson."

The banker recognized that voice instantly, and knew, before he turned and faced the door, that Ted Moore was in the room.

"So it's you again, Moore, is it? Another of your dirty, blackmailing tricks!"

Moore grinned.

"Dirty, if you like, Anson," he said, "but not quite so dusty as a trick— as blackmailing tricks go. We've got you fair and square this time. There's no getting away. You've got to pay those debts before you leave this room—every damned one of them. You didn't know Celia was a friend of mine, did you? Naturally. You'd never have engaged a friend of Ted Moore to be your secretary. You'd have smelt a rat, so we didn't let you know—were mighty careful not to let you know. I knew the sort of bait you'd fall for. You like the soft, clinging type, don't you, Anson—like Grace Marlow?"

Anson, his hands clenched and his eyes blazing with anger, took a step towards Celia.

"So that's what you are!" he exclaimed furiously.

"Just a cheap, common—"

"That'll do, Anson!" snapped Arthur. "I must ask you to remember that Celia is my wife."

"Grace Marlow," repeated Moore. "Just keep Grace Marlow in mind, Anson, when you start talking of cheapness. Remember the cheap way you treated her. And you'd have treated Celia the same when you got tired of her if she'd been fool enough to go with you. Paris, eh, by aeroplane? You always did have big ideas."

Celia went close to Anson and smiled up into his face.

"You're such a terrible fool, you know, Mr. Anson," she said. "You pretend to be so marvellous, such a keen business man, so high and mighty and important, but you're really a perfectly dreadful fool. And oh, Mr. Anson, you really are awful when you try to make love. Do you remember that evening in the taxi? If only you could have seen yourself!"

Anson's lips were working and he could not utter a sound. He could only stare at her, speechless with fury.

"We were afraid you'd spot it, Anson," said Moore. "But you didn't. That's what Celia means: you with your keen business perception weren't observant enough to see the resemblance, though it's striking enough in all conscience."

"I've not the least idea what all this rigmarole is about," blustered Anson, "and I've certainly no time to waste—"

He took a step towards the door, but halted as Arthur stepped in front of him, barring his way.

"Stand out of my way!" he ordered; but Arthur did not move, except to put his right hand in his pocket. The next moment Anson found himself staring at the muzzle of a revolver.

"It's serious this time, Anson," said Arthur. "There's no blustering your way out of it."

Again Celia went close to him.

"Look at me, Mr. Anson," she said. "Take a good look at me and see whether you can't notice the resemblance now. I've the same sort of eyes and the same sort of nose, and everybody says how alike we are—"

Anson started and stood staring at her face as though he were gazing at a ghost.

"So you've recognized it at last, Mr. Anson?" said Celia. The smile left her face and the sweetness disappeared from her voice and her eyes were suddenly blazing. "Yes, that's quite right," she exclaimed. "I'm Grace Marlow's sister. Now perhaps you understand the meaning of all this rigmarole. Try to remember what you did to Grace and you'll understand still better. You know what happened to Grace, don't you? Ted Moore told you, didn't he? And it was all your fault. You made her what she became—a woman of the streets—"

"I refuse to listen," interrupted Anson angrily.

"I refuse to listen to these absurd, insulting—"

"And because you did that to Grace," continued Celia, "this has happened to you. You can think what you like of me—I don't care. Grace is my sister, and Ted was in love with her, and between us we meant to make you pay."

"And because of this imaginary injury to your sister, you felt yourself justified in joining in a dirty blackmailing plot—"

"I felt myself justified in doing anything to make you pay," she told him. "I didn't care what happened to me so long as we could make you pay. And I

was safe enough; I could look after myself. Arthur knew that. He trusted me to put you in your place if you got too loving. Just a few kisses—" She made a gesture of distaste. "It was worth putting up with a few kisses to get you where we've got you now."

"That's just one thing you're going to pay for, Anson," said Moore. "You know the others. There's Anna's account to settle, too."

"Cut out the talk," said Arthur, "and get down to business, Ted."

"Very well, I will," said Moore. "How much money have you got with you, Anson?"

Anson glared at him.

"However much money I've got, you can take my word for it that you're not going to get a penny." Moore took no notice.

"You've probably got a nice sum. You wouldn't be bolting from the country without taking a good fat wad of notes with you. Not yours, of course, but that's of no consequence. If you're not squeamish over that sort of thing, I'm sure I've no reason to be. How much have you got?"

"You're not getting a penny." He swung round on Arthur again. "Stand away from that door or—"

"Or what, Anson?" smiled Arthur. "I should have imagined that a man of your powers of perception would have realized that this is the moment for a graceful surrender. Whether you realize it or not, I can assure you it is so; and whether it is graceful or not—that's for you to decide. Empty your pockets."

"I absolutely refuse—"

"Empty your pockets, Anson."

The banker forced a smile.

"If you imagine you can frighten me by holding a gun in your hand—" He waved the suggestion aside with a gesture of impatience. "I'm not the sort of man who is easily bluffed, and I know as well as you do that your gun is just a bit of—showmanship—window-dressing. You'd no more dare to fire it than the majority of the blackguards who carry guns. You seem to have forgotten that if you ventured to use it, the consequences might be somewhat serious for yourself as well as for me. Stand away from that door and let me out."

Arthur did not move.

"Once again, Anson," he said, "your perception is at fault. You have misjudged my character and you've under-estimated the seriousness of your position. I shall certainly use my gun if necessary, and I can assure you that

the consequences wouldn't be nearly so serious for me as you seem to think. Haven't you seen the papers?"

"They're after you, Anson," said Ted Moore, with a smile. "The police all over the country are after you. According to what the papers say, you've taken a whole lot of money that doesn't belong to you, and they don't intend to let you get away with it. Nor do we, by the way. But the point is that if you provoke Arthur to put a bullet into you, there won't be much fuss made. We had you here, and you tried to escape, and Arthur felt he was only doing his duty in stopping an absconding swindler from escaping his just punishment. You see what I mean, don't you?"

"Empty your pockets, Anson," repeated Arthur. "I'll do no such thing," fumed Anson. "You can do what you like; I don't care. You can go to hell— the whole lot of you! Go on—-fire your damned gun! Fire it—-if you dare!"

"I shall fire if it becomes necessary," Arthur told him. "It will become necessary only if you grow violent and try to leave this room. How much money have you got?"

Anson smiled faintly.

"You've been just a little too clever this time, Moore," he said. "Once again your blackmailing plot has come to grief. Except for two or three pounds—which I fancy won't be of much interest to you—I have no money with me at all."

Moore raised his eyebrows.

"Is that so? Well, that's a pity, because if you can't pay in cash you've still got to pay." He turned towards Celia. "As Mr. Anson has no money, Celia, just go downstairs to the telephone, will you, and put a call through to the police. Say we've got Mr. Richard Anson here waiting for them to call and collect him." He grinned at Anson. "You'll pay that way, Anson, and it'll suit me almost as well. Run along, Celia." Celia went from the room, and for a few moments Anson stood staring at the door through which she had passed. If they really telephoned to the police... They might. Moore was clearly out to get his own back, and it was not safe to assume that he was bluffing. In any case, time was getting short; he should have been on his way half an hour ago. They were waiting for him with the 'plane, and if he didn't turn up within a reasonable time they might clear off and leave him stranded. He would never get away by any of the ports. After all, there was only a couple of thousand or so in his wallet, and these swine would probably be satisfied with that. They knew nothing about that case he had left in the car. There was plenty more there, and with all the money he had got transferred abroad.... They were welcome to their couple of thousand. It

was a small price to pay for safety, and he could spare no time to argue about it....

He pulled his wallet from his pocket and tossed it on to the table.

"There you are, Moore," he said. "That's all I've got. And now tell that damned girl to come away from the telephone."

Moore picked up the wallet, opened it, pulled out a wad of notes and counted them.

"What about trying your other pockets, Anson?"

"Damn it, that's all I've got, I tell you!" exclaimed Anson. "If you want to search me... No, I'm damned if I'll let you search me. You can take my word for it or go to hell."

Moore glanced inquiringly at Arthur.

"Let it go at that," said Arthur, flung the door open and stood aside.

Without a glance at either of them, Anson strode from the room and went down the stairs. In the hall he saw Celia standing with the telephone receiver in her hand.

"Put that damned thing down!" he exclaimed, snatched it from her hand and banged it on to its hook. He strode to the front door, flung it open and was half-way down the steps when he heard Celia's voice:

"Mr. Anson!"

He paused and glanced back. She was standing in the doorway, smiling at him, with that adoring look in her eyes.

"Oh, Richard," she said, and all the cloying sweetness was back in her voice. "Oh, Richard, I think you're perfectly marvellous!"

Anson strode across the pavement, got into his car, slammed the door and the next moment the car glided away. He turned into Baker Street, entered Regent's Park and frowned, as he drove round the Outer Circle, at the thought that only a few nights ago he had been sitting in a taxi driving round and round the circle with Celia Paterson.

Grace Marlow's sister! Of course, he saw the resemblance as soon as it was pointed out to him. He'd have seen it before if he hadn't been so worried and anxious about the Bank. It was a bit humiliating to have been fooled by a chit of a girl like Celia and a couple of blackguards like her husband and Moore.

Still, he was well out of that trouble, and they were welcome to their two thousand pounds. He wasn't such a fool as not to have made ample provision for himself, and he would be able to live quite comfortably once he

was safely out of the country, as he would be in a few hours' time. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard and pressed down the accelerator.

He made for the Great North Road, travelled along it for some distance and then turned off along a by-road. The road was narrow and he was obliged to proceed more slowly, and every few minutes he shot an anxious glance at the face of the clock. Moore and his foolery had hung him up badly, and he'd be in a nice mess if he arrived to find that the 'plane hadn't waited.

He set the car going faster, swinging it recklessly round the bends and driving blindly through the little patches of mist into which he ran from time to time. Rounding one bend, his near-side wheel was almost in the ditch, and he swore softly as he savagely jerked the car on to the road again.

A patch of mist, another bend and then more mist, so dense that he could only just see the mascot on the radiator. This time it was a bigger patch. He switched off his headlights, found that he could see no better and switched them on again.

Suddenly he shot clear of the mist. Right in front of him, clear-cut in the beam of his lights, he saw a low stone wall right across the road. He realized in a flash that the road took a sharp bend to the left, over a narrow bridge, saw the wall rushing at him, swung the car desperately and jammed on his brakes.

He felt the car swerve, give a sickening slither, and got the impression that it actually flung itself at the parapet of the bridge. He heard a crash, caught a glimpse of flying masonry, felt the car leap in the air, and then realized that he was falling.

Another crash; waves of water rearing up on each side of the car; and then water, more water, water all round him, pouring in through the windows, filling the car—water in his mouth, his nose, rushing into his ears....

CHAPTER XXIII

ELIZABETH opened the french windows, went out on to the verandah and beckoned to John to follow her. There were two low wicker chairs, placed side by side on the verandah, and she took him by the arm, led him to one of them and settled him into it. Going back into the bungalow, she reappeared a few moments later carrying a cushion which she placed behind his head. She took a cigarette from her case, placed it between his lips and gave him a light.

She stood there for a moment surveying him as if searching for any little detail which still required attention; then with a smile she seated herself in the chair beside his and continued her scrutiny.

"Stick your legs out, John, and look as if you're really being lazy."

He thrust out his feet and glanced at her.

"Like that?"
She nodded.
"Just like that. That's exactly how I always used to picture you, John. It was the best I could do then—to picture you, to try to imagine how it would be if I hadn't made such a nice old mess of things."
"I thought it was agreed between us, Mrs. Hackett," he said, "that neither of us would ever again refer to the nice old mess of things. That was a clause in the marriage contract."
He laid a hand on hers, as it rested on the arm of her chair.
"Forget it, Beth. It all happened so long ago."
"Twelve whole months ago," she smiled. "I'm not sure I want to forget it, John—that day when we sat here on the verandah and you were so terribly worried in case Jim Huggett might be afraid to come and fetch us because of the mist."
She pointed out to sea.
"There it is, John, coming up again, just as it did that afternoon, slowly moving towards us. It won't reach us just yet, but this evening it will come creeping all round us, shutting us off from all the rest of the world, enclosing us in a wonder world of our own." She smiled at him. "But we don't need the mist now, John, do we? We've got our wonder world always, haven't we?"
"Always," said John. "Always—and everywhere."