The Red Derelict

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Freeditorial

THE RED DERELICT

Chapter One

The Episode of the Brindled Gnu.

"Mine!"

The word was breathed rather than uttered, and its intonation conveyed a sense of the most perfect, even ecstatic, contentment. The vivid green of early summer woods piled as it were in great cloud masses to the clear, unbroken blue, rolling up from the sheen and glory of golden seas of buttercups which flooded every rich meadow surface. Hawthorn hedges distilled their sweetness from snowy clusters crowding each other in their profusion, a busy working ground for myriad bees whose murmur made music in low waves of tone upon the sweet evening glow. And yonder, behind him who is contemplating all this, the slant of the westering sun touches the tall chimney stalks of the old house, just visible among masses of feathery elms loud with cawing clamour from black armies of homing rooks. Again the glance swept round upon this wealth of English summer loveliness and again the uttered thought, with all its original exaltation, escaped the lips.

"Mine!"

Wagram Gerard Wagram strolled leisurely on, drinking in the golden glory of the surroundings as though suffering it to saturate his whole being. As for the second time he half-unconsciously enunciated that single possessive it was with almost a misgiving, an uncomfortable stirring as of unreality. Would he awaken directly, as he had more than once awakened before, to find this vision of Paradise, as it were, dispelled in the cold and sunless grey of a mere existence, blank alike of aim or prospect—illusions dead, life all behind, in front—nothing?

With these conditions he was well acquainted—only too well. The seamy side of life had indeed been his—failure, straitened means, disappointment in every form, and worse. Years of bitter and heart-wearing experiences had planted the iron in his soul—but this was all over now, never to return. To him, suddenly, startling in its unexpectedness, had come the change, and with it, peace.

A perfect chorus of bird harmony filled the air. Thrushes innumerable poured forth their song, whose sweet and liquid notes gurgled upon the ear as though through organ pipes. Robins, too, and blackbirds were not slow to join in, and then the soft amorous coo of

wood-pigeons, and through all—thrown as it were from copse to copse—the blithe and gladsome shout of answering cuckoos.

Wagram opened a gate noiselessly, and with equally noiseless tread moved along one of the "rides" of a wood. On his shoulder was a rabbit rifle—one of some power and driving capacity—with which he was wont to practise long shots at outlying but uncommonly suspicious and wideawake Bunny. Things rustled in the undergrowth and brambles on either side, as though stealthily creeping away. A slight stirring of the grass caught his eye, and, as he bent over it, an adder contracted itself into a letter S, with its heart-shaped head somewhat lifted, alert, defensive. He raised the rifle so as to bring down the butt upon the snake—then seemed to think better of it.

"Poor little brute. The chances are ten thousand to one against it ever damaging anybody in a place like this, and those chances it can have the benefit of."

He touched it with the muzzle of the gun, amused by the impotent wrath wherewith the small reptile struck at the cold iron. Then he went on his way.

He reached a gate and peered over. Two or three rabbits were out feeding, but they darted like lightning into cover before he had time so much as to raise the piece. Passing out of the gate he crossed the open meadow.

In front a gleam of water, and beyond it the skipping forms of young lambs, whose shrill bleat harmonised with the multitudinous bird voices, and the green loveliness of the picture. Leaning lazily on the parapet of an old stone bridge which spanned the river, Wagram watched the ripple here and there of a rising trout, or the perky flirtings of a pair of water-ouzels, whose nest clung, excrescence-like, against one of the stone piers. Away down stream the roof of a picturesque old mill, its wheel for the nonce still and silent, and beyond, pointing above more woods, the spire of a distant church.

Again that well-nigh ecstatic sense of possession—of ownership—came over him, and now, giving himself up to it, he fairly revelled in it. The utter solitude of the spot constituted, in his eyes, one of its greatest charms. He could wander at will without meeting a human being, and though here the bridge carried on a public thoroughfare it was a lonely road at any time. But one side of such solitude was that thoughts of the past would arise, would obtrude, and such he steadily put from him. For he hated the past. Not one day of it would he willingly live over again—to no single incident of it would he willingly let his mind revert. It was a very nightmare.

Leaving the bridge he strolled up the tree-shaded road intending to return home. But no chances did he get of practising marksmanship, for the rabbits seemed unaccountably shy. Ah—at last. There was one. Nearly a hundred yards' range, too. Yes, it would do.

But before he could draw trigger he lowered the piece and threw up his head listening. A sound—a strange sound—had caught his ear. Yet it was not so much the nature of the sound, as the quarter from which it came that had startled him. No further thought of the rabbit now, as he listened for its repetition.

It came—louder, nearer, this time—a strange, harsh, raucous bellow. Again and again he heard it, each time nearer still. And with it now blended another sound—a loud shrill scream for help.

Wagram's blood thrilled as already he foresaw a tragedy. It happened that a portion of the park was set apart for several varieties of the larger African antelopes, which they were trying to acclimatise, and one of these must, by some means or other, have escaped from its paddock.

It is a fact that the shyest and wariest of wild creatures in their natural state, when captured and placed in confinement, as they become accustomed to the sight of the human form divine, soon develop an aggressive ferocity in exactly opposite proportion to their former shyness. No better instance is furnished of familiarity thus breeding contempt than in the case of the male ostrich. In his wild state the sky-line is hardly a sufficiently respectable distance for him to keep between you and him—incidentally he never does hide his head in the sand, a ridiculous fable probably originating with the old Portuguese explorers, in whom the waggishly disposed natives would find fair game. "Camped off" or enclosed, there is no limit to his absolutely fearless truculence. Even the graceful little springbok, half tamed, and shut up alone in a paddock, we have known to give a full-grown man all the rough and tumble he wants before getting out of that paddock unscathed. And these, we repeat, were of the largest variety of antelope, and now here was one of them at large and pursuing somebody—from the scream, evidently a woman.

Even while thinking, Wagram was at the same time acting, for he had rushed forward and literally torn himself through a high thick hedge which interposed between himself and what was transpiring. And this is what he saw.

A girl on a bicycle was skimming the broad white road which banded the level sward. Close in pursuit coursed a strange looking beast, utterly out of keeping with the peaceful and conventional beauty of an English park—a slate-coloured beast, with the head of an exaggerated he-goat, and bearded withal; the horns of a miniature buffalo, the mane of a

horse and almost the tail of one. It was in fact a fair specimen of the brindled gnu, commonly known as the blue wildebeeste.

Fortunately the creature did not seem able to make up its mind to charge; for now it would range up alongside of the bicycle and its rider, prancing and whisking around, and uttering its raucous bellow, then it would drop back, and rush forward again with horns lowered, to pull up and proceed to play the fool as before. All this Wagram took in, as he hurried up, and, taking it in, knew the peril to be great and dual. If the beast were to charge home, why then—those meat-hook like horns would do their deadly work in a moment. If the rider kept up, or increased her pace any further to speak of, why then this road ended in a gate giving admission to the high road, and this gate was shut. There was only one thing to be done, and he did it.

He rushed towards this strange chase, shouting furiously, even grotesquely, anything to draw the attention of the dangerous brute. But at that moment, whether the girl had lost her head, or was as startled at this new diversion as her pursuer ought to have been, the bicycle wheel managed to get into a dry rut, skidded, and shot the rider clean off on to the turf. A half-strangled scream went up, and she lay still.

It is possible that the accident saved the situation so far as she was concerned, for the gnu held straight on and, lowering his head, with a savage drive sent his horns clean through the fabric of the machine lying in the road, then throwing up his head flung the shattered fragments of metal whirling about in every direction, but the remainder, entangled in the horns, still hung about his forehead and eyes.

Wagram summed up the peril in a flash. There lay the girl, helpless if not unconscious, the gate a quarter of a mile away—even the hedge he had come through considerably over a hundred yards. Not so much as a tree was there to dodge behind, and there was the infuriated beast shaking its head and bellowing savagely in frantic attempts to disengage itself of the clinging remains of the bicycle. The rifle, he decided, was of no use; the bullet, too diminutive to kill or disable, would only avail to madden the animal still more. And even then it succeeded in flinging the last remnant of the shattered machine from its horns. It stood for a second, staring, snorting, stamping its hoofs, then charged.

Wagram levelled the piece and pressed the trigger. The hammer fell with a mere click, and as he remembered how he had fired in the air while rushing to the rescue, in the hope that the report might scare the beast, the shock of the onrush sent him to earth, knocking the weapon from his grasp.

For a second he lay, half stunned. Fortunately, he had managed to dodge partially aside so as to escape the full shock, and the impetus had carried his assailant on a little way. Would the brute leave them, he wondered, if they both lay still. But no. It faced round, stamped, shook its head, bellowed, then came on again—this time straight for the prostrate girl.

Wagram rose to his feet with a shout—a loud, pealing, quavering shout. He had no clear idea as to what he was going to do, but the first thing was to get between the maddened beast and its intended victim.

Even at that moment, so strange are the workings of the human mind, there flashed across Wagram's brain the irony of it all. The ecstasy of possession had culminated thus: that a sudden and violent death should overtake him in the midst of his possessions, and through the agency of one of them. The gnu, diverted from its original purpose, or preferring an erect enemy to a recumbent one, once more charged him. Then he literally "took the bull by the horns" and gripped them as in a vice. Throwing up its head the struggling, pushing beast strove to tear itself free, but those sinewy hands held on. Then it reared on its hind legs, and tall man as he was, Wagram felt himself pulled off the ground. Though considerably past his first youth, he was wiry and hard of condition, and still he held on, but it could not continue. He must relax his grip, then he would be gored, trampled, mangled out of all recognition. Already one of the pointed hoofs, pawing wildly downward, had ripped his waistcoat open, gashing the skin, when—he was somersaulting through the air, to fall heavily half-a-dozen yards away, at the same time that the sharp crack of firearms almost at his very ear seemed to point to a miracle in his swiftly revolving brain.

He raised his head. His late enemy was lying on the turf, a faint quiver shuddering through its frame, and, standing contemplating it, erect, unhurt, the form of her he had nearly lost his life to rescue, and in her hand, the smoke still curling from the muzzle, a rifle—his rifle.

Chapter Two.

Afterwards.

“How did you do it?” he asked, panting violently after his recent exertion and shock. “How?”

“I saw the cartridges fall out of your pocket while you fought the brute,” she answered. “That suggested it. I put one in the rifle and aimed just behind the shoulder, as I had read of people doing when shooting things of that sort. Thank Heaven it was the right aim. Do you know, I felt it would be—knew it somehow.”

She spoke quickly, excitedly, her breast heaving, and the colour mantling in her cheeks, as she turned her large eyes upon his face.

“It was splendid—splendid,” he repeated, rising, though somewhat stiffly, for he was very bruised and shaken.

“I don’t know about that,” she answered with a laugh. “I expect the old Squire will be of a different opinion. Why I—I mean you and I between us—have killed one of his African animals. And they say he’s no end proud of them.”

“Yes, and you have saved my life.”

“Have I? I rather think the boot’s on the wrong foot,” she answered. “Where would I have been with that beast chevying me if you hadn’t come on the scene. But—oh, Mr Wagram, are you much hurt? I was forgetting.”

“No, I am not hurt, beyond a bit of a shaking-up. And you?”

“Same here. I suppose the excitement and unexpectedness of the toss saved me. I was in an awful funk, though—er—I mean I was awfully scared. You see it was all so unexpected. I didn’t know these things ever attacked people.”

“They are apt to be dangerous in a half-tame condition, but ours are shut up in a separate part of the park. I have yet to find out how this one got loose.”

“What would I have done if you hadn’t come up?” she repeated. “I should certainly have been killed.”

Wagram thought that such would very likely have been the case, but he answered:

“I think you might have been considerably injured. You see, when you got to the gate over there, you would have had to slow down and jump off.”

“Rather. And—oh, my poor bike! It’s past praying for, utterly.”

“Well, it’s past mending, that’s certain. But—er—of course, you must allow us to make good the loss. As a matter of hard law you need have no scruple about this. It was destroyed on our property by an animal belonging to us, and on a public road.”

“A public road!” she echoed. “Then I was not trespassing?”

“No. This is a right-of-way, though I don’t mind admitting that we have often wished it wasn’t,” he added with a smile.

Inwardly he was puzzling as to who this girl could be. She was aware of his own identity, for she had addressed him by name; but he was absolutely convinced he had never seen her before. She was a handsome girl, too, very handsome. She had a clear, brunette skin, through which the colour would mantle as she grew animated, fine eyes of a light hazel, and an exceedingly attractive smile. In build she was square shouldered and of full outline, and though not exactly tall was of a good height for a woman. She was plainly dressed, but well, in a light blouse and grey bicycle skirt, and her manner was natural and unaffected. Yet with all these attractions Wagram decided that she was just not quite in the same social scale. Who could she be?

“Oh, but, Mr Wagram, I’m sure you must be hurt,” she broke in, as he rose from dusting down her bicycle skirt—she had sustained wonderfully little damage, even outwardly, from her fall. “Why, what is this?” catching sight of his ripped waistcoat. “Blood, too! Good heavens! Did it strike you with its horns? Oh, you must get it seen to at once. I have read somewhere that the wound from an animal’s horn is frightfully dangerous.”

“Well, it wasn’t the horn this time, it was the hoof. But I assure you the thing is a mere scratch; I daresay it might have been worse but for the waistcoat. As it is, it’s nothing.”

“Really? Seriously, mind?”

“Seriously. But if you always turn your reading to such practical account as you did just now, it’ll be good for other people all along the line. It was even better than plucky, for it showed a quickness and readiness of resource rare among women, and by no means so widely distributed among men as we like to imagine.”

“How good of you to say so,” she answered, colouring up with pleasure. “But—oh, what a pity to have had to kill such a curious animal. Will the old Squire be very angry, do you think, Mr Wagram?”

“He will be sorry; but you must credit him with a higher estimate of the sanctity of human life for anger to enter his mind in this connection. I am sure he will feel only too thankful that a most disastrous accident has been averted.”

“Oh, I am relieved. Poor thing,” she broke off, standing over the dead gnu with a little shudder at the pool of blood which had trickled from the small hole made by the bullet. “It is very ugly, though.”

“Yes; it’s a sort of combination of goat and buffalo, and horse and donkey, to all outward appearance. Ah, here’s someone at last,” as two men approached. “Here, Perrin,” to the foremost, “how on earth did this fellow break out of the west park? Are the palings broken down anywhere?”

“Not as I knows on, sir,” replied the man, who was an under keeper. “I was round there myself this morning, and ’twas all right then. Reckon he must ha’ jumped. Them things do jump terrible high at times. Be you hurt, sir?” with a look at the other’s torn clothing.

“No; only a scratch. But this young lady might have been killed. You’d better go to the village at once and let Bowles know there’s a butchering job here for him, and the sooner he sets about it the better, or the light won’t last. Oh, and on the way tell Hood to go over now and make sure there are no gaps or weak places in the palings, or we shall have more of the things getting out I should never have believed one would have taken that leap.”

“Very good, sir,” replied the keeper, turning away to carry out his orders.

The girl, meanwhile, was watching Wagram with a whole-souled but half-furtive admiration, not undashed with a little awe. The fact of her rescue by this man in a moment of ghastly peril, and at considerable risk to himself, appealed to her less than did the cool, matter-of-fact way in which he stood there issuing his orders, as though no life-and-death struggle between himself and a powerful and infuriated animal had just taken place. Moreover, there was something in the way in which he gave his orders—as it were, the way of one to whom such direction was bound as by right to belong—that impressed her, and that vividly. Perhaps, too, the unconscious refinement of the man—a natural refinement characterising not only his appearance, but his manner, the tone of his voice, his every word—came especially home to her, possibly by virtue of contrast.

Anyhow, it was there, and she hardly had time to disguise the growing admiration in her eyes as he turned to her again.

“Will you walk on with me to the Court and have a rest and some tea? We can send you home in the brougham.”

For a moment she hesitated. The invitation was wholly alluring, but to herself a perfectly unaccountable resolve came over her to decline it. It is just possible that the one word “send” had turned the scale. Had he offered to accompany her home she would probably have accepted with an alacrity needing some disguise.

“Oh no, thanks; I could not think of intruding upon you like that,” she answered. “I live just outside Bassingham, and a mere three-mile walk is nothing on a lovely evening like this.”

“Are you sure you are doing what you would prefer?” he urged.

“Quite. Oh, Mr Wagram, how can I thank you enough? Why, but for you I should be in as many pieces as my poor bicycle.”

“And but for you, possibly, so should I,” he laughed.

“Yes; only you would not have been there at all but for me, so that I am still all on the debtor’s side,” she rejoined, flashing up at him a very winning smile.

“Will you favour me with your address—here,” holding out a pocket-book open at a blank leaf. “And—er—you seem to have the advantage of me as to name.”

“Have I? Why, so I have,” (writing). Then handing it back he read:

“Delia Calmour, Siege House, Bassingham.”

“Oh, you live in Bassingham, then?” he said, in a tone which seemed to her to express surprise at never having seen her before.

“Yes; but I have been away for two years,” she answered in implied explanation which was certainly not accidental. “I have only just come home.”

She hoped he would question her further; but he did not.

“Good-bye, Mr Wagram,” putting forth her hand with a bright smile. “I shall return by the main road. It’s much shorter—besides, I’ve had enough adventure for one afternoon.”

“Well, if you won’t reconsider my suggestion.”

“Thanks, no; I had really better get back.”

“And,” he supplemented, “again let me remind you that the utter wreck of your bicycle is our affair. Oh, and by the way—er—in case you are put out by the want of it even for a day or two in this splendid weather, Warren, in Bassingham, keeps very good machines on hire—you understand, our affair of course. I will send him in word the first thing in the morning.”

“Now, Mr Wagram, you are really too good,” she protested with real warmth. “I don’t know whether I ought even to think of taking you at your word.”

“Ought? But of course you must. It’s a matter, as I said before, of hard, dry law, and damage. Good-bye.”

They had reached the gate by this time, and closing it behind her, Wagram raised his hat and turned back to where lay the dead gnu. Then, as the men he had sent for had arrived, and he had given directions as to the careful preserving of the head, he moved homeward.

The air seemed positively to thrill with the gush of bird-song as the last rays of dazzling gold swept over the vivid greenery, ere the final set of sun. Passing the chapel, a Gothic gem, set in an embowering of foliage, Wagram espied the family chaplain seated in front of his rose-grown cottage, reading.

“Evening, Father,” he called out.

The priest jumped up and came to the gate. He was a man about Wagram’s own age, or a shade older, a cultured man, and possessed of a fund of strong practical common sense, together with a keen sense of humour. The two were great friends.

“Come in, come in, and help a lonely man through a lonely half hour, or as many half-hours as you can spare; though I suppose it’s getting too near your dinner time for that.”

“Why don’t you stroll up with me and join us?” said Wagram, subsiding into a cane chair.

“Thanks, but I can’t to-night, and that for more reasons than one. Now, what’ll you be taking?”

“Nothing, thanks, just now,” answered Wagram, filling his pipe. “I’ve got a mighty unpleasant job sticking out if ever there was one. Went out to knock over a rabbit or two, and knocked over one of the blue wildebeeste instead. How’s that?”

The priest gave a whistle.

“I wouldn’t like to be the man to break the news to the old Squire,” he said, “unless the man happened to be yourself. Did you kill it?”

“Dead as a herring, or rather, the girl did.”

“The girl did! What girl?”

“Why, the one the brute was chevying. Of course I had to get between, don’t you see?”

“I don’t. You omitted the trifling detail that the said brute was chevying anybody. Now, begin at the beginning.”

Wagram laughed. This sort of banter was frequent between the two. The priest reached down for the half-smoked pipe he had let fall, relit it, and listened as Wagram gave him the narrative, concise to baldness.

“Who was the girl?” he said, when Wagram had done.

“That’s just the point. First of all, do you know any people in Bassingham named Calmour?”

“M’yes. That is to say, I know of them.”

“What do they consist of?”

“One parent—male. I believe three daughters. Sons unlimited.”

“What sort of people are they?”

“Ask the old Squire.”

“That’s good enough answer,” laughed Wagram. “You’re not going to give them a bad character, so you won’t give them any. All right. I’ll go and ask him now, and, by Jove,” looking at his watch, “it’s time I did. Good-night.”

Father Gayle returned from the wicket, thinking.

“So that was the girl!” he said to himself. “The eldest, from the description. I hope she won’t make trouble.”

For, as it happened, he had heard rather more about Delia Calmour and her powers of attractiveness than Wagram had; moreover, he knew that men, even those above the average, were very human. Wagram, in his opinion, was very much above the average, yet he did not want to foresee any entanglement or complication that could not but be disastrous—absolutely and irrevocably disastrous.

Chapter Three.

Father and Son.

The exclamation possessive which had escaped Wagram as he contemplated Hilversea Court and its fair and goodly appurtenances, was, as a matter of hard fact, somewhat "previous," in that these enviable belongings would not be actually and entirely his until the death of his father; an eventuality which he devoutly hoped might be delayed for many and many a long year. Yet, practically, the place might as well have been his own; for since the motor car accident which had, comparatively speaking, recently cut short the life of his elder brother, and he had taken up his quarters at Hilversea, the old Squire had turned over to him the whole management, even to the smallest detail. And he had grown to love the place with a love that was well-nigh ecstatic. Every stick and stone upon it, every leaf and blade of grass seemed different somehow to the like products as existing beyond the boundary; and there were times when the bare consciousness that he was destined to pass the remaining half of his life here, was intoxicating, stupefying—too good indeed to last. It seemed too much happiness for a world whose joys are notoriously fleeting.

While hurriedly dressing for dinner Wagram's mind reverted to the recent adventure. The old Squire had procured the African antelopes at considerable trouble and expense; in fact, had made a hobby of it. He would certainly not be pleased at the outcome of the said adventure; and the duty of breaking distasteful news to anybody was not a palatable one to himself. And the girl? She seemed a nice enough girl, and unmistakably an attractive one; and at the thought of her Wagram got out a telegraph form and indited a hasty "wire" to the London agency of a well-known cycle firm. Then he went down, a little late, to find his father ready and waiting.

The old Squire was a tall man of very refined appearance, and carried his stature, in spite of his fourscore years, without stoop or bend, and this, with his iron-grey moustache, would cause strangers to set him down as a fine specimen of an old soldier—which was incorrect, for he had spent the working period of his life in the Diplomatic Service.

"Well, Wagram, and what have you been doing with yourself?" he said, as they passed into a gem of a panelled room looking out upon a lovely picture of smooth sward and feathery elms. It was the smaller dining-room, always used when father and son were alone together.

"Oh, I crept around with the rabbit rifle—a sort of combination of keeping my hand in, and at the same time admiring the evening effects."

“Did you get any good shots?”

“H’m, rather,” thought Wagram to himself drily. Then aloud, “Do you know anybody in Bassingham, father, by name Calmour?”

“Calmour? Calmour?” repeated the old man dubiously. “I seem to know the name too, but for the life of me I can’t fit it with an owner. Rundle,” as the butler entered, “do I know any Calmour in Bassingham?”

“Well, sir, it’s Major Calmour. Lives at Siege House, just this side of the bridge, sir.” And Wagram thought to detect a subtle grin drooping the corners of the man’s well-trained mouth as he filled the Squire’s glass.

“To be sure, to be sure. Now it all comes back. Major Calmour! Ho—ho—ho! Wagram, that’s the man right enough. Why? Has he been writing to you about anything?”

“No. But—who is he, anyway?”

“He is a retired army veterinary surgeon, addicted to strong drink, and a wholly unnecessarily lurid way of expressing himself.”

“I know the species. What sort of a crowd are his descendants?”

“His descendants? I believe they are many. Their female parent was, they say, even more partial to aqua vita than their male; indeed, report sayeth that she died thereof. One, by the way, obtained large damages from Vance’s eldest fool in an action for breach of promise. I believe the family has been living on it ever since.”

“Which of them was that?” said Wagram carelessly, wondering if it was the heroine of the afternoon’s adventure.

“I don’t remember. Which of them was it, Rundle?”

“I believe it was the second of the young ladies, sir,” supplied the butler, who, being an old and privileged and, withal, discreet family servant, was often consulted by the Squire as to local and personal matters when memory proved defective. The answer, no name having been mentioned, of course conveyed no information to Wagram. So the heroine of the adventure was the daughter of a tippling and disreputable ex-Army vet. Well, she was not lacking in pluck and readiness of resource, at any rate.

“I made the acquaintance of one of the girls this afternoon, father, and that in rather a queer way,” he said.

“Ah, really; and how was that?”

Then Wagram told the story, told it graphically, too. The Squire, listening, was taken quite out of himself.

“Why didn’t you shoot the brute, Wagram? You had the rifle.”

“Oh, I didn’t want to do that as long as it could possibly be avoided. It couldn’t in the long run. But the girl shot him instead. Had to.”

“The girl shot him?”

“Yes! I’m coming to that.” And then as he narrated the progress of his hand-to-hand struggle, and the relief just in the nick of time, the Squire burst forth with:

“Splendid! Splendid! There’s nerve for you. You’d certainly have been killed Wagram. Why, man, did you think you were a match for the beast by sheer force of strength? Why, you might as well have tried the same thing on with a bull. Ah well, it’s a pity, but it’s lucky it was no worse. Lucky too, you were about, or that poor girl would have been killed or, at best, seriously injured. But how did the thing get out? This is within Hood’s responsibility.”

“I sent him at once to see,” answered Wagram. “Perrin opined that it jumped the palisade, and that’s not impossible. I gave them particular instructions about the head. It’s worth keeping. We’d better send it to Rowland Ward’s to be set up.”

“Yes.” And then the old squire became rather grave and absent-minded, and both men ate their dinner for a while in silence. In the mind of the elder was running the thought of what an awful thing had been avoided. His son might easily have met his death—this son from whom he had been estranged for years, and from whom now, he wondered how he could have spent those years of his old age apart. His glance wandered furtively to a portrait upon the wall. It was that of another son—a younger one—Wagram’s half-brother; a handsome, reckless face, but there was a shifty look in the narrowness between the eyes, that even the travesty of the portrait painter’s art could not altogether hide. For years past this one’s whereabouts had been a mystery; even his fate—even were he alive or dead. He had left home in a hurry and in anger, had left perforce to avoid a great scandal and disgrace, wherein, moreover, a question of felony was involved. This had befallen more than ten years earlier, and almost ever since nothing

had been heard of the exile. When last heard of he was in Australia, then to all inquiries there was a blank, and as time went on, more and more did those he had left assume that he was dead.

For the wanderer's own sake, the old squire in his heart of hearts could almost have brought himself to hope so. For of Everard Wagram the best description had been "a bad lot"—an all round bad lot, and for years his father and brother had lived in secret dread of any day hearing he had come to a bad end. Now gazing at the portrait, the old man was furtively making comparison between its original and Wagram; wondering, too, for the hundredth time, not that there should be any difference between them, but that their characters should be so entirely and completely divergent. But they were of different mothers, and behind this fact lay a good deal. They had both had the same chances, but different mothers, and the younger man had gone utterly to the bad.

"Did you say the young lady's bicycle was smashed, Wagram?" said the Squire at last, reverting to the adventure.

"All to smithereens. But I've drawn up a wire to Gee and Vincent to send her the latest thing up to date, and that sharp. I've also written Warren to let her have one on hire until it comes."

"Yes, that's quite right. But I doubt if it'll end there. Calmour's quite capable of threatening an action for damages with a view to compromise. He's a most astonishing cad, and chronically hard up."

"Poor devil. In the latter line he has my sympathy," said Wagram. "But it wasn't he who got damaged, it was the girl."

"That's just it, and that's where he'll score. If she's put in the box, from your description of her the conscientious and respectable British jury that won't give her damages doesn't exist."

"I can hardly think she'd be a party to anything of that sort," rejoined Wagram. "She seemed to me a nice sort of a girl; too nice, in fact, to lend herself to that kind of thing."

The Squire's head shot up quickly, and for a moment he looked at his son with grave concern. The two were alone together now.

"Don't you know lovely woman better than that even by this time, Wagram?" he said.

“Well, I ought to,” was the answer, beneath the tone of which lurked a bitterness of rancour, such as seldom indeed escaped this man, normally so equable and self-possessed with regard to the things, so tolerant and considerate towards the persons, about him.

“I should say so,” assented the Squire; “and I’ll bet you five guineas your acquaintance with this one doesn’t end where it begun.”

“I don’t see how it can. If it hadn’t been for her I should almost certainly have lost my life.”

“If it hadn’t been for her your life would not have been in danger, so the situation is even all round.”

Wagram laughed.

“There’s something in that, father. But you say these are absolutely impossible people?”

“Absolutely and entirely—dangerous as well. Didn’t I tell you just now about one of them and Vance’s eldest idiot? Why, for all we know, it may have been your heroine of to-day.”

“It may, of course. Still I have an instinct that it was probably one of the others. Wouldn’t it be the right thing if I were to call and inquire after the girl, make sure she’s none the worse for her spill. It would be only civil, you know.”

“Civil but risky. If you did that it wouldn’t be long before Calmour and some of them returned it. They’d jump at the opportunity. A Calmour at Hilversea! Phew! It would be about as much in place as a cow in a church.”

“That makes it awkward certainly.”

“Doesn’t it? Besides, I don’t see that what you suggest is in the least necessary. The girl on your own showing, wasn’t hurt. Her bicycle got smashed, and we are sending her a new one, probably ten times as good as the one she had before. Moreover we’ve lost one of our African antelopes. Upon my word I think the house of Calmour is far more indebted to us than we are to it. Just shut that window, Wagram. It’s beginning to get a little chilly.”

The sweet, distilling air of meadow and closing flower greeted Wagram’s nostrils as he lingered while obeying, and from the gloaming woodlands came the weird, musical

hooting of owls, and again he felt that intense, ecstatic thrill of possession sweep through his being. And as he turned from the window, he heard the Squire repeat, this time half to himself:

“A Calmour at Hilversea! Pho!”

Chapter Four.

Siege House and its Ways.

“Oh, what a perfect beauty! Look, Bob. Free wheel, Bowden brakes, everything.”

The hall of Siege House was littered with wrappings and twine, in the midst of which stood Delia Calmour, in a fervour of delight and admiration, while her brother Bob extracted from its crate a brand new bicycle which had just been delivered by railway van.

“Rather! Gee and Vincent, tip-top maker,” pronounced the said Bob, wheeling her machine clear of the litter and surveying it critically. “You’re in luck’s way this time, Delia. First chop new bike for a beginning, and now what about the damages? I’m only wondering whether five hundred would be starting too low.”

“Damages! What are you talking about?” said Delia shortly.

“Why, you got a toss, didn’t you—a bad one too—and owing to Wagram’s wild beast. There you are. First-rate grounds for action. Damages a dead cert. The only question is how much.”

“Oh Bob, don’t be such a beastly young cad,” retorted Delia, with a heightened colour and a flash in her eyes, plain speaking being the custom at Siege House. “But then I forgot,” she continued, coldly ironical. “It’s your trade to scent out plunder, or will be when you’ve learnt it. Good boy, Bob. Stick to biz, and never miss a chance.”

The point of which remark was that its object was in the employ of a firm of solicitors. Incidentally, he was a loose hung, pale faced youth, who was won’t to turn on an exaggerated raffishness out of office hours, under the impression that it was sporting.

“I should think not,” retorted Bob angrily. “And I don’t see any sense in jumping down my throat because I want to do you a good turn.”

“What are you kicking up such a row about Bob, and how the devil am I going to get through my typing in the middle of all this jaw?”

The above, uttered in a sweet and fluty voice, proceeded from an exceedingly handsome girl who now appeared from an adjoining door. She had straight regular features of the classical order, and a pair of large limpid blue eyes, the soulful innocence of whose

expression imparted an air of spirituality to the whole face. Yet never was expression more entirely deceptive.

“Oh, keep your hair on, Clytie. I’m only telling Delia how to get five hundred damages out of Wagram. You’d never have got your cool thou, out of Vance if it hadn’t been for me. It’s her turn now,” sneered Bob.

“You mean I’d never have got what your precious firm chose to pass on to me out of it,” retorted the girl serenely. Her brother grinned.

“Biz is biz and costs are costs. We don’t want work for nothing in the law,” he added.

“We! M’yes. Grandiloquent, very. So that’s the new bike?” going over to examine it. “It is a ripper. D’you think there are any more African wild beasts loose at Hilversea, Delia? I could do with a new bike myself.”

Delia, listening, was simply incapable of reply lest she should reveal the lurid anger which was simmering beneath. Her long absence from home and its incidents had gone far towards refining away the cynical vulgarity of mind and speech which was the prevailing tone in her family circle, from her father downwards. Not this alone, however, was at the back of her present indignation. A week had elapsed since her adventure, and the recollection of the acquaintanceship to which it had led—matter of a few minutes as such had been—glowed fresh in her mind, as indeed it had done ever since; though not for worlds would she have let drop word or hint to those about her that such was the case. She was by no means deficient in assurance and self-esteem, yet that day in the presence of Wagram she had felt inferior. He had seemed to her as a different order of being, this man whose prompt courage and readiness, and the exercise thereof, had glided so naturally into the calm considerate kindness whose first thought had been to make good her loss. The refinement of his aspect and manner, the utter absence of even any passing instinct to improve the situation, so different to those among whom she lived and moved, had completed the spell of magnetism he had all unconsciously cast over her, and in that short space her mind had undergone a complete transformation. Had the case been put before her as that of somebody else, Delia would unhesitatingly have pronounced it as one of falling over head and ears in love. Being her own it took on the aspect of a conversion to a sublime and compelling creed, the deity whereof was Wagram. And this was the man against whom her brother was suggesting a low and vulgar scheme of plunder—legal plunder, it was true, but still plunder.

“Bob,” she said at last. “If ever you propose such a thing again, from that moment you and I are no longer on speaking terms. I never heard a more unutterably caddish suggestion, and I’ve heard more than one as you know,” she added witheringly.

“Don’t see it at all. Damage to person pursuing lawful way along a public road—dangerous animal—property of ‘coiny’ swells. Coiny swells able to pay. Make ’em. What’s the law for, I’d like to know?”

“To swindle and fleece respectable people. To fatten a pack of bloodsucking thieves,” answered Delia, with trembling lips and flashing eyes. “In this instance I’d rather hang myself than have anything to do with it. Law, indeed!”

“Would you?” growled Bob. “Well, then, you won’t get any choice, because the old man’ll take it up, and then you’ll have to come forward. And he’ll collar the damages instead of you.”

“He’ll get none. I’ll refuse to appear.”

“Ha—ha. You’ll have to. You’ll be subpoenaed.”

“See here, my sucking Blackstone,” struck in Clytie, answering for her sister. “You remind one of the old chestnut about the judge who was nicknamed Necessity, because he knew no law. You haven’t even begun to know any. Delia’s of full age, and therefore no one could sue but her. The old man’s counted out.”

“You seemed to know more than enough that time you were under cross-examination,” jeered the exasperated Bob.

“Yes, I didn’t do badly,” acquiesced Clytie, her serenity quite unruffled. “But you know, Bob, you’re an awful juggins—yes, an out and out juggins.”

“I suppose so. May I ask why?”

“Certainly. Here you are putting Delia up to a scheme which is like being content with one silver spoon when you could collar the whole swag.” (The speaker was in course of typing a detective story.) “Now—d’you see?”

“Hanged if I do,” snorted Bob. “There’s nothing in it either. These Wagrams are rolling in coin, but you mustn’t pitch your claim too high. There’s such a thing as ‘excessive’ damages, appeal, and so forth. How’s that, old female Solomon? You see I do know a little about things after all.”

“Not anything—not anything,” came the reply, sweetly smiling. “Who’s talking about damages? That’s not the plum at all.”

“What is, then?”

“Capture the man. See? It’s quite simple. Capture the man. Yes? Does that make your chin rap the toes of your boots?”

For Bob was standing open-mouthed. The cool audacity of the scheme had struck him dazed, breathless.

“Fudge!” he snorted. “It can’t be done.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Because these Wagrams are tip-top swells—regular high flyers. I don’t mean only that they’ve got pots of money, and just about everything else. But, hang it all, look at them, look at us! No fear. That cock won’t fight, I tell you—no, not for half-an-hour.”

“Not, eh? Bob, as I said before, you’re a juggins; a juggins of the first water,” retorted Clytie, sweetly. “A man is always—a man. No matter how tip-top, and so forth, he may be, there’s no getting away from that.”

“Bosh! You’ve been reading too many of these high-falutin’ novels they give you to type. That sort of thing doesn’t happen in real life, I tell you.”

“Your knowledge and experience of real life being exhaustive,” was the unruffled reply. “Let me tell you that sort of thing does happen in real life, happens every day. It only wants working.”

“Does it? I say, Clytie, why don’t you take on the job yourself, as Delia doesn’t seem over sweet on it?” said Bob, with a guffaw. “That heavenly expression of yours ought to carry all before it. It only wants working. Ha—ha!”

“I’m scratched for that running,” she answered serenely. “It’s not for nothing all the surrounding whelps—of your kidney, Bob, and others—have labelled me ‘Damages.’ But Delia—well she’s, so to say, fresh on the scene, and then, the adventure business gives her a first-rate send off. I think this job might be worked. Now, Delia, let’s have your opinion on it for a change. I’m tired of Bob’s.”

“My opinion is that never in my life have I wasted half-an-hour listening to such perfectly unutterable bosh as you two have been talking—no, never,” was the reply, short and emphatic; “and I don’t want to hear any more of it.”

Clytie pursed up her very pretty lips and whistled meditatively. The while she eyed her sister narrowly and read her like a book. As a matter of fact the latter had not been so indifferent to their conversation as she would have had them believe. Listening, her heart had thrilled to a strange, wild venture of a hope, only to drop it, a dead weight, as she thought of her relatives. Had they but met in a new country far away from all such associations—well, who knew. To do her justice, it was of the man she thought, the man entirely, and apart from his circumstances and surroundings; indeed, she almost hated these, as constituting an insurmountable barrier.

"As for saying 'look at them and look at us,'" pursued Clytie, "why, from all accounts, Mrs Wagram Wagram Number One was no very great shakes."

"All the more reason why the said W.W. isn't going to be such a fool as to repeat the experiment," said Bob. "By the way, didn't she shoot herself in mistake for him, or something?"

"No; took too much morphia by mistake, and died. It was the only good thing she ever did for him, for she used to lead him the very devil of a life. She was a holy terror, from all accounts."

"And so you think he'll be such an ass as to risk it again, do you?"

"Certainly, my dear Bob. As I said before, a man is always—a man—otherwise an ass. The thing stares you in the face every day."

"P'raps it does. Well, chip in, Delia. Chip in for all you know how. We'll help you for all we do. By George, though, you'll have to begin by turning Papist!"

"Hilversea Court's worth turning anything for," murmured Clytie.

"Oh, and there's the ready-made step-son," went on the odious Bob. "We're forgetting him. How old is the young 'un, Clytie? About twelve, isn't he?"

The query ended staccato. The ways of Siege House were strange and summary, wherefore Delia, exasperated beyond endurance, had picked up a heavy rubber golosh, one of a pair that stood in the hall, and had launched it full and straight at the head of the offending youth, who barely escaped by a prompt dive. In the midst of which sounded a ring of the front gate bell.

"Now, who the very deuce can that be?" remarked Clytie.

“Maybe the old man’s come in ‘fresh,’ and can’t fit his key,” jeered Bob.

“’Tisn’t him. He wouldn’t ring, he’d batter—especially if he’s ‘full,’” rejoined Clytie, whose knowledge of the paternal habits was exhaustive. “One of us’ll have to go to the door. Emily’s out. Wait; let’s make sure first who it is.”

She passed into a room whose windows afforded a view of the front gate, only to reappear immediately in a state of suppressed excitement, a very unusual thing for her.

“‘Talk of the devil,’” she quoted. “Why, it’s him.”

“Who? The devil?” said Bob.

“No, you ass; Wagram Wagram himself! Now, Delia, you and I’ll worry out this tangle. Go in there,” pushing her through a door. “And you, Bob, make yourself scarce. You’re not to appear, see?”

“Why not? Where do I come in?”

“Nowhere. We don’t want you at all. You’d give away the whole show. Come, git!”

Grumbling, Bob “got.” He could not afford to run direct contrary to his sisters’ wishes when decidedly expressed; he was too much dependent on their good offices in more ways than one. In abolishing him on this occasion Clytie’s judgment was sound. The descendants male of the ex-army vet were a great deal less presentable than the descendants female—and this she knew.

Chapter Five.

A Surprise Visit.

Clytie opened the gate with the little half-startled look of astonishment in her face which she had so quickly yet carefully planned. The countenance of the visitor, on the other hand, was not free from a reciprocating surprise. He had not bargained on this admission at the hands of one of the daughters of the house—and an uncommonly attractive looking one at that.

"Er—my name is Wagram," he began, raising his hat. "One of your sisters met with something of an accident on our place a few days back, and I thought it would be a satisfaction to know she was none the worse for it. Is Major Calmour at home?"

The semi-puzzled look which had rested on Clytie's face during this speech gave way to a carefully planned light up at its conclusion.

"Oh, yes, of course. We heard about that, and your part in it, Mr Wagram. But won't you come in? My father is somewhere at the back, and will be delighted to thank you in person." And having uttered this shocking tarradiddle, she ushered him into the drawing-room.

Delia rose as he entered, having spent the intervening period in making superhuman efforts to recover her wonted composure. A volume of effusive thanks on the subject of the bicycle aided her efforts still further.

"Oh, Mr Wagram, what a lovely machine it is!" she began. "Why, it's simply perfection. A free wheel, too. I've always longed for a free wheel. No, it's too lovely. When we unpacked it just now, why, I thought I must be dreaming."

"Just now," she had said. Wagram looked up astonished, and feeling somewhat uncomfortable, fearing lest his arrival at that inopportune moment should wear an appearance as though he had come to be thanked.

"Has it only just come?" he said. "Why, it ought to have been delivered nearly a week ago. Gee and Vincent are not usually such dilatory people. I must row them up over it."

"Oh, please don't," said Delia. "Why should you take any further trouble about it? You have been too kind already."

“No, no,” he laughed. “By the way, it was just as Perrin said. The gnu must have jumped the palings of the west park. There was no gap or breakdown anywhere.”

“Really? But—tell me. Was the Squire very angry?”

“Not he. He was relieved to hear you had escaped uninjured. You are none the worse, are you? It was to ascertain that that I took the liberty of calling.”

“How kind of you again,” she answered, with a lustrous softness in her eyes that was not studied, and wonderfully attractive. “No; I am not one atom the worse.”

“Another thing has been on my conscience ever since, Miss Calmour; and that is, that I should have allowed you to walk all that way home. I ought to have insisted upon your coming on to the Court with me and driving back.”

“Oh, but you did try and persuade me, remember; it wasn’t your fault at all. Shall I tell you something, Mr Wagram? I believe the secret of my holding out was that I was more than a little afraid to face the Squire after what had happened.”

As a matter of fact, Delia had repented her refusal ever since. Such an opportunity might never recur; and, apart from that, it would have been so much more time to look back to and dwell upon.

“You needn’t have been. It was a pity,” he answered.

“Yes. And I hear you have some beautiful things at the Court, Mr Wagram—pictures and old relics and all that,” she added half shyly, as the consciousness flashed in upon her that he would take her remark as a direct “fishing” for an invite to come and see them—a misgiving which would not have afflicted her in the slightest degree had he been anybody else in the world. But at that moment the door opened, admitting Clytie, who had returned from a fictitious search for her parent, combined with a renewed command to the retired Bob on no account to show himself, on pain of such disabilities as it was within her power to place him under.

“I can’t find father anywhere,” she said. “He must have gone out without telling us. But he may be back any moment now. Oh, that’s my typing work, Mr Wagram,” following his glance. “I’m afraid you’ll think us very untidy. It really has no business littering about in here, but I brought it in because the light is better.”

As a matter of fact, she had hurriedly brought it in before going to answer his ring—and that with a purpose.

“Ah yes. Ladies have taken to that sort of thing a good deal, I’m told. Do you do much of it?”

“Not so much as I should like; only as much as I can get,” laughed Clytie. “We have to do these things—and it all helps.”

“And very right and plucky it is of you to do it,” he answered.

“That sounds nice. Oh, and, Mr Wagram, if you should know of anybody who wants anything done in that line you might mention me. There are so many people in these days who write, or try to. And, as I said before, it all helps.”

Wagram, of course, promised accordingly, at the same time thinking it would be hard if he could not put something in her way. He had known straitened circumstances himself, and the fact of this girl turning her hand to a means of adding to a small income sent her up in his opinion, as she had guessed it would. But Clytie was honestly scheming for Delia this time, and for her she judged it the moment to put in a word.

“But Delia is the one who works the hardest,” she said. “My typing is mere child’s play compared with all she does. She has been away a couple of years, and had to come home for a rest.”

“Really?” he answered, turning to Delia. “Well, that is plucky of you, Miss Calmour.” And both thought to read in the high approval expressed in his look and tone a shade of regret that she should be exposed to the necessity of being overworked at all.

They talked on, and soon their visitor became acquainted with all the family doings—of the third sister, who was away also working; of Bob and another brother in Canada, and three more at school; then of other things, and Wagram was surprised to note how well they talked. He had made up his mind to pay this call from a sense of duty, and had approached it with considerable misgiving. One girl he had already seen, and she had impressed him favourably, yet how would she show up under the circumstances of a surprise visit? For the others he had expected to find very second-rate types, possibly overdressed, certainly underbred; forward and gushing or awkwardly shy. But in these two, each more than ordinarily attractive after her different type, he had found nothing of the kind. There was an ease of manner and entire freedom from affectation about them that fairly astonished him, remembering the repute in which the family was apparently held; and, realising it, they went up in his estimation accordingly. Both were at their best, and knew it.

But through it all came the recollection of that action for breach of promise. Which of them was concerned in it, he wondered; or was it the absent one? Well, there was no finding out now. Yet somehow, he did not think it could be Delia. If it were either of these two he would rather think it was Clytie; and then, suddenly, it occurred to him to wonder why on earth he was troubling his head about it at all. He had paid his duty call, and there was an end of the whole matter. But—was there?

"So sorry father was out, Mr Wagram," said Clytie as he rose to take his leave, "and so will he be. But, perhaps, if you are in Bassingham again and are inclined to drop in for a cup of tea, I know he'll be delighted."

Wagram, as in duty bound, declared that the pleasure would be mutual. It was strange, he said, that he did not even know Major Calmour by sight; but he was so seldom in Bassingham, and had not been very long at the Court, for the matter of that.

"We pulled that off well, Delia," said Clytie as they returned from seeing their visitor to the gate. "He's gone away thinking no small beer of us. He had heard all sorts of beastly things said about us, and came to see if they were true, and has come to the conclusion they are not."

"Why do you think that?"

Clytie smiled pityingly.

"My dear child, I never saw the man yet I couldn't read like a book, even in matters far more complicated than that, and not often a woman. Never mind. I'll back you up all I know how if you'll go on playing up to me as you did just now. Oh, good Lord! there's the old man, and—he's 'fresh.'"

For a volley of raucous profanity had swamped her last words, and over the top of the front gate a face was visible—a very red face indeed, surmounted by a hat awry. The profanity was evoked by its utterer's natural inability to open a locked gate by the simple process of pushing and battering against the same. Delia looked troubled.

"Do you think he saw him?" she said. "He's only just this second gone out."

"Depends which way the old man came. But 'he', if you remember, said he'd never set eyes on him."

"Yes; but that's not to say he never will. And then, on top of that recognition, he'll be in no lively hurry to wend our way again."

“Leave all that to the future, and chance,” returned Clytie. “Oh, bother! The old man’s blaring away like a calf that has lost its cow. We’d better let him in sharp or he’ll draw a crowd.”

The two walked leisurely back to the gate, against which their parent was raining kicks—and curses.

“Go easy, dad,” said Clytie. “How the deuce can a fellow open the gate from this side what time you’re banging it in from that? There! Now, come along.”

“How the deuce? Look here, you minx, that’s nice sort of feminine language to use to your father, isn’t it? Or to anyone,” he repeated as he walked stiffly and with an ominous swaying gait up the garden path.

“And that’s nice sort of masculine language to use to your daughters—and the gate, and things in general, as you were doing just now, isn’t it?” laughed Clytie serenely. “Unless you can plead, with the proverbial Scotchman, that you were only swearing ‘at large.’”

“Ha-ha! What a girl it is!” chuckled the old man, with the suspicion of a hiccough. “You ought to go on the stage, dear; you’d make your fortune.”

“No doubt. But I’ve got to get there first. I say, dad, who d’you think has just gone?”

“Dunno, don’t care; only that I’m devilish glad they have gone. Now I can have a ‘peg.’”

“No, you can’t.”

“Can’t! What the devil do you mean, Clytie?”

“What I say. You’ve had enough of a ‘peg’ to last you till to-night. What you want now is some strong coffee, so come right in and have it.”

He grumbled something about not being master in his own house, and a good deal more. But in the end he submitted; for Clytie was the one who ruled him, and, to do her justice, ruled him tactfully and for his good, so far as it lay within her power; whereas Delia was somewhat intolerant of this phase of her parent’s weakness, and adopted towards it a scornful attitude.

“Well, dad, you haven’t guessed who has just gone,” went on Clytie.

“How the blazes should I know—or care?” snapped the old man. “Some spark of yours, I suppose.”

“Haven’t got any just now. Everyone seems ‘off’ me. Delia’s putting my nose clean out of joint,” was the placid reply. “Well, what d’you think of Wagram?”

“What?” roared old Calmour, who was just in the quarrelsome stage and was glad of an object whereon to vent it. “He? If I’d been here I’d have kicked him out of the house.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” said Delia quickly. “You couldn’t, to begin with.”

“What the—what the—?” And as the old man, purple with rage, let off a string of unstudied profanity, both girls put their fingers to their ears.

“Let’s know when you’ve blown off steam, dad,” said Clytie, “then we’ll listen to you again.”

At last old Calmour, seeing no fun in cursing without an audience, and being, moreover, quite blown, desisted, the resumed thread of his wrath taking the shape of rumbling growls. He would teach that blanked, stuck-up jackanapes—keeping wild beasts to attack his girls on a public road. He didn’t care this or that for any blanked Wagram, even if they owned half the county. He’d knock a thousand pounds damages out of them for that little job. He’d put it in his solicitors’ hands at once, he would, by so and so.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort, dad,” said Clytie. “We’ve got a much better plan than that.”

“Oh, you have, have you? And what is it?”

“Not going to tell you—not yet. Leave it to me, and—keep quiet.”

Again he grumbled and swore, but Clytie’s equanimity was proof against such little amenities. She was not going to let her father into their scheme only to have him giving it away in his cups, in this or that saloon bar about the place, not she. At last, drowsy with the combined warmth of the day, his own vehemence, and, incidentally, the liquor he had imbibed, he subsided on a sofa, and snored.

He did not look lovely as he lay there, open-mouthed and breathing stertorously, his grey hair all touzled about his red and bloated face. It was hard to realise that he could be the father of these two very attractive girls, yet in his younger days he had been a

good-looking man enough. But the effects of poverty and domestic worry, and drink taken to drown the care inseparable therefrom, had made him—well, what he was.

Chapter Six.

A Solemnity.

The chapel belonging to Hilversea Court stood a little back from the main avenue, and was so embowered in fine old trees as to be invisible in summer-time from the main road which skirted the park wall on the outside.

From the west front of it, at right angles to the main avenue, there opened out a second avenue, of a good width, and shaded by rows of tall limes extending some four hundred yards, and terminating in a sculptured stone Calvary of sufficient size and proportions as to be plainly discernible even at a distance. This avenue was known as the Priest's Walk.

The origin of the name was by no means clear. Some said it was because successive family chaplains for generations had been in the habit of pacing this avenue while saying their office, or for purposes of combining exercise with meditation; others that tradition had it that in the reign of Elizabeth a refugee priest was arrested there, and being, of course, subsequently martyred, was said to revisit the scene at midnight on the anniversary of his martyrdom, and pace up and down—incidentally, headless. None, however, could say for certain. But the name had stuck—had been there, indeed, beyond the memory of the grandfather of the oldest inhabitant.

On this cloudless June afternoon, however, there was nothing reminiscent of tragedy or special manifestation. Quite a throng of people lined the avenue on either side, quiet and expectant, talking but little, and then in subdued tones. Overhead, at intervals, drapings of crimson and white and gold spanned the avenue, as though for the passage of royalty; for it was the octave day of the Feast of Corpus Christi, and the procession customary on that solemnity was about to take place.

The occasion was a gala one at Hilversea. As far as possible the day was observed on the estate as a general holiday, and so great was the popularity of the old Squire and his son that even those among their tenants who differed with them in creed would willingly meet their wishes in this respect. Moreover, there was an abundant spread laid out in several large marquees, to which all belonging to the place were welcome, whether they attended the religious observances or not; and this held good of a sprinkling of people from outside, even though drawn thither by no more exalted a motive than that of witnessing a picturesque sight.

That it was all this there could be no room for two opinions as the chapel doors were thrown wide and the procession emerged. Headed by the cross-bearer and acolytes

came a long double file of white-clothed children wearing veil and wreath, girls from a neighbouring convent school, and a number of choir boys in lace-trimmed cottas and scarlet cassocks, which showed in bright contrast to the more sober black ones of the lay singers; several priests in cassock and cotta, all holding lighted candles; then, preceded by torch-bearers and thurifers, and walking beneath a golden canopy, came the celebrant bearing the Sacred Host in a gleaming sun-shaped monstrance, and attended by deacon and subdeacon, all three richly vested. Several banners, borne aloft at intervals, added a final stroke of picturesqueness to the moving pageant.

The demeanour of the onlookers varied only in degrees of reverence, for of the opposite there was none. Headed by the old Squire and such of the house party not officially assisting in the ceremony many fell in behind and followed on. So still was the summer air that the flame of the numerous tapers burned without a flicker, and when a pause occurred in the chanting a perfect chorus of thrush-song from the adjoining woods mingled with the musical clash of censer chains and the tinkle of the canopy bells.

Wagram, in cassock and cotta, was acting as master of ceremonies, keeping a careful eye on the line of march with a view to rectifying any tendency to crowding up on the one hand or “gappiness” on the other.

“A little quicker, please,” he whispered to a tall, beautiful girl of sixteen, with hair that shone like a flowing golden mantle over her white dress. She was supporting a large banner, and was flanked by two wee tots, similarly attired, holding the tassels. With a nod of the head she complied, and then Wagram, stepping back a pace or two to beckon the others on, brushed against somebody kneeling. Turning to offer a whispered apology he beheld Delia Calmour, who, giving him a little smile and reassuring nod, was occupied in resettling her hat. For a moment he found himself wondering that she should be there at all, then the discharge of his duties drove all thought of her out of his mind.

At the far end of the avenue a reposoir had been erected—a temporary throne, abundantly decked with lights and flowers—and here all knelt while the Tantum ergo was sung; and the white Host, framed in the flashing sun rays of the jewelled monstrance, gleamed on high as Benediction was given. Then, reforming, the procession, returning, moved forward once more upon its rose-strewn way, singing now the Litany of Loreto, which, being, of course, well known to most of those present, was taken up on all sides, and chorused forth in one great and hearty volume of rhythm.

Delia Calmour rose from her knees and joined the increased numbers of those who were following. What had moved her she could not for the life of her have told, but she had found herself bowing down in reverence as low as those around her as the Sacred Host

was borne past. Now she followed with the rest. She could not get into the chapel, but in this she fared no worse than nine-tenths of those in whose midst she was. But through the open doors she could distinguish the starry glitter of many lights on or about the high altar, as, in a dead hush, between thunderous waves of organ and chant, the final Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was given.

The throng outside began to break up and those from within to come out. The convent children were marshalled forth, two by two, in charge of their attendant nuns, and still Delia lingered. She longed for an opportunity of having a little talk with Wagram, if it were only for a few minutes. She went into the chapel, thick and fragrant with incense. Two acolytes were extinguishing the numerous candles, and her pulse quickened as she saw Wagram, now divested of his cassock and cotta, standing by the sacristy door, pointing out the architectural and ornamental beauties of the interior to a couple of priests, presumably strangers. It was of no use, she decided, and, going outside, she wandered up the decorated avenue again. But before she had gone far she stopped short, striving to curb the thrill of her pulses, to repress the tell-tale rush of colour to her cheeks. A step behind her—and a voice. That was all.

"How do you do, Miss Calmour? How quickly you walk. So you have found your way over to our solemnity?"

Delia turned at the voice. As they clasped hands she was conscious of an utterly unwonted trepidation. She had just given up all hope of speaking with him. He would be too busy with other things and people to trouble to find her out, even if he had remembered noticing her among the attendance at all, she argued.

"Yes; but I had to screw up my courage very considerably to do so," she returned, flashing up at him a very winning smile. "You see, I had heard that anybody might come."

"Of course. But what were you afraid of? That you would be spirited away and privately burnt at the stake? Or only thumb-screwed?"

"No, no—of course not. Don't chaff me, Mr Wagram; it's unkind. You ought rather to pity my ignorance. Do you often have a ceremony like that?"

"Only once a year hitherto. This ought, strictly speaking, to have been held last Thursday, or Sunday, but we couldn't make it anything like as imposing on either day. We couldn't have got the convent school for one thing, nor such a muster of clergy. They can't conveniently leave their own missions on those days. Now come up to the house. There's 'cup' and all sorts of things going; tea, too, if you prefer it—and I can't allow you

to break away as you did last time. Where did you leave your bicycle?"—with a glance at her skirt.

"I stood it against the chapel railing. Will it be safe there?"

"We'd better take it along to make sure."

She would not let him get it for her. Someone might detain him if once he left her side. Indeed, she could hardly realise that she was awake and not dreaming. In saying that she had screwed up her courage to come she was speaking the literal truth, and even then would have given up at the last moment but for Clytie, whom, feebly, she had besought to accompany her.

"Not I, my dear child," had been the decisive response. "If I were to get into that crowd some kind soul would be safe to pass the word: 'Hullo! There's Damages.' Then what sort of show would Damages' little sister have? No, no; you must play this innings off your own bat."

But Delia, to do her justice, had resolved in no way to second her sister's great and audacious scheme. It made her feel mean to realise that she had even heard it mooted. Her presence there to-day was not due to any wish to further it, but to a legitimate desire not to let slip so good an opportunity of furthering the acquaintance so strangely begun.

"I have never seen a more picturesque sight," she went on as they walked towards the house. "The effect was perfect—the procession moving between these great tree trunks—the avenue all strewn with roses—and all that flash as of gold here and there, and the scarlet and white of the choir boys. And how well they seemed to do it—no fuss or blundering. Did you organise it all, Mr Wagram? You seemed here, there, and everywhere at once."

"I generally do master of ceremonies—a very much needed official, I assure you, on these occasions."

"So I should imagine. And all those little tots in muslin and white wreaths—even the plainest of them looked pretty. Tell me, Mr Wagram, who was that lovely girl who carried one of the banners? She didn't look as if she belonged to that convent school."

"Yvonne Haldane. No, she doesn't."

"Is she French?"

“There’s nothing French about her but her name, unless that she speaks it uncommonly well. She’s staying with us—she and her father. The peculiarity about them is that they are rarely seen apart.”

“Really? How nice. You don’t often find that.” And the speaker’s thoughts reverted to another sort of parent, abusive or maudlin, red-faced, and semi or wholly intoxicated. “But, Mr Wagram, who is the priest who seemed to do all the principal part? Such a fine-looking old man!”

“Monsignor Culham. He and my father have known each other all their lives. Ah, here they all are,” as the tall forms of the prelate and his host appeared round the end of the house. With them was a sprinkling of black coats.

“I believe I’m a little afraid,” said Delia hesitatingly.

“You needn’t be. They are very good-natured men. They wouldn’t wish to burn you for the world. They prefer the ‘Stakes of Smithfield’ with the ‘e’ transposed.”

“Now you’re chaffing me again. But, really, I’m always a little shy of ‘the cloth.’ I never know what to talk about.”

“Make your mind easy. We shall find the lay element abundantly represented on the lawn, never fear. But first come and say a word or two to my father.”

Remembering the episode of the gnu, Delia was a little shy of meeting the old Squire. But she need not have been, for his denunciation of the house of Calmour notwithstanding, his greeting of this scion thereof was all that was kind and cordial.

“So this is the famous big game slayer?” he said after a word or two of welcome. “What do you think of that, Monsignor? You don’t meet every day with a young lady who can boast of having shot big game—dropped a fine specimen of the brindled gnu dead in his tracks.”

“No, indeed. In South Africa, I suppose?”

“South Africa? No. Here—right here. But it was to save someone from being badly gored.”

“Which is one more instance to show that pluck and readiness of resource are not prerogatives of our sex entirely,” said the prelate, quick to notice the look of embarrassment which had come over the girl’s face.

It was even as Wagram had said, the lay element was represented on the lawn, as a fair sprinkling of sunshades and vari-coloured light summer dresses and hats bore token. Likewise refreshment, and while in process of procuring some for his charge Wagram felt a pull at his sleeve.

“Who’s that you’ve got there, Wagram? Is Damages here too?”

“Eh? Oh, by the way, Haldane, which of them is Damages?”

“Not this one; a sister; the tall one: Clytie, I think they call her.”

“Oh! Well, this one isn’t responsible for her sister, and she’s a very nice sort of girl. She’s the heroine of the gnu adventure, you know, and I want Yvonne to go and talk to her a little.”

“Of course I will,” said Yvonne, moving off with that intent.

“Look at her!” exclaimed Haldane as they watched this tall child cross the lawn; straight, erect, gait utterly free and unstudied, the great golden mantle of her hair rippling below her waist. “Just look at her, Wagram! Did you ever see such a child in your life? And they talk about ‘the awkward age.’ Yvonne never had an awkward age.”

“I should think not,” assented Wagram, who ran her father very close in his admiration for the beautiful child.

“How many girls of her age,” went on Haldane, “would unhesitatingly go and talk to an entire stranger like that? They’d kick against it, object that they didn’t know what to say, that someone else had better undertake the job, and so on. Yet look at her; she’s as self-possessed as a woman of fifty, and as devoid of self-consciousness as a savage, and she’s talking to the other girl as if she’s known her all her life.”

And such, indeed, was the case. So entranced was Delia with the charm of this child-woman that she almost forgot to do justice to the strawberries and champagne cup which Wagram had procured for her, almost forgot furtively to watch Wagram himself as he moved here and there attending to other guests; forgot entirely any little gêne she might have felt, remembering that, after all, this was not her world, that she was in a sort of fish-out-of-water state. They talked of bicycling, then of post-card collecting, then

of the solemnity they had just witnessed, and here especially the blue eyes would kindle and the whole face light up, and Yvonne would describe graphically and well other and similar ceremonies she had witnessed in some of the great cathedrals of the world. Her listener thought she could have sat there for ever in that atmosphere of refinement and ease; and this lovely child, who had drawn her with such a magnetic fascination—they would probably never hold converse together again. How could they, belonging as they did to different worlds, and in this connection the thought of the atmosphere of Siege House caused her very much of a mental shudder.

"Has this little girl been boring you a lot, Miss Calmour?" And Haldane laid an arm round the sunny tresses upon his child's shoulders.

"Boring me! Why, I never was so interested in my life! You and your daughter seem to have been everywhere, Mr Haldane. Boring me!" And with a little, instinctively affectionate impulse she dropped her hand on to that of Yvonne, as though to plead: "Don't leave me yet."

"We've been having a post-card discussion, father; Miss Calmour has a splendid collection. But she holds that post-cards are no good unless they've been through the post. I hold they're no good if they have, because the picture is all spoilt."

"Why not cut the knot of the difficulty by collecting both?" suggested Delia.

"Don't you give her any such pernicious advice, Miss Calmour," laughed Haldane. "The craze is quite ruinous enough to me as it is. I find myself gently but firmly impelled within a post-card shop every other day or so—sort of metaphorically taken by the ear, don't you know—on the ground that just one or two are wanted to fill up a vacant space in the corner of a given page. But seldom, if ever, do I quit that shop without becoming liable for one or two dozen."

Delia laughed at this, but Yvonne merely smiled complacently, as though to convey that her parent might think himself lucky at being let down so easily. The latter went on:

"Now you are inducing her to do that which makes me fairly quake, for if she adopts the course you recommend she'll buy the cards at a greater rate than before, and ruin me in postage over and above for the purpose of posting them to herself."

"All safe, father; all safe this time. I wouldn't have them if they had been through the post."

“Would you care to bring your collection over and compare notes with Yvonne, Miss Calmour? Let me see, we are going back home on Monday. Why not come over to lunch on Tuesday? You have a bicycle—but I forgot, you can hardly carry a lot of post-card books on a bicycle.”

“Easily. I have a carrier on the back wheel which has often held a far greater weight,” answered the girl, hardly able to conceal her delight.

“Very well, then, that’s settled. But—don’t stop to shoot any more blue wildebeeste on the way.”

“Oh, that wretched creature! Am I never to hear the last of it?” laughed Delia, merrily rueful.

Two considerations had moved Haldane in the issuing of this invitation—the spontaneous and whole-souled admiration evinced by this girl for Yvonne, and the wistful look on the face of the latter at the propinquity of a good post-card collection which she might not see. He prided himself upon his knowledge of character, too, and watching Delia closely was inclined to endorse Wagram’s opinion. The house of Calmour was manifestly and flagrantly impossible; but this seemed a nice sort of girl, entirely different to the others. Moreover, Yvonne seemed to like her, and Yvonne’s instincts were singularly accurate for her age.

“Well, I must be moving,” said Delia, with something like a sinking of the heart. Wagram had disappeared for some time, and the groups on the lawn were thinning out fast. “But I don’t see Mr Wagram anywhere.”

“He’s probably in the big tent making them a speech or something,” said Haldane. “There, I thought so,” as a sound of lusty cheering arose at no great distance. “He’s sure to be there. Yvonne will pilot you there if you want to find him. It’s an institution I fight rather shy of,” he added, with a laugh.

But a strange repugnance to mingling in a crowd took hold of Delia just then. Would Mr Haldane kindly make her adieux for her? And then, having taken leave of them, she went round to where she had left her bicycle, and was in the act of mounting when—

“Hallo, Miss Calmour, are you off already? I’ve been rather remiss, I fear, but you’ve no notion how one gets pulled this way and that way on an occasion of this kind. I hope Yvonne took care of you.”

“She did indeed, Mr Wagram. What a perfectly sweet child she is! Do you know, I am to lunch there next week, and compare post-card collections.”

“That’ll be very jolly.”

“Won’t it? Well now, Mr Wagram, I don’t know when I have enjoyed myself so much. Oh, but there is one thing I wanted to ask you,” relapsing into shyness. “Might I—er—are people allowed—to attend your chapel here on Sundays? Now and then, I mean.”

“Certainly, if there’s room for them,” he answered, looking rather astonished. “It won’t hold a great many, as you might have seen to-day—oh, and, of course, you won’t see anything like the ceremonial you saw to-day.”

“I know. Still, I should like to attend occasionally. Then—I may?”

“Why, of course. Meanwhile I must look out a pair of thumbscrews that’s likely to fit you. Good-bye.”

In the midst of the mutual laugh evoked by this parting jest Delia mounted her bicycle and glided away. She passed groups in the avenue, some, like herself, awheel. Gaining the high road, there was the white gate opening on to the by-road through the park, the scene of the gnu adventure. Then, as by sudden magic, the spell of serenity and peace which had been upon her was removed. She felt restlessly unhappy, in tumultuous revolt. She thought of home, when she should get there; of Bob’s vulgarity, of Clytie’s soft-toned and brutal cynicisms, of her father, thick-voiced and reeling. Worse still, she would probably find him in an even further advanced stage of intoxication, and more or less foul of speech in consequence, and—this is exactly what she eventually did find.

Chapter Seven.

Concerning a Derelict.

“So that was your heroine of the adventure, Wagram?” said the old Squire as they sat at breakfast the following morning.

“Yes. What did you think of her?”

“Poor girl.”

“Poor girl? Why?” asked Monsignor Culham.

“Spells Calmour.”

There was a laugh at this.

“He is a holy terror, Monsignor,” explained Haldane. “Sort of paints the town red at intervals. The whole lot of them are impossible, yet this girl seems an exception. She’s been away from home a long time, I believe, and, of course, that may account for it.”

“Possibly,” said the prelate. “I noticed her yesterday, and she seemed very devout. Are these people Catholics?”

“Not they. I don’t suppose they’re anything at all,” answered Haldane.

“Old Calmour was very ‘sky blue’ that day I called there,” said Wagram. “He groped right past me, and I was thankful he didn’t know me from Adam. He was certainly ‘talking’ when he couldn’t batter his own gate in.”

“They say the girls have to stop their ears tight when he’s ‘fresh,’” said Haldane; “and yet Damages can do a little ‘talking’ off her own from all accounts.”

“You wouldn’t think it to look at her,” said Wagram.

“That’s just it. But I believe it’s a fact, all the same.”

“Well, then, what about this other one?” pursued Wagram mischievously. “She may be just as deceptive, and yet you’ve booked her to lunch at your place next week.”

“I rather pride myself on being a student of character,” said Haldane, “and I don’t, somehow, think this case will prove me wrong.”

“No; I don’t think so either,” assented Wagram.

“I formed a favourable impression of her, too—the mere glimpse I had of her when we met,” said Monsignor Culham. “She certainly is a very pretty girl, and I should think a good one. It might even be that in the fulness of time she should prove the means of salvaging the rest of the family.”

“Her brother Bob would take a great deal of salvaging,” said Haldane drily. “Hallo, the child’s late,” he added, with a glance at the clock. “Said she’d be in before this.”

“In! Why, I thought she might be sleeping off the effects of her efforts yesterday,” said the Squire.

“Not she. She’s adding to them. She’s gone down with Hood to try and capture an early trout.”

“Really!” exclaimed Monsignor. “Is she generally successful, Mr Haldane?”

“She’s a very fair hand at throwing a fly. Really, though, Monsignor, I’m afraid you’ll think me a doting sort of a driveller on that subject. The fact is, we all spoil her shockingly among us. Wagram doesn’t come far behind me in that line, and the Squire too.”

“I’m not surprised,” answered the prelate. “I think she is without exception the dearest child I have ever seen, and the proof of it is she remains unspoiled through it all. Why, there she is.”

On the lawn she was standing, just handing her trout rod to the old head keeper, who could not refrain from turning his head with a smile of admiration as he walked away. Then she danced up to the window, the pink flush of health in her cheeks, the blue eyes alight with a mischievous challenge.

“Well? What luck, Sunbeam?” said Haldane, who was already at the open window.

“Ah—ah! I wasn’t to get any, was I?” she cried ostentatiously, holding down the lid of her creel. “Well—look.”

She exhibited a brace of beautiful trout, each something over a pound, but in first-rate condition.

“Did you get them yourself?” said Wagram, who liked to tease her occasionally.

“Mr Wagram! I shall not speak to you for the whole of to-day—no—half of it.”

“I thought possibly Hood might have captured them,” he explained. “Did you say one or both?”

“Now it will be the whole of the day.”

“Well done, little one. Did they fight much?” said Haldane. “You shall tell us about it presently. Cut away now and titivate, because Wagram was threatening to polish off all the strawberries if you weren’t soon in, and I want you to have some.”

“He’d better; that’s all,” was the answer as she danced away, knowing perfectly well that the offender designate would get through the intervening time picking out all the largest and most faultless—looking for her especial delectation. Whereby it is manifest that her father had stated no more than bare fact in asserting that they all combined to spoil her. Equally true, it should be added, was Monsignor Culham’s dictum that they had not succeeded.

“Are my censures removed?” said Wagram as Yvonne entered. “Look at all I have been doing for you,” holding up the plate of strawberries.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they ought to be. I said I wouldn’t speak to you for the whole day. Well, we’ll make it half the day. I’ll begin at lunch-time.”

“Then we’ll say half the strawberries. You shall have the other half at lunch-time.”

“Look at that!” she cried. “Claiming pardon by a threat! You can’t do that, can he, Monsignor?”

“Certainly not,” answered the prelate, entering thoroughly into the fun of the thing; “not for a moment.”

“Roma locuta—causa finita,” pronounced Wagram with mock solemnity, handing her the plate. “Of course, I bow.”

“In that case I must treat you with generosity, and will talk to you now, especially as you are dying to know where and how I got my trout. I got them both, then, within fifty yards of each other; one in the hole below Syndham Bridge, the other at the tail of the hole; one with a Wickham’s Fancy, the other with a small Zulu—”

“Didn’t Hood play them for—?”

“Ssh-h-h! You’ll get into trouble again,” interrupted Yvonne. “You’re repeating the offence, mind.”

“Peccavi.”

“I’ll forgive you again on one condition: I’m just spoiling for a bicycle ride. You shall take me for one this afternoon.”

“Won’t the whole day be enough for you?”

“Not quite. The afternoon will, though.”

“Well, that’ll suit me to a hair. We’ll make a round, and I’ll look in at Pritchett’s farm; I want to see him about something. What do you think, Haldane? Are you on?”

“Very much off, I’m afraid. I sent my machine in to Warren’s to be overhauled. He promised it for yesterday morning, but the traditions of the great British tradesman must be kept up. Wherefore it is not yet here. But you take the child all the same.”

At first Yvonne declared she didn’t want to go under the circumstances, but was overruled.

“I’ve got to go into Fulkston on business, Sunbeam,” said her father, “so I shall be out of mischief, anyhow. I’ll borrow one of the Squire’s gees, if I may.”

“Why, of course,” said the Squire. “You know them all, Haldane. Tell Thompson which you’d rather ride.”

Then the conversation turned to matters ecclesiastical, also, as between the two old gentlemen, reminiscent. They had been schoolfellows in their boyhood, but the clean-shaven, clear-cut face of Monsignor Culham, and the white hair, worn rather long, gave him a much older look than the other; yet there was hardly a year’s difference between them. Both had in common the same tall, straight figure, together with the same kindly geniality of expression.

“I think I shall invite myself this time next year, Grantley,” said the prelate. “It is really a privilege to take part in such a solemnity as we held yesterday. It makes one anticipate time—very much time, I fear—when such is more the rule throughout the country than an isolated and, of course, doubly valued privilege.”

“My dear old friend, I hope you will. Only you must pardon my reminding you that it is for no want of asking on my part that ages have elapsed since you were here. And they have.”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t yesterday, and I concede being in the wrong,” rejoined Monsignor Culham. “But I have been in more than one cathedral church where the solemnities were nothing like so carefully and accurately performed. It was a rare pleasure to take part in these.”

“Here, Wagram, get up and return thanks,” laughed Haldane. “If it weren’t breakfast-time one would have said that Monsignor was proposing your health.”

“The lion’s share of the kudos is due to Father Gayle,” said Wagram. “He and I between us managed to knock together a fairly decent choir for a country place, which includes Haldane, a host in himself, and, incidentally, Yvonne. The rest is easy.”

“‘Incidentally Yvonne!’” repeated that young person with mock resentment.

“I don’t know about easy,” declared Monsignor Culham. “The fact remains you had got together an outside crowd who weren’t accustomed to singing with each other—over and above your own people.”

“Yes; but we sent word to the convent asking them to practise their children in what we were going to sing—and to practise them out of doors, too. For the rest of those who helped us we trusted to their intuitive gumption.”

“Ah, that’s a good plan,” said the prelate; “there’s too little care given to that sort of thing. Singers on such an occasion are left to sort themselves. Result: discord—hitches innumerable.”

“I know,” said Haldane. “I was on the sanctuary once in a strange church. They were going to have the Te Deum solemnly sung for an occasion. I asked for a book with the square notation score. They had no such thing in their possession, and the consequence was everyone was dividing up the syllables at his own sweet will. It was neither harmonious nor jubilant.”

“I should think not,” assented Wagram emphatically. “Now, there is hardly an outdoor function I have been present at which hasn’t represented to my mind everything that outdoor singing ought not to be. Unaccompanied singing is too apt to sound thin, and if backed up with brass instruments it sounds thinner still. So we dispense with them here, and our oft-repeated and especially final injunction to all hands is: ‘Sing up!’”

“Well, it certainly was effective with your singers, Wagram,” pronounced Monsignor Culham, “and I shall cite it as an instance whenever opportunity offers.”

“That’s good, Monsignor,” returned Wagram. “We want all round to make everything as solemn and dignified and attractive as possible, as far as our opportunities here allow, especially to those outside; and we have reason to know that good results have followed.”

“In conversions?”

“Yes. We throw open the grounds to all comers on these occasions, and in the result some who come merely to see a picturesque pageant are impressed, and—inquire further.”

“I wonder what proportion of the said ‘all comers’ confine their sense of the picturesque to the tables in the marquee,” remarked Haldane, who was of a cynical bent.

“Well, you know the old saying, Haldane—that one of the ways to reach a man’s soul is through his stomach,” laughed the Squire. “Anything in that paper, by the way?”

“N-no,” answered Haldane, who had been skimming the local morning paper, while keeping one ear open for the general conversation. “Wait, though—yes, this is rather interesting—if only that it reminds me of a bad quarter of an hour once owing to a similar cause. Listen to this: ‘The R.M.S. Rhodesian, which arrived at Southampton yesterday evening, reports passing a derelict in latitude 10 degrees 5 minutes north, longitude 16 degrees 36 minutes West. The hull was a dull rusty red, and apparently of about 900 or 1000 tons burthen. The vessel was partly submerged, the forecastle and poop being above water. About eight feet of iron foremast was standing, and rather more of mizzen-mast, with some rigging trailing from it. No name was visible, and the hulk, which had apparently been a long time in the water, was lying dangerously in the track of steamers to and from the Cape.’ I should think so indeed,” continued Haldane with some warmth. “It was just such a derelict that scraped past us one black night when I was coming home in the Manchurian on that very line. It was about midnight, and everybody had turned in, but the skipper and I were having a parting yarn on the

hurricane deck. We were so close to the thing that the flare of our lights showed it up barely ten yards from us; then it was gone. I asked the skipper what would have happened if we'd hit it straight and square, and he said he was no good at conundrums, but would almost rather have run full speed on against the face of a cliff."

"I suppose there was great excitement in the morning?" said the Squire.

"Not any; for the simple reason that nobody knew anything about it. The occurrence was logged, of course, but the skipper asked me not to blab, and I didn't. Most of the passengers were scary enough over the risks they knew about, he said, and if you told them a lot more that they didn't many of them would die."

"They oughtn't to leave a thing like that," said Wagram. "Why didn't your captain stop and blow it up, Haldane?"

"I asked him, and he said his company didn't contract for hulk-hunting on dark nights; it contracted to carry Her Majesty's mails. Probably the skipper of the Rhodesian reasoned in exactly the same way about this one."

"It's as bad as an infernal machine."

"It is an infernal machine," said Haldane.

Chapter Eight.

Retribution—Sharp and Sore.

"Now I'll race you, Mr Wagram."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. When I consented to take charge of you—a weighty responsibility in itself—I did so on condition that it was at your own risk. In short, the average railway company couldn't have contracted itself out of its liabilities more completely."

They were skimming along at the rate of about ten miles an hour, and that on an ideal road, smooth, dustless, and shaded by overhanging woods. Yvonne was trying how far she could ride with both hands off the handlebars, and performing various reckless feats, to the no small anxiety of her escort.

"Slow down here," said the latter. "This pace isn't safe; too many rabbits."

"Too many rabbits?" echoed the girl. Then she gave forth a peal of laughter.

"Yes; it's a screaming joke, isn't it? But it may surprise you to hear that I've known of more than one bad spill caused by a fool of a rabbit dodging under the wheel, especially at night."

"Really? You're not stuffing me?"

"Well, can't you see for yourself how easily the thing might happen? They're crossing the road in gangs in both directions, and a rabbit is sometimes as great a fool as a human being in crossing a road, in that it is liable to change its mind and run back again. Result in either case, a bad spill for the bicyclist. You needn't go far for an instance. Saunders, the chemist's assistant in Bassingham, was nearly killed that way. He was coasting down Swanton Hill in the moonlight, and a rabbit ran under his wheel. He was chucked off, and got concussion of the brain."

"Fancy being killed by a rabbit!"

"Yes. Sounds funny, doesn't it? Here's Pritchett's."

They had emerged from the woods into an open road, beside which stood a large farmhouse. The farmer was somewhere about the place; he couldn't be very far off, they

were informed. His wife was away, but might be back any minute. Should Mr Pritchett be sent for?

“No, no,” said Wagram; “just find a boy to show me where he is. I’ll go to him. Yvonne, you’d better wait here for me; a rest will do you no harm.”

“All safe. Don’t be longer than you can help.”

But Yvonne could not sit still for long, being of a restless temperament. She was soon outside again, and, promptly tiring of the ducks and fowls, she wandered down the shady road they had just come along.

Not far along this she came to a five-barred gate, opening into a broad green lane with high hedges, leading into the wood at right angles to the main road. In these hedges several whitish objects caught her glance.

“Honeysuckles,” she said to herself. “Beauties, too, if only I can reach them.”

In a moment she had opened the gate and was in the lane. But the coveted blossoms grew high, badly needing the aid of a hooked stick. She looked around for something approximating to one and found it. Then followed a good deal of scrambling, and at last, hot and flushed and a little scratched, Yvonne made her way back to the gate, trying to reduce into portable size and shape the redundant stems of the fragrant creeper. Being thus intent she did not look up until she had reached the gate, and then with a slight start, for she discovered that she was no longer alone.

Standing on the other side of the gate, but facing her, with both elbows lounged over the top bar, was a pasty-faced, loosely-hung youth, clad in a bicycle suit of cheap build and loud design. This precious product nodded to her with a familiar grin but made no attempt to move.

“Will you make way for me, please? I wish to pass,” she said crisply.

This time the fellow winked.

“Not until you’ve paid toll, dear,” he said, with nauseous significance.

It was well for him that Yvonne’s hands held nothing more formidable than a couple of bunches of honeysuckle. Had they held a whip or a switch it is possible that the pasty face of this cowardly cur might have been wealed in such wise as to last him for quite an indefinite time.

“Will you stand away from that gate, please? I repeat that I want to pass,” she said in even more staccato tone than before. Her blue eyes had grown steely, and there was a red flush in the centre of each cheek. She glanced furtively on the ground; if even she could find a stone for a weapon of defence; but the lane was soft and grassy, and stones there were none. But all the fellow did was to drop his elbows farther down over the top bar, so as to hold the gate more effectually.

“Not until you’ve paid toll, dear,” he repeated. “Come, now, don’t be disagreeable. It’s the rule of the road to take toll of a pretty girl when you let her through a gate. You’re only a kid, too, and I won’t give it away. Ooh—hah—hah!”

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the combined terror and anguish conveyed in the above shout. Equally impossible would it be, we fear, to convey the attitude struck, in sudden and swift transition, by him who uttered it. He bounded back from the gate like an india-rubber ball thrown against it, and with like velocity, for a tough and supple ground-ash stick had descended upon that part of his person which his forward lounge over the gate had left peculiarly suggestive of the purpose; and with lightning-like swiftness again the stick came down, conveying to the recipient some such sensation as that of being cut in half by a red-hot bar. One appalled glimpse of Wagram’s face, blazing with white wrath above him, and the terrified bounder, ducking just in time to avoid being seized by the collar, turned and fled down the road, quite regardless, in his blind panic, of abandoning his bicycle, which leaned against the hedge a few yards from the gate.

But for himself no more disastrous plan could he have conceived. Wagram had no intention of letting him down so easily, and sprang in pursuit, with the result that in about a moment he was flogging his victim along the road at the best pace that either could by any possibility put forward. At last the fellow lay down, and howled for mercy.

Giving him one final, pitiless, cutting “swish” as he rolled over, Wagram ceased.

“You crawling cur,” he said, still white with anger, and rather breathless with his exertion, “I won’t even give you the privilege of apologising. That is one reserved for some slight semblance of a man; but for a thing like you—Faugh!”

The thought seemed to sting him to such a degree of renewed ferocity that his face changed again. Fearing a renewal of the chastisement the cringing one fairly whimpered.

“You’ve nearly killed me,” he groaned. “I didn’t mean any harm, sir; it was only a bit of fun.”

“Fun!” Wagram turned away. He could not trust himself until he had put a dozen yards between them. Then he turned again.

“Get your bicycle, and take yourself off,” he said—“if you can still sit on it, that is.” Then he returned to Yvonne.

“I am not pleased with you,” he said. “You should not have gone wandering off on your own account like that. And I’m responsible for you to your father. What’ll he say? The only bright side to it is that I was in time to thrash that unutterable young brute within an inch of his life. No, though; I didn’t give him half enough,” with a vicious swish of the ground-ash through the air.

“Don’t be angry with me, Mr Wagram,” she answered, and the sweet, fearless blue eyes were wet as she slipped her hand pleadingly through his arm; “I’m so sorry.”

There was no resisting this, and he thawed at once.

“Well, we’ll think no more about it, dear. There, now, don’t cry.”

“No, I won’t.” She dashed away her tears with a smile. She thought so much of Wagram that a displeased word from him was more to this happy, sunny-hearted, spirited child than the occasion seemed to warrant. Then a shout behind caused them both to turn.

They had strolled about a hundred yards from the gate, and now they saw that the fellow had regained his bicycle. He was standing in the middle of the road ready to mount, but at a safe distance.

“I’ll have the law of you for this,” he shouted, “you great, bullying coward. I’d like to see you hit a man your own size. I’ll have a thousand pounds out of you for this job. You’ve committed a savage assault on me, and you shall pay for it, by God! I know who you are, my fine fellow, and you’ll hear more about this; no blooming fear!”

“Oh, you haven’t had enough?” called out Wagram. “All right. My bike’s just close by; I’ll get it and come after you, then you shall have some more,” holding up the ground-ash. “Go on; I’ll soon catch you up.”

This was a new aspect of the affair. The fellow seemed cowed, for he forthwith mounted his machine with some alacrity, and made off at a pace which must have caused him

agonies in the light of the raw state to which his seating properties had just been reduced.

This is how the situation had come about. When Wagram returned to the house with the farmer he found that Yvonne, tired of waiting, had strolled off down the road, intending to pick wild flowers, or otherwise amuse herself. Without a thought of anything untoward he had followed her. The gate at which the affair began stood back from the road, and was concealed by the jutting of the hedge from anyone approaching. But the girl's indignant voice, clear as a bell, fell upon his ear, and simultaneously he had caught sight of the objectionable cad's nether extremities, as their owner, leaned over the gate. The idea suggested, to open his knife, and in a couple of quick, noiseless slashes to cut one of the fine, serviceable ground-ash plants growing on the bank, was the work of a moment. It was the work of another moment to step noiselessly behind the fellow just as he was delivering himself of his second insult. The rest we know.

"Well, child, we shall have a lovely ride back," he said. "I believe Mrs Pritchett has got some rather good strawberries and cream for you before we start, to say nothing of some very inviting-looking home-made bread and butter. She has come in, you know."

They had reached the farmhouse by now, and the farmer and his wife were waiting for them in the porch.

"Come in miss, do," said the latter. "I know you'll like this." And she beamed proudly, with a look at the spotless white tablecloth, and the set-out of blushing strawberries and snowy cream, and the thin, tempting slices of brown bread and butter. "I've made you a nice cup of tea, too, Mr Wagram, sir. I don't know that you'll take a fancy to such things," added the good dame ruefully.

"I'll take an immense fancy to a glass or two of your husband's excellent home-brewed, Mrs Pritchett. Why, you're forgetting how I've enjoyed it before to-day."

"Why, of course I am, sir," was the reply, immensely pleased; and in a trice the farmer returned with a foam-capped jug and a glass.

"What's this?" said Wagram, with reference to the latter. "Why, certainly you're going to keep me company, Pritchett."

"Well, sir, I shall be proud," was the answer, and the omission was promptly rectified.

"Here are your healths," said Wagram, raising his glass. "I didn't see you yesterday, Mrs Pritchett. Weren't you able to get over? Of course, I don't mean necessarily for the

service," he added quickly; "but you ought to know by this time that all our friends are heartily welcome, irrespective of their creed."

"Well, sir, you see it was this way," began the good woman with some slight embarrassment.

"That's all right," interrupted Wagram genially. "Well, you'll know it next time, I'm sure."

"That I shall, sir."

After a little more pleasant conversation they shook hands heartily with the worthy couple and took their leave.

Just before the dressing-bell rang Haldane burst in upon Wagram in a wholly unwonted state of excitement.

"What's this my little girl has been telling me, Wagram?" he said. "I must go and kill the scoundrel at once. I'll borrow the Squire's biggest hunting-crop."

"You can't, Haldane, if only that we haven't the remotest idea who the said scoundrel is. It's probably some miserable counter-jumper doing a bike round. But, sit tight; he's got enough to last him for many a long day."

"Did you cut him to ribbons? Did you?"

"I cut his small-clothes to ribbons. By George, he'll have to launch out in a new biking suit. No; great as the offence was, even I think he got something like adequate compensation for it," added Wagram grimly, as he called to mind the fellow's insults—and their object.

And with this assurance Haldane had perforce to remain satisfied.

Chapter Nine.

"We Get No Show."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Clytie Calmour as a vehement ring sounded at the front gate, obviously produced by the owner of the large red head which surmounted that portal. "Great Scott! but whoever called this shebang Siege House named it well. Here's our last butcher pestering for his account for the seventh time. Now, dad, shell out."

"Don't talk rot, Clytie. You know I haven't got a stiver. He'll have to wait till next quarter-day. Tell him that, and let him go to the devil."

"Yes, yes; that's all right. But meanwhile we shall have to be vegetarians."

"This infernal dunning gets on a man's nerves. It oughtn't to be allowed," grumbled old Calmour, who, it being only breakfast-time, was not sufficiently drunk to philosophise.

"No, it oughtn't," cut in Bob; "but this time tell him we'll square with him next week to a dead cert, Clytie, and deal with him ever after. You know, dad. You were forgetting," with a significant wink.

"I wonder what nefarious plan you're hatching between you," said Delia. "But I'd be sorry for Wells if he depended upon it for getting his money."

"Oh, shut up," snarled Bob. "You weren't so blazing straight-laced and sanctimonious until you got taken up by the nobs, either. By Jove, I believe Clytie's got round him after all. What a girl she is!"

For the exasperated tradesman, who had been delivering himself of all sorts of uncomplimentary sayings, on the appearance of Clytie on the scene had evidently thawed with a suddenness which was quite miraculous, and was seen to salute quite respectfully as he turned away.

"I've fixed him," she said serenely as she entered. "He'll send round. We shan't have to vegetate to-day."

This sort of incident was common at Siege House, which, by the way, had really been so named by a former owner who had taken part in the siege of Delhi. Indeed, it was a mystery how they lived. Old Calmour's pension was not large, and generally forestalled, yet somehow they managed to rub along.

“When are you going to start for Haldane’s, Delia?” went on Bob, who was inclined to make himself disagreeable.

“Soon.”

“Soon? Can’t be too soon, eh? It’s surprising how these old widowers freeze on to you. First Wagram, now Haldane,” jeered Bob.

But there came a look into the face of his would-be victim that he did not like. Delia had a temper, both quick and hot when roused, as he had more than once had reason to know, wherefore now his asinine guffaw seemed to dwindle. Clytie intervened.

“Shut your head, Bob,” she said decisively. “You open it a great deal too much, and generally at the wrong time. Likewise clear; we’ve had enough of you. Besides, you’re late. Pownall and Skreet must be absolutely languishing for you and your valuable services. Do you hear? Clear.”

Whatever hold the speaker had upon Bob it was obviously a tight one, for he never failed in his obedience. Such was rendered grumblingly, indeed, but rendered it was. Now he retreated to the door, grunting a surly “All right.”

“What are those two up to, do you think, Clytie?” said Delia. “The old man’s going to Pownall and Skreet’s as well as Bob.”

The last named at this juncture put his head in at the door to shout out:

“Which is the one, Delia? Wagram or Haldane?” and withdrew it in a hurry lest a well-aimed missile might considerably damage it—for of such were the ways of Siege House.

“I don’t know. There may be a judgment summons out against him that we know nothing about—or anything,” answered Clytie with a tinge of anxiety.

“You don’t think they’re up to any mischief with regard to that wretched gnu affair?” said Delia anxiously.

“No—no; I’ve put my foot on that. And Pownall and Skreet are infernal thieves. Look how they fleeced me. They couldn’t let Charlie Vance’s thousand pass through their hands without sticking to a lot of it. Called it costs! Why, they ought to have got those from the other side. Well, that’s all gone, and I don’t know how we’re going to raise the wind. A cool thou, wouldn’t come in badly just now. By the way, Delia, supposing my scheme fell through, how would it be to bring off something of that kind—on the

principle of 'half-an-egg'? And it would be a dashed sight more than a cool thou, this time, for the Wagrams are Croesus compared with the Vances."

"Oh, that'll do, Clytie. I suppose, as Bob says, I must have become straitlaced and sanctimonious; but I hate to look upon it in that light. I'm not meaning to reflect on you, mind; but, rather than do the other thing, I'd starve."

"So might we. Oh, I don't mind," was the serene answer. "Only, look here, Delia, and see where we come in. It's like having first-rate teeth but nothing to eat with them. Here we are, two devilish good-looking girls, each in our own way, yet we get no show. What's the use of our looks if they're to be nothing more than an instrument for cajoling a red-headed butcher into giving us further 'tick'—as in the present case?"

"What's the use? None at all," said Delia bitterly—"nor ever will be. We don't seem to 'get there,' and it's my belief we never shall."

"We've a margin left yet, thank the Lord; and you never know your luck. Well, Delia, you've a ripping day before you, at any rate. If I were you I should start early and ride slow. You never look your best coming in hot and blown. And make all you can and half as much again of your chances, for, as I said, you never know your luck."

What Clytie had stated, in her characteristically slangy way, was rather under the truth. These two, possessed of exceptional powers of attractiveness, had, as she put it, "no show." Nor did their relative attractions clash. The one, with her limpid blue eyes, Grecian profile, and tall serenity of carriage, made an effective contrast to the rounder, more voluptuous outlines of the other, with her dark, clear skin and mantling complexion, bright hazel eyes and full, ruddy lips. But their circumstances and surroundings were all against them; and, handicapped by tippling, disreputable old Calmour as a parent, those they would have had to do with fought shy of them, and those they would not—well, they would not.

"There's the second post," said Delia with a sigh. "More duns, I suppose."

She went to the door just as the postman rapped his double knock, and returned immediately with two letters.

"Both for me, but—I don't know the first at all."

"It's Haldane, putting you off, of course."

“Oh, Clytie, don’t,” quickly answered Delia, to whom such an eventuality would have constituted the keenest of disappointments. “No; it’s all right,” tremulously tearing open both envelopes. “But—they’re not for me at all, they’re for you. They’re about typing, but they’re both directed ‘Miss Calmour.’”

“Let’s see.” Then reading: “‘Madam,—you have been mentioned to me by Mr Wagram Wagram—’ Ah, that’s all right.” And she went on with the letter, which ran to the effect that the writer wanted the MS of a novel of 80,000 words typed, asking her terms, and throwing out a promise that, if such were satisfactory, he would be happy to entrust her with all his work. The name was a fairly well-known one.

“Now, what shall I ask him? If I say a shilling a thousand, there’s a four-pound job. But, then, he may answer he can get it done for tenpence, which is quite true. If he had seen me I’d ask him fifteen pence.”

“Do it anyhow. You can always come down.”

“No fear; not through the post. Well, I’ll ask him a bob, and chance it.”

“He could well afford it. He must be making pots of money, according to the newspapers.”

“M—yes—according to the newspapers. Now, then, Delia, here we are. ‘Mr Wagram Wagram’ again. It’s a she this time, and starts on tenpence. Knows her way about evidently; hints at ninepence because of the inconvenience of postage, and it’s only two short stories of 4000 apiece. Well, I’ll take her on, too, at tenpence. You can’t haggle up our own sweet sex. Well done, Wagram Wagram. It’s brickish of him; and I’d just begun to think he’d forgotten what he said, or had only said it for something to say. Four quid, and a trifle over; that’ll help stave off Wells. Just in the nick of time too.”

“Yes; isn’t it good of him?”

“Who? Wells? Oh, Wagram. Yes. Quite so. It is rather. Good job you went over to Hilversea the other day, Delia; it may have reminded him.”

“I don’t think he’d ever have forgotten. Oh, but it was lovely there—the whole thing. It was like being in another atmosphere, another world.”

Clytie, the shrewd, the practical, put her head a little to one side as she scrutinised her sister.

“Make it one then, dear; make it yours. You’ve got some sort of show at last, if you only work it right. I’m sorry, though, we let Bob into the scheme. What asses we were, or rather I was. One oughtn’t so much as to have mentioned a thing of that sort in his hearing.”

“No, indeed. But the idea is too ridiculous for anything.”

“Because he is Wagram Wagram of Hilversea. Supposing he were Wagram Wagram of nowhere? What then, Delia?”

“Ah!”

Clytie shook her pretty head slightly and smiled to herself. The quick eagerness of the exclamation, the soft look that came into her sister’s eyes, told her all there was to tell.

“You’re handicapped,” she said. “You can’t play the part. You’re handicapped by genuineness. Never mind; even that may count as an advantage.”

Chapter Ten.

At Haldane's.

Delia was a quick and graceful cyclist, and now on her beautiful new machine she seemed to fly as she skimmed the level and well-kept roads; and although she covered the eleven miles intervening between Bassingham and Haldane's house—a pleasant country box—in a little over the hour she was neither hot nor blown. Yvonne was strolling on the lawn, and greeted her with great cordiality.

"Is that your post-card collection?" she said as she helped to unstrap three large albums from the carrier. "Why, it must be as big as mine. I am longing to see it. We'll overhaul it after lunch down there," indicating a spreading tree by the stream which gave forth abundant shade.

"What a lovely kitten," cried Delia.

"Isn't it?" said Yvonne, picking it up. "Only it isn't a kitten; it's full-grown. It's a kind that never grows large—do you, Poogie?" she added lovingly, stroking the beautiful little animal, which nestled to her, purring contentedly. It was of the Angora type, with small, lynxlike ears, thick, rich fur with regular markings, and a spreading tail. "We got it in Switzerland. I wasn't going to lose the chance. You might go all your life and never see another like it, so I made father buy it for me. It follows me like a dog. If I walk up and down it walks up and down with me. Look."

"How sweet," said Delia, watching the little creature as, with tail erect, it paced daintily beside them. "I do love them like that."

"So do I, and so does father. I believe if anything happened to Poogie he'd be as sick about it as I would."

"I don't wonder." And, all unconsciously, the speaker had more completely won Yvonne's heart.

Even the shyest—and Delia was not addicted to shyness—would have felt at ease as they sat down, a party of three. Haldane had a frank, easy way with him towards those he did not dislike, calculated to make them feel at home, especially in the case of a bright, pretty, and intelligent girl, and soon all three were chatting and laughing as if they had known each other all their lives. Delia was at her best, and talked intelligently and well, as she could do when temporarily emancipated from the depressing atmosphere of Siege House.

“What a beautiful place Hilversea Court is, Mr Haldane,” she said presently.

“Yes. Too big for me. Very good as a show place; but for living in give me a box like this.”

The said “box” at that moment looked out upon a wondrously lovely bit of summer landscape—great clouds of vivid foliage against the blue sky; intervening seas of meadow, golden with spangling buttercups; and in the immediate foreground a stretch of green lawn, flower-bedded, and tuneful with the murmur of bees, blending with the plash of the stream beyond. Within, all was correspondingly bright and cheerful.

“Father says Hilversea Court exists for the sole purpose of framing old Mr Wagram,” said Yvonne. “That Grandisonian, old-world look about him wouldn’t be in keeping with anything more modern.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” assented Haldane. “But, as I said before—never to the Wagrams, though—the place is much too big to live in.”

“I suppose they are passionately attached to it?” asked Delia.

“That’s the word. If they have a weakness it is a conviction that the world revolves round Hilversea, and this conviction Wagram holds, if possible, a trifle more firmly than the old Squire.”

“Really?”

“Yes; but he acts in keeping with the idea. There isn’t a better looked after place—well, in the world, I may safely say. All the people on it simply idolise him, especially since the old Squire turned over the whole management to him.”

“How perfectly delightful,” pronounced Delia. “I can well imagine it, for a more kind and considerate man can hardly exist. Fancy, that splendid new bicycle I’m riding he insisted on sending me in place of mine that got smashed up by the gnu—an old rattle-trap of a thing that would hardly have fetched its value in old iron.”

“Yes; that’s just the sort of thing he would do,” said Yvonne.

Then Delia went on to tell about the typewriting work he had been instrumental in procuring for her sister; and they talked Wagram for some time longer, in such wise as should have put the heir-apparent of Hilversea to the painful blush could he have overheard them.

“What I object to about him, though,” said Haldane, “is that he shirks his duties on the Bench. I suppose if it weren’t that he can hardly help being on the commission of the peace he’d resign.”

“I’m sure he would,” declared Yvonne. “You know, Miss Calmour, he says it doesn’t seem his mission to to be punishing other people.”

“Ho—ho—ho!” laughed Haldane. “Decidedly, then, he had forgotten that principle when he caned that cad for you the other day, Sunbeam. He seems to have waled the fellow within an inch of his life.”

“Why? What was that?” asked Delia, looking up with quick interest. And then the story came out.

“The brute deserved all he got,” she exclaimed with heat, and there was something like adoration in the glance she sent at Yvonne. This lovely child-woman, in her exquisite refinement, to be insulted by a common or roadside cad!

“And he deserved all he’s going to get if ever I have the pleasure of beholding him,” supplemented Haldane grimly.

“No, he isn’t, father, for I don’t believe I should know him again from Adam, in the first place. In the second, I shouldn’t point him out to you if I did. Thirdly and lastly, I think the poor beast got quite enough that day.”

“He couldn’t. Don’t you agree with me, Miss Calmour?”

“Most decidedly,” said Delia, looking again at Yvonne. The latter laughed.

“The thing isn’t worth making any more fuss about,” she said, with a shake of her golden head. “And, if we have all done, it’s time to look at the post-cards; I’m longing to see them.”

Now, through all this conversation Delia was conscious that she had never enjoyed a more excellent lunch. Haldane was fond of the good things of life, and his Moselle was irreproachable—so, too, was Yvonne as a hostess—and, being gifted with a fine, healthy appetite, begotten of youth and a bicycle ride, their guest was in a position to appreciate it nicely.

The two girls adjourned to the shade of the big tree that Yvonne had pointed out, and there for long did they compare notes and look over each other's collections.

Delia had been on the point of selling hers—everything was considered in the light of an asset at Siege House—and had only refrained by reason of the inadequacy of the offers made. Now she rejoiced that she had not since it constituted the peg whereon hung the initiation of this acquaintance. Yet she wished she had thought of weeding it a little, for some of the specimens, looked at in recent lights, struck her as tawdry and vulgar. Yvonne's collection, on the other hand, seemed to represent every town, village, cathedral, and picturesque spot in Europe, with famed works of art and a sprinkling of celebrities.

"Why, what's this?" cried Delia as several loose cards fluttered out of the books. "It's yourself!"

"Yes. Father had it done to send to people as a Christmas card."

"But you must let me have one of these. Why, they are charming portraits. Do! Will you?"

"Certainly, if you care about it. Shall I post it to you?"

"Not for the world. They'd stamp it all over, perhaps right across the face."

"Ah—ah!" mischievously. "Now you see why I don't like them through the post. All these places are like portraits to me; they remind me of good times."

"They must indeed," said the other, thinking under what glowing circumstances this happy child's life had been passed.

"Here's one of Poogie. I had that done. Would you like it too? Come here, Poogie, and strike the same attitude, and let's see if it's good."

"I should rather think I would like it," answered Delia, who was stroking the beautiful little creature. And so the afternoon fled, for one of them only too quickly; and presently Haldane joined them, smoking a pipe, and they strolled about a little till it was time for the inevitable tea, and soon after for a homeward move.

"You must come and see us again, Miss Calmour, if you have not found it too slow," Haldane said as they exchanged farewells.

“Slow! Why, Mr Haldane, I have never enjoyed myself so much in my life.”

“I’m so glad,” Yvonne interposed in her frank, sunny way. Then they had parted.

“She seems a nice, pleasant, straightforward sort of girl, with no nonsense about her,” was Haldane’s comment as they strolled back from the gate. “Pity she comes of that rotten brood. I wouldn’t have one of the others inside my door on any account. But I’ve always stood out against holding the individual responsible for the defects of its relatives, and here, I fancy, is a case in point. Let’s go and try for a trout, Sunbeam.”

Their late guest, speeding along in the sweet June sunshine was going over the day’s events in her mind, and into the same there shot a sudden idea. If only she could be wanted as “companion” for Yvonne. She had held a post of the kind before, and had found it, not through her own fault, intolerable. But here it would be like Paradise, such was the spell this sunny child-woman, with the pretty little foreign ways contracted during a large Continental experience, had woven upon her. It needed Clytie to point out to her that a hale, middle-aged man such as Haldane, if in want of that functionary at all, must perforce employ a very Gorgon, which, of course, he could never dream of doing; and her musings kept her so busy that she nearly dropped off her bicycle in the start she gave on finding herself almost face to face with Wagram.

He was advancing towards her, evidently making for a gate that led into the ride of a wood. He had a rabbit rifle in his hand, the same weapon that had figured in the adventure. She was on her feet in a moment.

“Oh, Mr Wagram, how good of you!” she began in her impulsive way. “Clytie has just had two orders—both through your recommendation.”

“I am always pleased to be of use to anybody when it is within my power.”

What was this? Had the very heavens fallen? His tone was icy. He had just formally touched her outstretched hand—no more than the barest courtesy demanded.

“It was very, very good of you all the same,” she pursued lamely.

“Pray don’t mention it,” he replied, lifting his hat with a movement as though to resume his way, which she could not ignore.

She remounted her bicycle, and well, indeed, was it for her that the road was clear, as she whirled along mechanically with pale face and choking a sob in her throat. What did it mean? What had she done? What could she have done? The god at whose shrine she

worshipped was displeased—sorely and grievously displeased. Yet why, why? To this she could find no answer—no, none.

And the sunshine had gone out of the day.

Chapter Eleven.

Concerning Two Claims.

“God bless my soul!” ejaculated the old Squire in a startled tone. Then relapsing into mirth: “Is it meant for a joke?”

“What?” asked Wagram, who was engaged in the same occupation—investigating letters which had just come by the afternoon post.

“This,” said the Squire, handing across the letter he had been reading. “Why, it’s too comical. I never heard of such preposterous impudence in my life.” And he began to pace up and down the hall.

Wagram took the letter, and the first glance down it was enough to make him thoroughly agree with his father, except that he felt moved to even greater anger. For the heading showed that it emanated from the office of Pownall and Skreet, Solicitors, Bassingham, and its burden was to claim the sum of one thousand pounds damages “on behalf of our client, Miss Delia Calmour, by reason of certain severe bodily injuries received by her from a certain ferocious and dangerous animal, your property, suffered to be at large at such and such a time and place, the latter a public highway.” And so on.

“Is it a joke, Wagram?” repeated the old Squire.

“If so, it’s an uncommonly bad one,” was the answer; “in fact, rotten. No, I wouldn’t have believed it of the girl—really, I wouldn’t.”

His father smiled slightly, but refrained from retorting: “What did I tell you?”

“And yet the other day,” he pursued, “she came in among us all, and we treated her as one of ourselves. Yet all the time she was scheming a plan of vulgar and most outrageous blackmail.”

“That’s the worst part of it,” said Wagram with some bitterness. “See what comes of thinking oneself too knowing. I could have sworn the girl was a good girl and honest; she had honest eyes.”

“Honest! You can’t mention the word in connection with that low-down, scheming, blackmailing brood.”

“Well, there you have me, father, I admit,” answered Wagram. “You advised me against them, and I took my own line. I sing small.”

“Oh, that’s no matter. The question is: What are we going to do? Take no notice?”

“I should send her the money.”

“What! Why, Wagram, it’s preposterous. Why, on your own showing the girl wasn’t hurt at all. A thousand pounds?”

“Still, I should send it. We shouldn’t feel it. I expect these people are in desperate straits, and I’ve known that enviable condition myself.”

“Send it? Great heavens, Wagram! A thousand pounds for that old sot to soak on?”

“No, no. Send it so that nobody has the handling of it but the girl herself. She behaved very pluckily, remember. I’m almost sure she saved my life.”

“Yes; but if you hadn’t come to her rescue it wouldn’t have been in danger, as I said before,” replied the Squire somewhat testily.

“Well, perhaps not; but the situation was inevitable. I couldn’t slink away and leave her to be hacked to death by the brute.”

“All right. I’ll leave it to you, Wagram. Do as you think fit.”

“Very well,” was the answer as he busied himself again with his letters. Then he repressed a quick whistle of astonishment.

“Pownall and Skreet again. Another thousand pounds!” he mentally ejaculated. And, in fact, it was just that; and this time the claim was made on himself on behalf of “our client, Mr Robert Calmour, by reason of injuries sustained in the unprovoked savage and brutal assault committed by you upon him, on the public highway,” at such and such a time and place.

“Pownall and Skreet are having a merry innings,” he thought to himself; and then he laughed, for a recollection of the said Mr Robert Calmour’s frantic rebound from the gate when that worthy first came in contact with the ground-ash rushed overwhelmingly upon him. But astonishment underlay. So that was the identity of the fellow he had thrashed! Could it be Delia’s brother? Why, it must be; and then he remembered the running epitome as to their family and its habits which Clytie had given him on the

occasion of his call at Siege House. Well, the Calmours were on the war-path this time, and no mistake.

“What’s the joke, Wagram?” said the old Squire, who was looking out of the window and had his back turned.

“Something reminded me of the cad I whacked the other day, and it was funny.” He decided not to let his father into a knowledge of this other impudent demand. It he would know how to deal with himself. “Who are Pownall and Skreet?”

“Two rascally solicitors in Bassingham.”

“All right. You’ve left it to me now, father. Don’t you worry any more about the affair; it’s out of your hands.”

“Oh, I shan’t bother about it.”

Soon after Wagram took up the rabbit rifle and strolled forth to try a long-distance shot or two; but his mind was full of the demand they had just received—that on behalf of Delia: to Bob’s affair he did not give a further thought. He had felt interested in the girl; had thought to discern a great deal of good in her; had even been wondering what he could do to help her. He owned himself astonished—astonished and disgusted. Had it been the other the result would not have surprised him. Looking back, too, he thought to discern a potential slyness beneath Clytie’s open ingenuousness; but as to this one he was disappointed.

Then he remembered that he had, in a way, taken her up, and through him Haldane. She was no fit companion for Yvonne, and at this thought his disgust deepened. Well, it would be easy to let Haldane judge for himself, and at sight of the lawyer’s letter he knew what Haldane’s judgment would be. Then, too, he recalled her demeanour on the occasion of last week’s solemnity: how she had affected an interest in it, and so on. All acting, of course; possibly due to the acquiring of a cheap honour and glory among her own set as having been seen among the party at Hilversea Court. Innately very much of a misogynist, Wagram’s bitterness in a matter of this kind needed no spur, no stimulant. He felt very bitter towards this girl with the straightforward eyes and appealing ways who had so effectually bamboozled him. It was no question of the amount—that, as he had said, they would not feel—it was the way in which the thing had been done. And, having arrived at this conclusion, he looked up, and there, skimming towards him on her bicycle, was the object of his cogitations. The method of that brief interview we know.

Thereafter Wagram resumed his way. It was only natural, he argued, that she should affect ignorance, utter innocence, as to what had transpired. Another bit of acting. He hoped he had not been manifestly discourteous, but he could not have trusted himself to prolong the meeting. Now he would dismiss the matter from his mind. He had made a grievous error of judgment, and when the affair became known he would become something of a laughing-stock. For that, however, he cared nothing.

Delia, for her part, felt as if she had just received a blow on the head as she wheeled homeward in a semi-dazed condition. The sight of Bob in the doorway—Bob, perky, expansive, more raffish than usual—did not tend to soothe her either.

"Hullo! What's the row?" he cried as she pushed past him. "You're looking like a boiled owl. Too much of Haldane's champagne, eh?" For he delighted to tease Delia, did this amiable youth; she was putting on too much side of late, and wanted taking down a peg, he declared. With Clytie he had to mind his P's and Q's, as we have seen. Now the latter appeared to the rescue.

"Clear out, Bob," she said. "What a young cur you are! A jolly good licking would do you all the good in the world, and I wonder every day that someone or other doesn't give you one; only I suppose you keep your currishness for us."

"Oh, do you?" snarled Bob, in whom the words awoke a perfectly agonising recollection. "Who the deuce cares what you think or don't think?" he added, the sting of the allusion rendering him oblivious of the five shillings he had been intending to "borrow" from the—for the present—earning one of the family. Besides, he would be flush enough directly, then he would be in a position to round upon Clytie for the domineering way in which she had been treating him of late. When he got his thousand pounds, or even half of it, he had a good mind to chuck his berth with Pownall and Skreet and clear off to South Africa, or somewhere, and make his fortune. When he got it!

Paying no further attention to him, both girls made straight for their room.

"I've got a ghastly headache," said Delia, throwing herself upon the bed. "I believe I got a touch of the sun."

"Yes; it's been infernally hot—is still. Well, did you have a good time of it otherwise?"

"Perfect; yes, perfect," she answered, with a bitterness begotten of a strong instinct that it was the last she would have of any good times of that sort. "Do you know, Clytie, the contrast is too awful. It's brought home to one so, and it hurts. I think I shall try and get

some work again that'll take me away, and keep me at it from morning till night—that'll be the only thing."

Clytie knew better than to question her further at that time.

"You turn in and get to sleep," she said, "and I'll bring you something that'll send you off like a humming-top. Don't go down again; and if that rascal Bob does anything to disturb you I'll—I'll—well, he'd seriously better not."

She had her good points, you see, this handsome, slang-affecting, cold-blooded schemer.

Throughout the whole of the next day Delia was very miserable and depressed; only now did she realise what an obsession this secret cultus had become. What had she done to offend its object? Had any of her belongings done so, her father, perhaps, or Bob? She questioned Clytie as to this, but on that head could get no satisfaction.

"Let me think it out," said the latter. "I'll keep my ears open too. It's a thousand pities my scheme should fall through. But, Delia, you must buck up. It's of no use going about looking, as Bob said, like a boiled owl. Buck up."

While she was dressing the following morning there came a whole-hearted bang at Delia's door, coupled with the somewhat raucous voice of Bob.

"Here, I say, Delia; here's a registered letter for you. Oof, of course. Well, I claim my commission for bringing it."

"'Costs' shouldn't it be?" she answered. "Well, push it under the door."

"There's the receipt too. You must sign it, and shove it back again. Postman's waiting."

This was done, and Delia looked at the registered envelope, wondering. Nobody owed her money, nor was there anyone in the wide world who would be in the least likely to give her any. There was a certain amount of excitement about the conjecture—something like the solving of an interesting conundrum. Then she cut open the envelope.

It contained a letter written on stiff, blue-grey, lawyer-like paper. Over this was the turned down end of a cheque. She looked at the cheque before the letter, and then—Great heavens! what did it mean? For the characters on the oblong slip danced before her amazed eyes.

“Pay Miss Delia Calmour one thousand pounds.

“Grantley Wagram.”

One thousand pounds? Grantley Wagram? What did it mean? In Heaven’s name, what did it mean? With trembling hands she spread out the letter. But it was not to herself. It was, in fact, the letter of demand which we have already seen the old Squire receive.

What did it mean? Delia was simply dumfoundered. She had never instructed anybody to claim damages in her life, either from the Wagrams or anyone else. Pownall and Skreet! Ah-h! They were Bob’s employers. Now she saw light. Her father and Bob had put up this between them. She remembered her suspicions with regard to them, or at any rate her father, two mornings ago. All now stood explained.

With eager hands she looked once more into the envelope, but it contained no further communication, no line or word addressed to herself, no explanation. There was the letter of demand, and the tangible evidence of compliance therewith in full. The sender had clearly deemed further explanation unnecessary.

How she completed her dressing Delia hardly knew, so consumed was she with a burning longing to get at those who had placed her in this shameful position. No wonder Wagram’s demeanour had been what it had when the girl to whom he had shown kindness had revealed herself as a mere blackmailing adventuress—a gainer of money under false pretences. Heavens! it would not bear thinking upon. Well, first to give the schemers a piece of her mind, then to rectify in so far as it lay within her power the shameful wrong they had done her.

Chapter Twelve.

Concerning Two Claimants.

“Well, Delia, how much was it?” was Bob’s first greeting.

“A thousand pounds.”

The effect of this announcement was electrical and diverse. Old Calmour dropped his knife and fork—they were at table—and stared. Even Clytie could not repress a gasp; while as for Bob, he hoorayed aloud.

“Then Wagram has stumped up! Did he send it straight to you?”

“Look! There’s the cheque,” holding it up.

“Phew!” whistled Bob. “It ought to have come to you through our people, though.”

“Good thing it didn’t,” said Clytie significantly.

“Rather!” assented Bob briskly. “All the more for us. Now we need only pay for the letter of demand. Well done, Delia. I say, dad, we ought to have a jolly good dinner to-night on the strength of it, and some fizz to drink Delia’s health.”

“So we will, so we will,” snuffled the old man. “It’s like a blessed gift of Providence coming as it does just now, for the devil only knows how we should have managed to get on much longer.”

“Buck up, old girl,” cried Bob, boisterously affectionate on the strength of this sudden accession to wealth. “Buck up. You’re looking sort of white about the gills, and pulling a face as long as a fiddle, instead of hooraying like mad. Why, you’ve got your thousand—a cool thou—and no costs charged, and no delay, and you don’t seem a bit happy.”

Then Delia spoke.

“Happy! I feel as if I could never look anybody in the face again. A mean, extortionate, blackmailing swindle has been perpetrated in my name, and I shall not lose a moment in putting it right, and explaining that I had no part in it. I am going to return this cheque.”

“Wh-at?” bellowed Bob.

“Going to re—” gasped old Calmour, who had fallen back in his chair, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

“Is she mad?” snorted Bob, who had gone as white as the girl herself. “Gets a cool thou, sent her—a cool thou, by the Lord Harry!—and then says ‘No, thanks; I’d rather not. Take it back again.’ It oughtn’t to be allowed.”

“And would rather see her old father starve,” yelped old Calmour. “Here, take it from her, Bob. We’ll keep it for her till she comes to a better frame of mind.”

“You dare to lay a hand on me,” said Delia; and there was that in her livid face and blazing eyes that caused the move Bob had made to rise in his chair to subside again. “Besides, you couldn’t take it from me without tearing it to pieces, nor could you cash it without my endorsement—which you would never get. How’s that, Lawyer Bob?”

“Damnable tommy-rot. Oh, hang it, Clytie, can’t you knock some sense into her silly noddle? You haven’t said anything.”

“How can one when you’re all bellowing at once? Well, I may as well tell you both that you’ve made a thundering silly mess of the whole thing. My beautiful scheme, which was becoming simpler and simpler every day, is now irrevocably knocked on the head—”

“Beautiful scheme! Tommy-rot!” interrupted Bob. “A cool thou, in the hand’s worth twenty ‘beautiful schemes’ in your head.”

”—But as you have knocked it out,” went on Clytie, ignoring the interruption, “I say stick to the thousand.”

“Hear, hear!” cried Bob.

“My mind is quite made up,” replied Delia. “I am going to return it. Why, we could never hold up our heads in the place again.”

“We don’t hold them extra tall as it is,” laughed Clytie, “yet we manage to rub along somehow. A cool thou, doesn’t tumble our way every day, wherefore don’t be in a hurry about the thing, Delia; give it, say, till to-morrow. Think it well over.”

“It won’t bear thinking about, much less thinking over. I am going to Hilversea as fast as my bicycle will carry me; now, immediately.”

Then her father and brother began upon her again. Ingratitude for what they had done for her, callous indifference to her father's declining old age and increasing wants, general selfishness—these were but few of the crimes laid to her charge. But she was adamant.

"You'll have to get your bike to carry you first," snarled Bob, giving up the contest. Hardly had he flung himself from the room than the meaning of his words flashed upon Delia. She flew to the door. Too late. Her bicycle stood in the front hall, and Bob, with a nasty grin on his face, was in the act of replacing a pin in his waistcoat. He had punctured both wheels in two or three places, and, to make assurance doubly sure, had treated Clytie's machine in like manner.

"You cur!" she gasped. "Never mind; I'll hire one at Warren's."

"Wagram won't pay the bill this time. Ta-ta! Bong voyadge!" And the abominable cub took himself off.

"How could you do such a thing?" she flashed out, turning on her father. "You have disgraced me for ever. A downright blackmailing fraud!"

"Fraud be damned?" snarled old Calmour. "What are you talking about, girl? That sort of talk is dangerous. A highly respectable firm like Pownall and Skreet don't deal in frauds."

"What sort of firm did you say, dad?" said Clytie sweetly.

The old man whirled round upon her.

"What have you got to say to it, I'd like to know? You just mind your own blanked business. Are you backing that idiot up in her lunacy? And look here, my lady Delia. You've grown too big for your boots of late. If we're not good enough for you, and our ways don't suit your ladyship, you'd better go and look out for yourself. See then how much your swagger friends will do for you."

"Yes; I will go," said the girl, "but not until I've put this matter right. Your 'highly respectable firm' ought to be struck off the rolls for this job. Faugh! it's scandalous!" she flashed out, as angry as he was.

"Here, Delia, come away," said Clytie. "We've all let off quite enough steam, and we don't want to go on nagging all day." And she dragged her sister from the room almost by main force.

The while Bob, heading for the offices of the said "highly respectable firm," though hugely incensed at his sister's decision, yet through it discerned a silver lining to that cloud. If Wagram père had been so quick to respond to her claim—or rather to the spurious claim that he and his father had put forth—and that to the uttermost farthing, by parity of reasoning would not Wagram fils be equally ready to meet his own, issued simultaneously with the other? Clearly these people had a horror of litigation, and already he saw himself master of a thousand pounds, all his own, or at any rate of the result of a substantial compromise. Consequently, when he entered the office—incidentally a little late—it was with a jaunty, rakish air, as though, if he chose, he could buy up the whole concern.

"Pownall wants you, Calmour," said one of the clerks at once.

"Ha, does he? I thought he would," answered Bob lightly. Already he saw himself in possession. The reply had come. The only thing now to be reckoned with was that Pownall should not make an undue deduction for costs. Yet, somehow, as he knocked and entered, there was something in Pownall's veined and scrubby-bearded face that was not propitious. And Pownall was not inclined to waste valuable time.

"Look here, Calmour," he began, "when you brought me this claim of yours I told you I didn't think there was the slightest chance of your getting anything. Here's the answer."

"Do they refuse, sir?"

"Absolutely and uncompromisingly. Here, read it yourself," chucking an open letter across to his discomfited clerk, who took it and read:

"Hilversea Court,

"23rd June 1897.

"Sirs,—I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of yesterday's date, demanding from me the sum of a thousand pounds as compensation to one Robert Calmour, for assaulting him. If this person is the blackguard I chastised last week on the Swanton Road for grossly insulting a young lady under my charge, I may mention incidentally that he is very ill-advised in revealing his identity, for the young lady's father, on learning it, is not only prepared, but eager, to repeat the infliction, and that with very considerable exaggeration of the punishment he received at my hands. To come to the main point, I flatly refuse to pay one farthing; indeed, so impossible is it for me to treat

this claim as a serious one that I have not even deemed it worth while to refer the matter to my solicitors.—Yours faithfully,

“Wagram Gerard Wagram.

“Messrs Pownall and Skreet.”

Bob had gone very pale during the perusal of this letter. Not only had his house of cards gone down with a flutter—for he could read no compromise here—but he was threatened with the summary vengeance of an unknown and vindictive parent. The stripes that Wagram had laid upon him, now turned to yellow and red bruises, seemed to tingle afresh.

“Is it no good pressing him further, sir?” he stammered. “This may be bluff.”

“Ours was bluff,” sneered Pownall. “I thought it just worth trying on, but only just. Now I see it isn’t. No jury in England would find for you, and we can’t afford to take up such a case.”

“But they paid my sister, sir, almost by return.”

“What?” shouted Pownall, jumping from his chair. “What? Paid in full?”

“Yes. Sent her a cheque for a thousand.”

“But this ought to have gone through us. It’s irregular, damned irregular.”

“So it is, sir. And what’s more irregular, she’s going to return it.”

“Going to return it?”

“Yes; swears she won’t accept it; calls it blackmail, and so forth.”

“Does she? Well, see here, Calmour, I’m sick of all your family grievances, and am devilish sorry I ever took them up. If it hadn’t been that your father’s a very old friend of mine I wouldn’t have touched them with the tip of the tongs. Now you’d better get back to the office.”

“One minute, sir,” stammered Bob. “Er—who is the person referred to in the letter as—er—threatening me with further violence?”

“I shrewdly conjecture it’s Haldane—and, if so, you’d better give him a wide, wide berth. He just about worships that girl of his, and he has knocked about in rough, wild parts. Hang it! couldn’t you tell the difference between a lady—a thoroughbred—and a village wench if you must get playing the fool by roadsides, you silly young rip? Now get back to your job. I haven’t taken anything by either of you,” added the lawyer disgustedly as he resumed his work.

If ever anybody found himself in an utterly abject state of mind, assuredly that individual was Bob Calmour as he slunk out of his principal’s room, and as he took his place at his own desk he felt as if he could have blown his brains out, only he lacked the courage. He cursed Pownall, he cursed Delia, he cursed everything and everybody, but more than all did he curse Wagram. Should he take his claim to some other solicitor? That would be useless, for he felt pretty sure that nobody but his principal would have touched it. Furthermore, the hint thrown out by Wagram with regard to his identity becoming known commanded his whole-hearted respect, and he grew green with scare at the thought that Haldane might be looking for him even at that moment. Heavens! what if Delia had let drop anything that might give him away when she was spending the day there? Hardly likely; and again he congratulated himself on his sound policy in keeping the thing a fast secret between himself and his principal. One comfort was that Haldane rarely came to Bassingham, his county town being Fulkston, away in the other direction; still, Bob Calmour was destined to expiate his act of Yahooism very fully, in the shape of a chronic apprehension, which rendered life a nightmare to him for some time thenceforward.

Chapter Thirteen.

Concerning One Claim.

“A matter of urgent importance,” read the Squire again from a card just handed him by a servant, and which bore the inscription: “Miss Calmour.”

“What on earth can the girl want next? She’s got her money—far more than any court would have awarded her. What the deuce is she bothering us further for?”

“I can’t imagine. Still, I’ll see her, if you like.”

“I wish you would, Wagram. The fact is, I’m sick of the very sound of the name.”

It was the middle of the afternoon, and the two were strolling together in the shrubbery. Both were, not unnaturally, somewhat annoyed.

“The young lady’s in the morning room, sir,” said the footman. “I put her in there, sir, because she said she’d come on a matter of business, and hoped no one else would come in.”

“Quite right,” said Wagram.

Delia rose as he entered. She did not put forth her hand, and did not seem to expect him to. She was busying herself extracting something from an envelope, and he noticed that her hands shook.

“I would have been over about this the first thing this morning,” she began, speaking quickly, “but my tyres were punctured. I did not want to lose a moment. But”—looking up—“it was not you I came to see, it was your father.”

“Won’t I do as well, Miss Calmour? Any matter of business is all within my province.”

“Well, then, it is about this,” exhibiting the letter of demand and the cheque. Wagram felt himself growing grim.

“Has any mistake been made in the drawing of it?” he asked, bending over to look at it. She caught at the word.

“Mistake? The whole thing is a mistake, and worse. Mr Wagram, will you believe me when I assure you upon my honour that until I received these two enclosures this morning I knew no more about this than—than, well—than if I had never been born?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.”

“Don’t you? Oh, you do make it hard,” with a little stamp of the foot. “Well, then, this claim was never made by me—never—and until this morning I did not know it had been made at all.”

“Well, but—if you were hurt that time why not accept a little—er—compensation?”

“Hurt that time? I would be hurt now, if I were not too ashamed, that you should think me capable of such a thing. Even if I had been half killed I would not have—have—done—what has been done. Compensation! Look!”

She tore the cheque twice across, and laid the fragments on the table before him, together with the letter of demand.

“Now, will you believe that my hands are entirely clean in the matter? The moment I received this I never had a moment’s doubt as to the course I should pursue. That is the outcome.” And she pointed to the torn cheque.

She looked very pretty standing there—her breast heaving in her excitement, her eyes brightened, and the colour coming and going in her face—very pretty and appealing.

“Certainly I believe you,” said Wagram, who now, as by an inspiration, saw through the whole sordid affair; “and I don’t think you need go to the trouble of explaining it any further, for I can quite see how it happened.”

“But I must explain a little. Oh, Mr Wagram, my father is not well, not always quite responsible. His health is weak, and he has had a great deal of trouble, and might do what he would never have dreamed of doing when he was a younger and stronger man; and the temptation, I suppose, was too great.”

Her voice tailed off into a sob, and Wagram felt a great wave of pity overwhelm him as he looked at this girl, who now more than ever struck him as far too good for her sordid surroundings. Her laboured apology for her rascally old parent, too, had sent her up a hundred per cent, in his estimation, but as an excuse for the old sot it weighed not with him at all. The attempted blackmailing had been too flagrant, too outrageous, but to find

that Delia was entirely innocent of it afforded him more satisfaction than he could have believed.

“Sit down, sit down. Why have you been standing all this time?” he said gently; and the tone was too much for poor Delia, who broke down utterly, and wept.

“There, there, now. Don’t give way over nothing,” he went on. “A mistake has been made, and put right again, that’s all. Meanwhile you must accept my sincere apologies for my side of it.”

“Apologies! Mr Wagram, don’t. Apologies! Why, I have been feeling as if I could never look you in the face again.”

“But you don’t feel that any more, of course not. Now, I know my father would like to see you, so I will let him know you are here, if you will excuse me for a minute or two.”

As the door closed on him Delia brushed away her tears, and then did an inexplicable, a foolish thing. She rose and pressed her lips to the table, on the spot where his hand had rested during the interview.

“And they would have had me extort money from him, blackmail him!” she said to herself. “Faugh! what a horrible word. But the whole thing was horrible, shameful. Oh, but the tactfulness of him! It was wonderful. No wonder such people seem to reckon themselves a separate order of being. They are.”

Meanwhile Wagram had found the old Squire in the library.

“The poor girl had no hand in it after all,” he said. “It appears she knew nothing about it until this morning, when she received the cheque. The whole thing was got up by her rascally father without her knowledge.”

“Of course. But now that it’s within her knowledge she won’t find a thousand pounds come in badly,” was the somewhat testy answer.

“She tore up the cheque of her own accord under my eyes.”

“What? Did she? That looks genuine, Wagram. By George, that looks genuine. Fancy anything Calmour refusing a thousand pounds—or even a hundred! Good heavens! is the world coming to an end?”

“Well, she’s done it anyhow. I want you to come in and see her, father, and put her at her ease. She’s genuinely distressed that we should have thought so badly of her, and all that.”

“By the way, does she know of the trouncing you gave that precious blackguard of a brother of hers?”

“I haven’t told her. If she knows I expect she thinks he richly deserved it. I fancy she’s that sort of girl.”

The blend of the courtly and the paternal in the old Squire’s manner was charming, and soon Delia was quite at ease with herself and her surroundings. Then they showed her over the historic parts of the house, and she gazed with awed delight at the great staircase with its twisted stone banister and the gallery hung with family portraits and old war trophies.

“Oh, but this is perfection,” cried the girl as she leaned out of one of the high windows to gaze upon the panorama unfolded beneath. Miles and miles of it lay outspread in the sunlight—green meadow and dark fir covert, cloud-like masses of feathery elms and hawthorn hedgerows, with here and there a gleam of silver, as a winding of the river broke into view. Then, from far and near, a chorus of song thrushes and the joyous sound of a cuckoo lent the finishing touch to this fairest of English landscapes.

“That spire away there beyond the dark line is Fulkston, near Haldane’s place,” went on Wagram, in the course of pointing out to her the various landmarks.

“Is it? What a delightful day that was. Isn’t Miss Haldane perfectly sweet? By the way, Mr Wagram, I enjoyed hearing how you thrashed a cad for insulting her.”

If the faintest gleam of mirth came into the other’s eyes Delia missed its point.

“Oh, I’m not proud of it, I assure you. If he had been impudent only to me I wouldn’t have touched him, for he was no match for me. If it had been any other girl I should have thought I had given the poor devil too much, but it being Yvonne Haldane he insulted it seemed as if he couldn’t have enough.”

“I most heartily agree,” said Delia, and again that curious gleam passed across Wagram’s face.

“Would you like to see a secret chamber?” he said.

“Wouldn’t I? Is it a real secret chamber, opening with a sliding panel, and all that sort of thing?”

“You shall see.”

He led the way to a high gallery in an unused part of the house, a trifle gloomy by reason of the few and narrow windows that lighted it from one side. The old Squire had left them early in the investigation, declaring that he did not feel equal to going up and down so many stairs. The girl’s nerves were athrill with the delightful air of mystery suggested by the surroundings.

“You haven’t asked as to the family ghosts yet,” he said, “and it seems strange.”

“Strange? Why?”

“Because you are the first within my knowledge to be shown over the house who has not asked about them long before this. Were you keeping it till we got down again?”

“No. I wouldn’t have asked such a question. How could I tell but that it might be an unwelcome one?”

It was a small thing, but somehow it seemed to Wagram to argue an uncommon thoughtfulness and delicacy of mind on the part of this girl—this daughter of a drunken, blackmailing, old ex-army vet.

“I won’t insist on blindfolding you, Miss Calmour,” he said, with a smile, “but I’ll ask you just to look out of that window for a minute.”

“Certainly,” she said. “Why, this is more than interesting.”

“That’ll do. Thanks.”

“Can I look?”

“Yes.”

The inner wall of the gallery was patterned faintly in large squares diagonally divided, so that you might see in them squares or triangles according to the caprice of the eye. Now, where one of these squares had been Delia saw a dark aperture easily large enough to admit the body of a man. It was about a yard and a half from the ground.

“What was it used for?” she said, as her eyes becoming more accustomed to the gloom she made out a narrow, oblong chamber, or rather closet, about eight feet by four, and running parallel with the wall.

“A priest’s hiding-place. There is still a sprinkling of them to be seen in our old country houses, more or less perfect still.”

“This one seems perfect. But how did they get light and air?”

“They didn’t get much of the first. For the last, there’s a small winding shaft that opens under the roof.”

“And did they spend days in here? It must have been dreadful.”

“Not to them, because their mission was in its highest sense the reverse of dreadful. But there was a dreadful side to it, for at that time every one of them who came to this country came with the quartering block and boiling pitch before his eyes, as, sooner or later, his certain end. You can imagine, then, that to such men there would be nothing very dreadful in spending a few days in a place like this.”

“Of course not. What a stupid remark of mine.”

“As a matter of fact, the last to use this place met with just that fate. He was a relation, and was captured in that avenue which was the route of the procession this day last week.”

“How terrible,” said Delia, gazing with renewed awe into the gloomy chamber. “How you must venerate this place, Mr Wagram.”

“Well, you can imagine we do; in fact, it isn’t often shown.”

“Oh, then I do feel honoured—I mean it seriously.”

He smiled.

“Have you seen enough? because if so we’ll shut it up again.”

“One minute. How does it open and shut? Why, it isn’t a mere panel, it’s a solid block of stone.”

“Ah, that’s the secret of it. It is easily opened from within if you know how; but from without—well, it has never been discovered. The secret has been handed down among ourselves. It is always known to three persons, of which, needless to say, I am one.”

“How interesting! But if I were in there, and you and the other two were not get-at-able, what then?”

“You might as well be buried alive. Now, oblige me by looking out of that window once more.”

“If I mayn’t look, may I listen?”

“Certainly. Now you may turn again. Well, what did you hear?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Well, see if you can tell which of the squares it was that opened.”

“This one. No; it doesn’t sound hollow. None of them do. I give it up.”

“We’ll be going down again, then. You’ll be glad of tea.”

She protested that such a thing was beyond her thoughts amid the wonder and delight of all she had seen. On the way he pointed out a few of the more prominent family portraits.

“That is our martyr relative.”

A cry of surprise escaped Delia.

“That! Why, Mr Wagram, it might be yourself.”

The portrait was quite a small one, and in a massive frame of stained oak. It represented a man of about the same age, with the same thoughtful dark eyes, the same shaped face, and the same close-trimmed, pointed beard. The figure was gowned in black, and the head crowned with a Spanish biretta with high-pointed corners. Attached to the frame was a Latin inscription.

“People do remark a likeness,” he said; “but you can guess how we value that portrait for its own sake. It was painted at Salamanca just before he left for St Omer to start on the English mission.”

“Is there any Spanish blood in your family, Mr Wagram?”

“A strain; but it dates rather far back. Aren’t you more than ever afraid of coming to our services now?” he added slily. “The Inquisition, you know.”

“Afraid? If I didn’t know you were chaffing me I would say that I was the more attracted after what you have shown and told me to-day.”

The old Squire was waiting for them in the great hall, where they had tea, and Delia, having now recovered her spirits completely, was chatting away as though the matter which had brought her there was but the recollection of a half-faded nightmare—a very note of interest and admiration concerning all she had just seen. Then, imperceptibly to her, they drew her on to talk about herself, and one point in the plain tale of real, plucky, hard work, which had come within her experiences of late, Wagram made a mental note of for future use.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Sea and her Dead.

The old Squire was skimming the morning paper, without much show of interest, however. Of politics he declared himself sick, and there was not much of any interest all round. He felt himself wishing that all newspapers were only issued weekly.

He was about to throw the paper aside when a paragraph caught his eye. It was headed: "A Terrible Tale of the Sea," and set forth the picking up of an open boat, a small dinghy, in fact, containing three men in the last stage of starvation and exhaustion, survivors—probably the sole survivors—of the passengers and crew of the steamship Carboceer, homeward bound from West Africa. The steamer, according to the narrative of these, had run at full speed ahead on to a huge floating hulk in black midnight, and had gone down in less than five minutes they estimated, and that amid a scene of terrible panic.

"But," continued the paragraph, "the survivors, consisting of two seamen and a passenger, seem unable to agree as to the cause of the disaster. The sailors pronounce the obstruction to be a derelict, and are emphatic on this point. On the other hand, the passenger, Mr Develin Hunt, is equally positive that he saw at any rate one man on board of it, which points to the possibility of another lamentable catastrophe due to the carelessness of those in charge of a certain type of windjammer in neglecting to show lights."

The paragraph went on to a little more detail, mainly conjectural, but of this Grantley Wagram took no heed. He had dropped the paper, and sat staring into space, with the look upon his face of a man who has met with a shock, as violent as it is unexpected—as one who had seen an apparition from beyond the grave.

"Develin Hunt!" he repeated. "Good God! it can't be. Yet—there can't be two Develin Hunts."

He snatched up the paper again, with something of a tremble as he grasped it, and once more scanned the paragraph. Then he turned eagerly to several other morning dailies which lay on the table. More detail might be set forth in each—but no. Either too hurriedly did he turn over each close-printed sheet, or the item of news had been overlooked, but nothing further could he find concerning the tragedy. At last, stuck away in a corner of a different sheet, he found another paragraph: "The only surviving passenger of this ghastly marine tragedy," it concluded, "proves to be a West African trader who has spent many years far up country—an elderly gentleman of some sixty years, named Develin Hunt."

Grantley Wagram's face lost none of its set greyness.

"Of some sixty years?" he repeated—"that would be about the age. No; he'd be more than that. There can't be two Develin Hunts! The sea has given up her dead."

He looked years older as he sat there, still grasping the paper, and for it he had reason; for should his conjectural identification of this man prove an accurate one, why, then, it meant that the ruin of his house would be fixed, and, humanly speaking, beyond his power to avert.

For long he sat, motionless as a stone figure. Through the open window came in the joyous sounds of the summer morning—the rustle of the great elms in a light breeze, the caw of rooks, and the distant clicking of a mowing-machine, and, with all, the scent of flowers upon a groundwork fragrance of new-mown hay. Every nerve and sense was alive to these. No wonder that he should look grey and stony. What if all should end with him?

What if his son—? And then from without came the voice of his son, together with that of another, and both were inquiring as to his whereabouts. The voices from outside acted as a tonic; and, pulling himself together, the old Squire got up and went to meet their owners—his son and the family chaplain. Wagram had been serving the latter's Mass, and had brought him in to breakfast.

"Looking fit? Oh, well, I suppose so. I haven't begun to feel my years as yet," was the easy answer of the old diplomat to the fresh, cheery greeting of the priest. But the latter was not altogether deceived. His keen observational faculty did not fail to detect a certain drawn and anxious look, differing from the ordinarily suave expression of his host's face. "Wagram, tell Rundle to get us out a bottle or so of that dry, sparkling hock. You know, the 13 bin. I believe that's better than anything else on a warm morning like this."

"Upon my word, Squire, you've missed you're vocation," laughed Father Gayle. "You ought to have been a crack physician, for certainly no one answering to that qualification could have been guilty of a more salutary prescription."

"Any news?" said Wagram, picking up the paper. Then, as they sat down: "Why, this is a queer yarn, these three chaps being picked up in a boat." Then, after briefly skimming it: "Why, by George! I wonder if that's the hulk we were reading about the other day when Haldane was here? I shouldn't be surprised. It must be very much in the same part of the world."

“You forget, Wagram,” said the chaplain quizzically, “that so far we none of us know what the mischief it is you are talking about, save that it concerns three men in a boat, a yarn, and Haldane. Now, even in my childhood, I was never good at piecing together puzzles. I can’t answer for the Squire.”

“Here you are; read it for yourself,” said Wagram, pushing the paper across the table. “It’s a ghastly thing to figure out, though, if these are the sole survivors. Develin Hunt! That’s a rum name! How perfectly sick that fellow must have got all through boyhood, youth, and middle age of being—banteringly or the reverse—told he had the Develin him.”

They laughed at this—none more heartily than that finished old diplomat Grantley Wagram. Laughed—in his bright, genial, humorous way, and yet all the time he was thinking how Wagram was, figuratively speaking, cracking jokes over his own open grave. Laughed—even as he might have laughed a few minutes earlier, before this dreadful bolt out of the blue had fallen. Laughed—as Wagram, sitting there in his blissful ignorance, was laughing. Why, the thing was so sudden, so unlooked-for, and withal so disastrous, that it seemed like a dream. Yet Grantley Wagram could laugh. But within his mind still hummed in mocking refrain his first ejaculation: “There can’t be two Develin Hunts.”

They talked on of various matters—the prospects of grouse on the Twelfth, and when Wagram’s boy would be home for the holidays, and so forth. Then the priest said:

“By the way, Squire, that’s a most astonishing thing Wagram has been telling me about that Miss Calmour and the claim made against you.”

“Yes; I told Father Gayle because he seemed to have rather a—well, unexalted opinion of the poor girl when we first talked about her,” explained Wagram.

“Oh, come; I didn’t say so.”

“No. Still, I thought it only fair to show the other side of her.”

“No one could have been more astonished than I was myself,” said the Squire. “She certainly behaved most honourably.”

“I should think so,” declared Wagram. “Her people are chronically hard up, and, that being so, to tear up a cheque for a thousand pounds deliberately was in her case rather heroic.”

“Probably the rest of them will lead her a terrible life on the strength of it,” said the Squire. “Poor child! she seemed a good deal better than her belongings. We must see if we can’t do something for her.”

“Yes, we must,” agreed Wagram. “This is a morning to tempt one out. I think I shall jump on the bicycle and rip over to Haldane’s—unless you want me for anything, father.”

“No, no. I’ve a thing or two to think over, but nothing that you need bother about,” answered the Squire, adding to himself—“as yet.”

Soon after breakfast Father Gayle took his leave, and the Squire his usual morning stroll round the gardens and shrubbery. But he did wrong to be alone, for, try as he would, the one idea clung to his mind in a veritable obsession: “There can’t be two Develin Hunts.”

The while Wagram, skimming along the smooth, well-kept roads, was again thrilled with the intense joy of possession as he revelled in the cool shade of over-arching trees; in the moist depths of a bosky wood, echoing forth its bird-song, with now and again the joyous crow of a cock pheasant; in the green and gold of the spangled meadows and the purl of the stream beneath the old bridge. Surely life was too good—surely such an idyllic state could not be meant to last, was the misgiving that sometimes beset him; for he had known the reverse side of all this—had known it bitterly, and for long years.

Haldane and Yvonne were pacing up and down one of the garden walks, the former smoking a pipe and dividing his attention between the morning paper and the lovely child beside him. Just behind the latter, stepping daintily, and turning when they turned, was the beautiful little Angora cat.

“Did you see this, Wagram?” said Haldane, the first greeting over, holding out the newspaper. “Well, you remember that confounded stray hulk we were reading about over at your place? It’s my belief that it’s the very one that’s sent this boat to the bottom. Did you read about it?”

“Yes.”

Yvonne’s face was now the picture of blue-eyed mischief.

“Well, this chump that was picked up, did you notice what a devilish odd name they’ve given him?”

“Develin Hunt, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Well, now, think of his life spent in being told he had the Develin him.”

A peal of laughter went up from Yvonne—and it was good to hear that child laugh—such a clear, merry, hearty trill.

“I’ve been waiting for that,” she cried. “Mr Wagram, you’re a perfect godsend. Father has inflicted it upon every available being up till now. Briggs, the gardener, was gurgling to such an extent that he had to stop digging. He even stopped old Finlay, driving by to Swanton, and fired it off on him.”

“Sunbeam, you are getting insufferably impudent,” said her father. “I shall really have to cane you.”

With mock gravity she held out a hand that was a very model, with its long, tapering fingers, which closed upon those which descended upon it in a playful little slap.

“He isn’t the only sinner in that respect, Sunbeam,” said Wagram. “I myself was inflicting it upon our crowd at just about the same time.”

“And are not ashamed of yourself? I’ve a great mind not to show you where I took out a two-pounder the other evening.”

“Did you get it out yourself?”

“That’s stale. I sha’n’t even answer it. Come.”

She had taken an arm of each, in the way of one who ruled both of them. But Haldane hung back.

“Take him alone, dear. I must get two confounded letters behind my back, or they’ll never get done. I’ll come on after you if I’m done in time.”

“All safe. Poogie, I think I won’t take you,” picking up the beautiful little animal. “Some obnoxious cur might skoff you.”

“Why not chuck her in the river for a swim?” said Wagram mischievously. The look Yvonne gave him was beautiful to behold.

“Now, I’ve a great mind not to take you,” she said severely. “Well, come along, then.”

For nearly an hour they wandered by the stream that ran below the garden, talking trout generally, and peering cautiously over into this or that deep hole where big trout were wont to lie. Then, recrossing the plank bridge, with its rather insecure handrail, they started to return.

The field footpath was a right-of-way, and now along it came a somewhat ragged figure, dusty and tired-looking. It was that of a swarthy, middle-aged woman, with beady, black eyes. Instantly Yvonne's interest awoke.

"She can't be English," she declared. "Wait, I'll try her."

She opened in fluent Italian, but met with no response. A change to Spanish and French was equally without result.

"It ain't no good, young lady," said the tramp; "I don't understand none of them languages. And yet I ain't exactly English, neither, as you was saying just now."

"What! You heard that?" cried Yvonne, astonished. "You are able to hear far."

"Ay; and able to see far too. Would you like to know what I can see for you, my sweet young lady?" she went on, dropping into the wheedling whine of the professional fortune-teller.

"It would be fun to have my fortune told," said the girl rather wistfully.

"Yvonne, I'm surprised at you," said Wagram, with somewhat of an approach to sternness. "Don't you know that all that sort of thing is forbidden, child, and very wisely so, too?"

"I know; but I don't mean seriously—only just for the fun of the thing."

"No—no. Not 'only just for' anything; it's not to be thought of."

"It's 'ard to live," whined the woman, "and me that's tramped without bite or sup since yesterday. And I'm that 'ungry!"

She certainly looked her words. Wagram softened in a moment.

"Here," he said; "and now take my advice and get on your way. We don't want any fortune-tellers round here."

The tramp spat gleefully—for luck—on the half-crown which lay in her surprised palm.

“Thankee, sir, and good luck to you, sir, and to the sweet young lady. I’ll move on, never fear. You’re a genelman, you are.”

“What are you up to, Wagram?” said Haldane, joining them. “Encouraging vagrancy—as usual? Good line that for a county magistrate.”

“Oh, I can’t see those poor devils looking so woebegone and turn them away. The principle’s quite wrong, I know, but—there it is.”

“Quite wrong. They’re generally lying.”

“More than likely. Still, there it is.”

He was thinking of his meditations as he had ridden over—of the contrast between his life now and formerly, of the intense joy of possession, which he hoped did not come within the definition of “the pride of life.” Of the ragged tramp he had just relieved he had no further thought. Yet it might be that even she would cross his path again. It might be, too, when that befell, little enough of “the pride of life” would then be his.

Chapter Fifteen.

More Siege House Amenities.

In conjecturing that Delia Calmour's honourable renunciation was probably made at the cost of her peace at home the Squire proved himself a true prophet, for the poor girl's life became anything but a bed of roses. When he heard that she had irrevocably carried out her intention old Calmour grew savage, first abusing her in the most scandalous manner, and, being half drunk, fell to whining about the ingratitude of children, deliberately allowing their parents to starve in their old age for the sake of gratifying a selfish whim. Then he got wholly drunk, so violently, indeed, that even Clytie, the resolute, the level-headed, found it all that she could do to keep her nerve, while the intrepid Bob promptly skulked off out of harm's way.

The said Bob, too, contributed his share of mean and petty annoyance. He would insinuate that he did not believe she had really returned the cheque. She wanted to keep it all for herself, and leave them out. He went further, like the mean and despicable cad he was, insinuating that there was plenty more where that came from, that Wagram knew a pretty girl when he saw one, and so forth; in short, behaving in such wise as would formerly, according to the ways of Siege House, have drawn upon himself some sudden and violent form of retaliation. But a change had come over the sister he was persecuting, and the ways of Siege House were no longer her ways, hence the abominable Bob took heart of grace, and his behaviour and insinuations became more and more scandalous. Even Clytie could no longer restrain him. But his turn was to come.

Throughout all this Delia never regretted the decision she had arrived at, never for a single moment. She would act in exactly the same way were the occasion to come over again—were it to come over again a hundred times, she declared, goaded beyond endurance by her father's alternate maudlin reproaches or vehement abuse. And he had retorted that the sooner she got outside his door and never set foot inside it again the better he would be pleased. This she would have done but for Clytie and—one other consideration.

Clytie at first had been a little cool with her, but had come round, declaring that, on thinking it over, perhaps, on the principle of a sprat to catch a herring, what had happened was the best thing that could have happened, if only they played their cards well now. Then Delia had rounded on her.

"Don't talk in that beastly way, Clytie; I'm not going to play any cards at all, as you put it. Even if I were inclined to, look at us—us, mind," she added, with a bitter sneer, and a

nod of the head in the direction of the other room, where their father and brother were audibly wrangling and swearing—the former, as usual, half drunk.

"Pooh! that wouldn't count," was the equable reply. "You don't suppose you'd have that hamper lumbering around once you'd won the game, do you? I'd take care of that."

"Well, I shall go; he's always telling me to."

"No, you won't. Let him tell—and go on telling. I can do some telling too, if it comes to that—telling him that if you go I go too, and we know well enough how he'd take that. No; you stop and face it out. You'll be jolly glad you did one of these days."

Poor Delia within her heart of hearts was glad already. A month ago less than a tenth of what she had had to undergo would have started her off independent, to do for herself. Now all the strength seemed to have gone out of her, and the idea of leaving Bassingham and its neighbourhood struck her with a blank dismay that she preferred not to let her mind dwell upon. Now she broke down.

"I wish it had been me, instead of the bicycle, that had been knocked to pieces," she sobbed. "I wish to Heaven the brute had killed me that day."

"But you should not wish that, my dear child," mocked Bob, who, passing the door, had overheard. "You should not wish that. It's very wicked, as your Papist friends would say." Then he took himself off with a yahooing laugh.

Now, it befell that on the following morning, while moving her post-card albums, Delia dropped several loose cards. Upon these pounced Bob, with no intention of picking them up for her, we may be sure, possibly in the hope of causing her some passing annoyance by scattering them still more; but hardly had he bent down with that amiable object than he started back, as though he had been about to pick up a snake unawares. "What—why? Who the deuce is that?" he cried. One of the cards was lying with the picture face upwards. This he now picked up. "Who is it?" he stammered, staring wildly at it. "Don't you recognise it, or does it bring back painful recollections?" retorted Delia as she watched him blankly gaping at the portrait card which Yvonne had given her. For upon her a new light had dawned. "Don't you? You should have good reason to," she went on mercilessly, her eyes full upon his face. "Isn't it Miss Haldane? You know—and I know—who it was that insulted her on the Swanton road one day, but Mr Haldane doesn't know—as yet." Bob's face had gone white.

"Hang it all, Delia," he gasped, "you wouldn't give your own brother away, surely?"

“My own brother has just given himself away,” was the sneering reply. “Brother! Yes. You have been very brotherly to me of late, haven’t you—trying to drive me from the house, and making all sorts of perfectly scandalous insinuations! Very brotherly? Eh?”

“Oh, well, perhaps I said a good deal more than I meant,” grumbled Bob shamefacedly.

“And you’d have gone on doing the same if it hadn’t been for finding that card,” she pursued, not in the least deceived by an apology extorted through sheer scare. “Well, please yourself as to whether you do so or not, now.”

Thus the abominable Bob’s turn had come, and so far as he was concerned Delia was henceforward left in peace. Bob, then, being reduced Clytie judged the time ripe for reducing her father also.

“See here, dad,” she began one day when the old man was grumbling at his eldest daughter, and suggesting for the twentieth time that she had better clear out and do something for herself, “don’t you think we have had about enough nagging over that cheque business?—because if you don’t, I do.”

“Oh, you do, do you, Miss Hoity Toity?”

“Rather. And I move that we have no more of it—that the matter be allowed to drop, as they say in the House.”

“What the devil d’you mean, you impudent baggage?” snarled her father.

“What the devil I say—no more—no less,” was the imperturbable reply. “Two or three times a day you tell Delia to clear, and we’re tired of it.”

“Are you?” he returned, coldly sarcastic. “Well, I wonder she requires so much telling.”

“Well, you needn’t tell her any more—it’s waste of trouble. She isn’t going to clear, not until she wants to, anyway; except on these terms—if she clears I clear too. How’s that?”

Thereupon old Calmour went into a petulant kind of rage, and choked and spluttered, and swore that he’d be master in his own house, that they were a pair of impudent, ungrateful baggages, that they might both go to the devil for all he cared, and the sooner they got there the better. Unfortunately, however, he rather neutralised the effect of his peroration by tailing off into the maudlin, and allusions to the wickedness and

ingratitude of children who thought nothing of deserting their only parent in his old age, and so forth—to all of which Clytie listened with unruffled composure.

"All right, dad," she rejoined cheerfully. "Now you've blown off steam and are more comfortable again let's say no more about it. What has been done can't be undone, that's certain; in fact, I've an instinct that it may have been all for the best after all, so let's all be jolly together again as before. I've got a lot more orders for typing—in fact, almost more than I can do—and if they go on at this rate I shall have to get another machine, and take Delia into partnership—she has an idea of working it already."

"Well, well, there's something in that," said the old man, mollified by this brightening of prospects. "I must have a glass of grog on the strength of it."

Clytie looked at him for a moment, shook her pretty head, and then got out a bottle. He was quite sober, and it was the first that day.

"Only one," she said. "No more, mind."

She did not think it necessary to tell him that this increase of material prosperity was due to the good offices of Wagram. The latter was not the one to do things by halves, and had never forgotten the promise he had made on the occasion of his call at Siege House.

"There you are, Delia!" she triumphantly declared as the orders came pouring in. "You never know what you lose through want of asking. If I hadn't put it point-blank to him I shouldn't have got all these—and it makes a difference, I can tell you. What a devil of a good chap he must be!"

A few days later a surprise came for Delia in the shape of a letter from the editor of a particularly smart and up-to-date pictorial, requesting her to contribute to its illustrated series of articles on old country seats, so many words of letterpress and so many photographs of Hilversea Court, and quoting a very liberal rate of remuneration if the contribution proved to be to the editor's satisfaction. The girl was radiant.

"It's too good to be true, Clytie. How can they have heard of me?" she exclaimed. "Surely no one has been playing a practical joke on me. I can hardly believe it."

Clytie scanned the letter "It's genuine right enough," she pronounced. "Wagram again."

"What? But—no—it can't be this time. Why, don't you see what it says: 'Provided you can obtain the permission of Mr Grantley Wagram'? So, you see, it's apart from them entirely."

“That’s only a red herring. I’ll bet you five bob he’s at the back of it. Are you on?”

“N-no,” answered Delia, upon whom a recollection was dawning of things she had let fall on that memorable occasion of her last visit to Hilversea. She had prattled on about herself, and her experiences, among which had been a little journalism of a very poorly-paid order.

“I believe you are right, Clytie,” she went on slowly. “I remember letting go that I had done that sort of thing in a small way, and even that I would be glad to do it again in a large one if only I got the chance, but I never dreamt of anything coming of it—never for a moment.”

“No? Well, you’re in luck’s way this time, dear. Probably this editor is a friend of his; and then, apart from that, a man in the position of Wagram of Hilversea can exercise almost unlimited influence in pretty near any direction he chooses—by Jove, he can.”

Delia did not at once reply, and, noting a certain look upon her meditative face, Clytie smiled to herself, and forebore to make any allusion to her cherished scheme, which, in her own mind, she decided was growing more promising than ever.

Chapter Sixteen.

"A Calmour at Hilversea."

Wagram's private study, or "den," where he was wont to do all his business thinking and writing, and which was absolutely sacred to himself and his papers and general litter, was a snug room overlooking the drive; and thence, as he sat with his after-breakfast pipe in his mouth and some business papers relating to the estate before him on the morning following the incidents just recorded, he was—well, not altogether surprised at seeing a girl on a bicycle skimming up to the front door.

"Poor child!" he said to himself. "She looks positively radiant. I used to think, in those awful days, if I were in the position I am in now—by the grace of God—what a great deal I could do for others, and yet, and yet, it's little enough one seems to be able to do."

He need not have disparaged himself. There were not a few, among them some who had shown him kindness in "those awful days," who now had reason to bless his name as long as they lived, and their children's children after them.

"Come in. Yes; I'll be down in a minute or two," he said in response to the announcement that Miss Calmour had called on a matter of business, and very much wished to see him. He smiled to himself as he remembered the occasion of her last call—also "on a matter of business." Then he made a note as to where to resume the work in which he had been interrupted, laid down his pipe, and went downstairs.

"And now," he said merrily when they had shaken hands, "what is this 'matter of business'?"

Delia was looking radiant, and, consequently, very pretty. She had that dark warmth of complexion which suffuses, and her hazel eyes were soft and velvety.

"This will explain," she said, holding out the editor's letter; "and, Mr Wagram, it would be affectation for me to pretend that I did not know whom I had to thank for it."

"Of course. As far as I can see it is the editor of The Old Country Side. But editors don't want thanking; they are hard, cold-blooded men of business, as I have had ample reason to discover in my old struggling days."

She made no comment on this last remark. She had heard that this man's life had not been always a bed of roses.

“Yet, how could this one have heard of me?” she said. “No; I don’t know how to thank you enough for this—and Clytie too. She has almost more work than she can do, all thanks to your introductions. You are too good to us.”

“My dear child, haven’t you learnt yet that we must all help each other in this world as far as lies in our power? The difficulty sometimes lies in how to do it in the right way. By-the-by, this letter, I observe, makes it a condition that you should obtain my father’s permission. How, then, could we possibly have had anything to do with instigating the offer?”

Delia smiled, remembering her sister’s dictum: “That’s only a red herring.” However, she had sufficient tact not to press the point.

“I see they want six photographic views,” he went on. “Now, if I might suggest, do two of the house, from different points of view—outside; one of the hall and staircase; two of the chapel, outside and in; and one of the lake. That makes it.”

“But, Mr Wagram, you are forgetting the African animals. I must have those; they are such a feature.”

“Why, of course. Well, then, now I think of it, we will delete the interior of the chapel. To the crowd it would only look like any other interior. What is your camera, by the way?”

“Only a Kodak. Bull’s-eye Number 2. But I understand time exposures, and it takes very sharp and clear.”

“And shorthand writing too. You are a clever girl, and should be able to turn your accomplishments to useful account.”

Again Delia smiled, for she remembered having let out that she was a ready shorthand writer during that former conversation.

“Well, now, what I suggest is this: I have rather a pressing matter of business to finish off this morning, so, if you will excuse me, I propose to turn you over to Rundle. He will show you every hole and corner of the house; he knows it like a book. We only looked at it cursorily last time you were here. That will take you all the morning. After lunch—we lunch at one—I can take you over the outside part of the job myself. The Old Country Side is a first-rate pictorial, and we must do justice to Hilversea in it, mustn’t we?”

Delia professed herself delighted, as indeed she was. Then Rundle, having appeared in response to a ring, Wagram proceeded to direct him accordingly.

“Show Miss Calmour all there is to see, Rundle,” he said, “and work the light for her so as to get everything from the best point of view for photography. I showed her the priest’s hiding-place the other day, so you needn’t; besides, you don’t know the secret of it.”

“No, sir; and it’d have been a good job if some others hadn’t known there was such a thing,” said the old butler in historic allusion. “This way, miss.”

Delia appeared at lunch radiant and sparkling. Rundle had proved a most efficient cicerone, she declared; indeed, so much had there been to see and hear that she wondered how on earth she was going to compress her notes into the required limit. Wagram was in a state of covert amusement, for he knew that his father was not forgetting his former dictum.

“A Calmour at Hilversea! Pho! it’d be about as much in place as a cow in a church!”

And yet, here was this bright, pretty girl, who talked so intelligently and well—why, she might have been anybody else as far as keeping the old Squire interested and amused was concerned.

“Now, Miss Calmour, which shall we take first—the animals or the chapel?” said Wagram as they rose from table.

“The animals, I think, because it may take some time, and the sun is not as reliable as it might be. The chapel I can get much easier with a time exposure, if necessary.”

“Right. I’ll tell them to get my tyres pumped up, and we can bike down there.”

Their way took them over the very road where the adventure had befallen, then a turn to the left, where the riding was rough. Here, under the trees, a shed of tarred planks came into view.

“We’ll leave our machines here,” said Wagram, dismounting. “They’ll be quite safe; still, I’ll chain them together, as a matter of precaution.”

“What a perfectly lovely place this is,” said the girl as they walked on beneath great over-arching oaks, which let in the sunlight in a network on the cool sward. “Tell me, Mr Wagram, don’t you sometimes find life too good to be real?”

He looked at her a trifle gravely. There was something very taking in her genuineness and spontaneity. In the present instance she had voiced what was often in his mind.

“Yes, indeed I do,” he said; “so much so that at times it is almost startling.”

It did not occur to him how he was giving vent to some of the most solemn side of his meditations for the benefit of this girl—this daughter of the drunken, disreputable, old ex-army vet, any other member of whose family he would not willingly have had there at all. But had he known her better—that is, had he known her before that eventful day—he would have reason to marvel at the great and wondrous change that had come over her within that short space of time. Her former slanginess, and other amenities and ideas begotten of Siege House, were to her now quite of the past, so effective had been recent influences to refine and soften her.

“Look there, we are in luck’s way so far,” he said. “Have you got an exposure ready?”

They had reached a high paling with the upper part bent over inward. In front was a step-ladder giving access to a small wooden platform at the top of this.

“Don’t show too suddenly,” he whispered as he helped her up this; “you’ve a fine chance.”

Delia could hardly restrain a cry of delight. About twenty yards away a couple of white-tailed gnus were feeding, and just beyond three more of the larger and brindled kind, and a little apart from these a fine specimen of the sable antelope. It was as if some fortunate freak of Nature had grouped and focussed the lot for her own especial benefit.

“Got ’em,” she whispered, clicking the trigger.

Up went every head. The white-tailed gnus, their wild eyes staring out of fierce-looking, whiskered countenances surmounted by sharp meat-hook-like horns, began to snort and prance round and round. Those of the other kind drew nearer, uttering a raucous bellow.

“Now, snap them again,” whispered Wagram; “you’ll never get a better chance.”

“There; that’ll be perfect. Are there any more, Mr Wagram?”

“None worth taking. Some of the smaller kinds of antelope; but we hope to get some more specimens. Haldane got these for us. He’s been an up-country sportsman in his time, and shot lots of them.”

“How picturesque they look; but they are very ugly.”

“Not the sable antelope?”

“Oh no; the others. They look as if Nature had started to make a goat, then changed her mind, and manufactured a bad attempt at a buffalo, with a dash of the camel thrown in.”

“Good description,” laughed Wagram. The creatures, excited by the sound, snorted and bellowed, pawing the ground or capering in absurd antics, while two had got up a sham fight on their own account.

“Supposing we were to go down into the enclosure?” she said.

“Hadn’t you a specimen of what that would mean the other day? We have notices posted everywhere warning people against venturing in; but this part of the park is right away from any public road, and we don’t encourage trippers. Hallo!”—looking up—“it’s lucky you got your snapshots. It has started to rain.”

Big drops were pattering down. The sky had become quickly overcast, and an ominous boom from a black, inky background of cloud told that a summer shower was upon them with characteristic suddenness. They regained the shed where they had left their bicycles only in the nick of time, as, with a roar and a rush, the rain whirled upon them in a tremendous downpour. Then the vivid sheeting of blue electricity, almost simultaneously with the sharp thunder-crack. The girl gave a little start.

“Are you afraid of thunder?” asked Wagram, with a smile.

“Not now. Sometimes when I am alone I get rather nervous, but now I don’t mind it a bit.”

She spoke no more than the truth. She would have welcomed another hour of the most appalling thunderstorm that ever raged to sit here as she was doing now, and spend it in this man’s society. Yet a wooden shed, open in front, and overhung by tall, spreading oaks, is not perhaps, the safest refuge in the world under all the circumstances. But the thunder and lightning soon passed over, although it continued to rain smartly.

“Mr Wagram, there is something I would like to talk to you about,” began the girl, rather constrainedly, after a quite unwonted interval of silence—for her. “I have been thinking of late that I would like to be a Catholic.”

Wagram looked up keenly.

“Have you given the question careful study?” he said.

“I have thought it over a great deal. I am fairly at home in the Catholic services. You see, I was travelling on the Continent as companion for a time, and then we always attended them, so I do know something about it.”

“To know ‘something’ isn’t sufficient; you must know everything.”

“Tell me, then. What should I do?”

“First, be sure that you are thoroughly in earnest; then you must undergo instruction.”

Delia’s face brightened.

“I will,” she said. “But—tell me how.”

“There is a mission in Bassingham. Go and consult the priest there.”

Delia tried all she knew to keep her face from falling. She had hoped, in her ignorance, that Wagram would have accepted the post of instructor.

“Father Sonnenbloem!” she said. “But, he’s a German.”

“Well, what then? My dear child, the Catholic Church is the Church of the World, and is above nationality in that it embraces all nations—hence its name. As it happens, Father Sonnenbloem is one of the most kind-hearted and saintly men who ever lived. He is learned, too. If you are in earnest you could go to no one better.”

Delia declared that she would; and, the rain having ceased, they went forth just as a bright shaft of sunlight, darting through the cloud, which it was fast dispelling, converted the rain drippings from the leaves into a shower of glittering diamonds, and the moist, ferny, woodland scents after the shower were delicious.

“We shall have a splashy ride back, I’m afraid,” said Wagram as they regained the road. “No; it has run off rather than soaked in. It won’t hurt us; and you’ll have the sun for your remaining shots.”

After she had taken the chapel and the Priest’s Walk—she must take that, she said—Delia asked, somewhat diffidently, if she could see the ornaments.

“Certainly,” answered Wagram; “only we must get hold of Father Gayle for that, because he has got the keys of all the best things.”

The chaplain was at home, and soon found.

“Been taking our private Zoo, I hear, Miss Calmour,” he said genially as he joined them. “Your second sight of it is not quite so startling as your first, eh?”

In the sacristy—for they did not do things by halves at Hilversea—Delia was lost in wonder and delight at the beauty of the vestments and ornaments, rich and exquisite in texture and design, and she almost had to shade her eyes to look at the great sun-shaped monstrance, blazing with precious stones; but what interested her no less, perhaps, was a splendid old chasuble of Flemish make, rich and full, and displaying a perfect chronicle of symbolism in every detail of its embroidery, which Wagram pronounced to have been almost certainly worn by their martyred relative.

“From that to my boy’s things is something of a skip,” he went on, half opening a drawer, in which lay an acolyte’s dress of scarlet and lace; “only the rascal isn’t over-keen on getting inside them when he’s here—eh, Father? Says he has enough of that sort of thing to do at school.”

“Oh, well, we mustn’t expect a boy to be too pious,” laughed the priest. “I know I was anything but that at his age.”

Delia was interested. It was the first time she had heard Wagram refer to his son, and she was about to question him on the subject when the sound of a door opening, and of voices inside the chapel, caught their attention.

“It’s Haldane and Yvonne,” pronounced Wagram. “Perhaps they’ve come to have a practice.”

His conjecture proved correct, as in a minute or two the new arrivals joined them in the sacristy. They wanted to try over a few things, they said, and now the organist was nowhere to be found. Wagram couldn’t play and sing at the same time, and the same held good of Yvonne, while Haldane couldn’t play at all. What on earth was to be done?

“Could I be of any use, Mr Haldane?” said Delia with some diffidence. “I have some knowledge of accompaniment, and am used to the organ; in fact, I can sing and play at the same time without difficulty.”

“The very thing!” cried Haldane. “What a friend in need you are, Miss Calmour.”

They adjourned to the choir-loft over the west door, and Delia took her seat at the organ. It was small, but a perfect little instrument for the size of the building—here again Hilversea did not do things by halves—and had an automatic blower.

“This is a treat,” said the girl as she ran her fingers over the keyboard. “Why, the instrument is perfect. What shall we start upon?”

“Arcadelt,” said Yvonne. “Can you take soprano, Miss Calmour?”

“Yes.”

“All safe. Then we are set up. Mr Wagram, you take tenor, and father will take bass, though he’s not as good as he might be at it. Now, are you ready?”

And then Arcadelt’s Ave Maria, than which, probably, no more beautiful composition of its kind was ever wrought, in its solemn and plaintive melody and exquisite interpretation of light and shade, went forth from the four voices, cultured voices too, swelling up to the high-pitched roof in all its richness of sound, and softening into tender petition.

“Lovely, lovely!” whispered Delia, half to herself, as it ended.

“It is, isn’t it?” said Yvonne. “Do let’s have it on Sunday, Mr Wagram.”

“Shall we?”

“Oh, do, Mr Wagram,” echoed Delia enthusiastically. “I’ll ride over, wet or fine, if only to hear it.”

“Very well, then, we will; but won’t you not only hear it but help us in it?”

“May I? Oh, I shall be delighted.”

They tried over a few more things, including a gem or two of Gounod, then adjourned to the house for tea.

“What a universal genius that little girl is, Wagram,” said Haldane as they walked thither, the two girls being in front.

“Yes; she’s a clever child—seems able to turn her hand to anything.” And then he told of the day’s doings.

“Good, and good again,” said Haldane. “We must tell everyone to get that number of The Old Country Side. Then they may give her another job.”

“I think they very likely will,” said Wagram, with a twinkle in his eyes that escaped his friend.

Chapter Seventeen.

Blackmail?

Grantley Wagram sat alone in his library—thinking.

When a man thus sits, with an open letter in front of him, at which he gazes from time to time, with a contraction of the brows, it is safe to assume that his thoughts are hardly pleasant; and such, indeed, represented the state of the old Squire's mind.

The correspondence which troubled him was not quite recent—that is to say, it was some days old. But, great Heaven! the issue it involved if the statements therein set forth were true! It speaks volumes for the old man's marvellous self-control that he should have gone through that period evincing no sign whatever that anything had occurred to threaten his normal urbanity—no, not even to his son; and yet, day and night, awake, and even asleep, the matter had been uppermost in his thoughts. Now, those thoughts for the hundredth time seemed to voice the two words: Only Blackmail! And yet—and yet—he knew that it was blackmail from which there would be no escape.

He took up the letter and scanned it, then let it fall again with a weary sigh. There was a genuine ring about the tone of the communication. No; there could hardly be two Develin Hunts.

Well, a few moments would decide, for the letter which troubled him was subscribed with that name, and the writer promised to call that very morning—in fact, might arrive any moment.

Even then there came a tap at the door, and the servant who entered announced the arrival of a stranger.

"Show him up here," said the Squire.

The first thing the new-comer did was to look deliberately around, return to the door, open it, and look outside. Then, closing it, he came back, seated himself opposite the Squire, and said:

"Don't you know me?"

"No."

“Look again. You know me right enough, though we’ve neither of us grown any younger.”

“Not from Adam.” And Grantley Wagram leaned back in his chair, as if there were no more to be said.

“Never heard my name before, eh?” said the stranger sneeringly.

“N-no. Wait. Let’s see. Now I remember I read it in connection with some shipwreck. Are you the person referred to?”

“That I am. And a hell of a time I had of it. By the Lord, we all had.”

“I can quite believe that,” said the Squire. “That castaway business must be one of the most ghastly situations imaginable.”

“Quite right, Squire. Come, now, I believe you’re not half a bad sort after all. I believe we are going to understand each other.”

The old diplomat made no immediate reply as he leaned back in his chair and watched the other. He saw before him a tallish man, somewhat loosely hung, but conveying an idea of wiriness and strengths. The face, tanned a red brown, might very well have been good-looking at one time; now somewhat bloodshot eyes and an indescribable something told that its owner had lived hard and wildly, and that in wild, hard places.

“Yes; I believe you’re not half a bad sort, Squire,” repeated the stranger, pulling at his short white beard—“far too good a sort not to have forgotten that a man might have a thirst after a walk on a hot morning; for I walked over here, mind.”

“To be sure, I had forgotten,” said the Squire, with a pleasant laugh, as he touched an electric button on the table. “What do you fancy? A glass of wine?”

“Wine? No, thanks. Scotch is good enough for me, especially good Scotch—and it’s bound to be that here,” with a comprehensive sweep of the hand round the library.

A servant appearing, the whisky was ordered and brought, Grantley Wagram the while uneasily hoping that it would not have the effect of making his unwelcome visitor uproarious.

“Soda? No, thanks,” said the latter emphatically; “that’ll do for those stay-at-home popinjays who loaf about clubs, not for a man who’s lived. Ah! That’s real good,”

swallowing at a gulp half the four-finger measure he had poured out for himself. “Soft, mellow as milk. Squire, you’re not with me.”

“Not—?”

“Not with me. It isn’t usual in places I’ve been for one man to drink and another to look on.”

“Oh, I see. I must ask you to take the will for the deed. This is the wrong end of the day with me for that sort of thing.”

“Oh, but—it’ll never do,” returned the other in an injured tone, gulping down the remains of his glass. “We shall never get to business that way.”

“Perhaps even better,” said the Squire pleasantly. “Well, now—what is your business?”

At this—put point-blank—the stranger stared, and the decanter which he had reached for, to fill up again, was held arrested in mid-air.

“Well, I’ll get to it,” he said, following out his immediate purpose, and tossing off a good half of the same. “I’ve been knocking about all my life—and it has been a life, mind you—and now I want to squat. Some nice, bright, pleasant neighbourhood where there’s good company and a bit of sport to be had; like this, for instance.”

“Quite natural,” said the Squire pleasantly. “Made your pile, I suppose, and want to settle down and enjoy it.”

The other winked.

“Not much ‘pile,’” he said. “For the rest you’re right. I do want to enjoy it—if by ‘it’ you mean life—and it strikes me this is just the corner of this little island to do it in.” And down went the remainder of the glass.

The Squire was relieved to find that the liquor had no effect upon the man whatever, for though he had lowered practically a tumbler of it neat, and within a very short interval of time, he talked with the same easy, confident drawl, nor did his speech show any signs of thickening. The said speech, by the way, was correct, and not by any means that of an uneducated person.

“And—the business?”

“That’s it, Squire. I want a nice snug little box, where I can smoke my pipe in peace and stable a horse or two, and have a day’s shooting now and again, and throw a fly when I want. That’s reasonable, isn’t it?”

“Quite. But, then—I’m not a house agent.”

“Ha—ha—ha! Capital joke—capital! Well, for once in your life you shall be one—”

“Eh?”

”—And find me exactly what I want. I think the terms are easy. Only there is another trifling detail I forgot. You were mentioning a ‘pile’ just now. Well, I haven’t made any pile—rather the other way on. Now, that modest establishment I suggest will want a little keeping up—a banking account, you understand.”

“Yes; it would want that.”

“Well, then, you could arrange all that for me too,” rejoined the stranger airily, though at heart somewhat disconcerted by the old diplomat’s coolness. “Come, now; the terms are not hard. What do you think?”

“Shall I tell you what I think?”

“Do.”

“I think you must be an escaped lunatic.”

“Ah, you think that, do you? Well, I’m not going to lose my temper with you, Squire; in fact, I admire your gameness. But it’s of no use. I like this part of the country, and I’m here to stay. When I’ve prospected around a little more I’ll tell you which place I’ll take, and how much it will require to keep up.”

“Yes? Pray be modest when you do.”

The other laughed. The mild sarcasm tickled him, and he felt so sure of his ground.

“I think I am, all things considered,” he said. “Of course, we can break off the deal—right now. You are all right for your life, but what price when your son Wagram has to pack up and go, as, of course, he will? You have another son?”

“No.”

“What? Oh, Squire! Ah, I see. You don’t own him, and all that sort of thing. Well, I’m not surprised, and I don’t blame you, for he’s a hard case. Upon my word, he’s a devilish hard case—one of the hardest cases I’ve ever struck, and that’s saying a gaudy good deal. Well, now, I know exactly where to put my finger on him, and when Wagram has to pack, why, then, the other one—Everard—comes in. It’ll all be his then, and won’t he make things hum!”

“I should think he most probably would, unless he’s vastly changed since I last saw him,” smiled the old man, as if his visitor had just vented some pleasant witticism.

“Well, he hasn’t—not for the better at any rate, from your point of view. You may take it from me, he won’t refuse me what I am asking you—ay, and a great deal more besides. In fact, he daren’t.”

“In that case, why did you come to me at all if you could get so much more from him?”

“Don’t you see, Squire, that would be a waiting game, and I don’t prefer that if it can be avoided, for, of course, he couldn’t touch a thing during your time.”

“No; he couldn’t—and certainly shouldn’t.”

“Very well, then. There’s one motive, and here’s another. What if I have a hankering—a genuine one—after respectability? What if I would rather settle down as a highly respectable neighbour of yours—you would find me all that, I promise you—than help ‘blue’ the whole show with Everard? No; don’t smile so incredulously. A man with your cool reasoning faculties, which I have been admiring all along, ought to know human nature better.”

“Now, look here, Mr Develin Hunt, or whatever you choose to call yourself,” said the Squire, rising in his chair, as a hint to terminate the interview, and speaking in a crisp, decisive tone. “Do you really imagine that this precious concoction of yours is going to frighten or influence me in the slightest degree—because, if so, you don’t know me at all—as, indeed, how should you? But I warn you that personation and blackmail are felonies in this country, and not only very severely punishable but generally very severely punished. So now I’ll say good-bye; only lay my warning to heart, and don’t come here with any more of these flimsy attempts to obtain money or I shall know next time how to treat them.”

“Blackmail! Felony! Ugly words both,” said the stranger cheerfully as he, too, rose. “Well, I’m not much afraid; only, let me echo your words: ‘I shall know what to do next

time' if you refuse to see me, and that will be to place the matter before your son Wagram. He'll think twice before allowing all the good you and he have done here—I have been taking observations, you see—to be wrecked at the sweet will of as cut-throat and piratical a 'tough' as ever escaped hanging, even though it be his own brother. Good-morning, Squire. Shall see you again in a few days. Looks as if we were going to have rain, doesn't it? Good-morning."

He passed through the door, which was being held open for him, for the Squire had already rung, and went down the stairs with jaunty step. Then, as he heard the front door shut, Grantley Wagram sank back into his chair.

The sting of the whole interview lay in the parting words. About the man's identity he had no doubt, and that his other and missing son should be the instrument for undoing all that had been done, and bringing the family to utter ruin! It was terrible! He could not so much as sit still to think about it. He felt cornered and trapped.

He went to the open window. The June sunshine was flooding over the richness of the foliage tossing in mountainous masses against the cloudless blue. A perfect gurgle of bird voices in sweet harmony blended in unceasing song, and that clear, pure fragrance which you will only find in the open country came up with every waft of the summer air. Red roofs nestling among the trees, near and far, where farm or tiny hamlet formed a cluster of dwellings—all the people represented by these looked up to him, and to him who should come after him, and the reflection only served to add bitterness to Grantley Wagram's meditations. He had striven to do his best for all these, in the truest and best sense of the word, and had no reason to believe his high aims had met with failure; indeed, it would have been false modesty to pretend to himself that the very reverse was not the case. Wagram had ably and whole-heartedly seconded him, and would continue to do so after his time. Yet now, if this would-be blackmailer could but furnish convincing proof of his identity—ah, surely high Heaven would never permit such an undoing of its own work!

Chapter Eighteen.

Further Counsels.

“Monsignor Culham, sir,” announced a servant, throwing open the library door.

The Squire advanced with outstretched hand. “Ah, my dear old friend, I never was more glad to see you in my life.”

“And how are you, Grantley? Upon my word, in spite of whatever it is that’s bothering you, you are looking younger than ever.”

“That’ll soon remedy itself, unless we can devise some way out of this abominable tangle.”

“Supposing, now, you let me in behind this same abominable tangle—for, of course, I have as yet no idea as to its nature.”

A week had gone by since the visit of the African adventurer, but nothing further had been heard of or from that worthy. Clearly he was not going to hurry his victim unduly, but that he had given up his predatory scheme the said victim could not bring himself to believe.

In a matter involving weighty issues even the most shrewd and secretive of us may be excused for doubting his own judgment, or, at any rate, desiring to take counsel of another mind. Thus the situation, as laid down by the would-be blackmailer, had got upon even the cool nerves of the old diplomat; and upon whose judgment could he rely as he could upon that of his old friend?

“But you are only just off a journey,” he now replied. “You must rest and refresh first.”

“Neither, thanks; and the journey wasn’t a long one. Now, begin.”

“It’s a tale soon told. My first wife—Wagram’s mother—was married before. She honestly believed her husband to be dead; in fact, if certificates and all that sort of thing count as proof, she was justified in believing it. Afterwards he turned up, and tried blackmailing us.”

“Was that before Wagram was born?”

“No; after. Not that it made any difference either way, because, of course, the marriage was void.”

“You have no doubt whatever that he was her real husband?”

“She had no doubt. Poor thing! it killed her.”

“And what became of the man?”

“I made it worth his while to leave the country, and on the way to New Zealand or Australia—I forget which—he was washed overboard, and never seen again. I was justified in believing him drowned, if only that he never troubled me again, which he would certainly have done otherwise.”

“And he wasn’t?”

“So he says. Read this,” handing him the newspaper cutting narrating the rescue of the three castaways.

“And is this the man—Develin Hunt?”

The Squire nodded. “Funny, isn’t it, that he should reappear in the same way as he went? Well, he has been here to blackmail me.” And he told of the recent visitor and the proposed terms.

“People change a good deal in a matter of thirty years or so,” said the prelate. “And you had no doubt as to this man’s identity?”

“Unfortunately, none. I didn’t let him know that, though. I treated him politely, and as if I thought him a fraud of the first water, but it didn’t seem to disconcert him. He has a trump card to throw down, for it is not merely a case of Wagram going out but—of who do you think coming in? Everard!”

“What?”

“Everard. He professes to know his whereabouts, declares that he has gone utterly to the bad. The fellow even dwelt upon the utter wreck that wretched boy would make of everything here in the event of establishing his claim.”

To listen to the old man telling his tale in his easy, light, cynical tones you would have thought it concerned him not at all. But his friend saw deeper down than that; he knew

that if this thing were to befall Grantley Wagram's days were numbered. Heavens! it was too awful! And Wagram, whose love for his heritage was an obsession, and who was such a perfect steward of the great wealth entrusted to him—what would be the effect on him when he learnt that such heritage was reft from him at one blow—that he had no right even to the name he bore, nor his son after him? The prelate's face wore as gloomy a look as that of his friend.

"Of course, you must insist on this man furnishing you with every proof of his identity," he said. "He can do that, of course?"

"The worst of it is I'm convinced in my heart of hearts as to his identity. There was something out of the way about the fellow that even the lapse of time hasn't affected. I don't know quite what it is. Perhaps it's his way of talking. Anyway, I'm sure of him."

"You can be sure of nothing in this world, Grantley—nothing that isn't a matter of faith, which, of course, sounds paradoxical. But in mundane matters such as this it isn't a question of faith but of hard, dry evidence, which for present purposes may be taken to mean: Can this man prove that he was validly and legally married to your first wife before you went through what we will, provisionally, and for the sake of argument, call the form of marriage with her?"

"And supposing he can't?"

"Then there's an end of the whole affair."

"Even if I am morally certain?" persisted the Squire, smiling sadly to himself as he remembered how, when they were youths at college together, he had delighted in putting every form of difficult and intricate case of conscience he could think of to the budding priest, who, for his part, had never shirked the challenge.

"Everything is to be ruled upon its own merits. Moral certainty in such a matter as this is nothing, and counts for nothing. We must have clear, authenticated, documentary proof."

"I have often wondered," went on Grantley Wagram slowly, "how Everard could really be my son; there was a total absence about him of every sort of seeming relationship or affinity. Well, well, it is too late to dwell upon that now. Yet I gave him every chance, and he threw it from him. Did I not give him every chance?"

"You did indeed; you have nothing to reproach yourself with under that head."

“Then, as a matter of conscience, I am justified in resisting the claim de haut en bas? And I don’t know who could be a better authority in that department than you, old friend.”

“Absolutely and entirely you are. You can’t as a juror conscientiously hang a man on moral certainty, you must have legal certainty—otherwise clear evidence. It’s the same here. When you consider the enormous stake involved the principle of ‘the benefit of the doubt’ holds good more than ever.”

“Knowing what I knew,” resumed the Squire after a brief pause—“knew, or at any rate was morally certain of—I reckoned it my duty to make a second marriage, to obviate all possibility of Hilversea passing to a distant and apostate branch of the family, which stands in no sort of need of it, by the way, being as well endowed with this world’s goods as I am myself. How disadvantageous that second marriage turned out—well, you, old friend, will remember. And the only result spells—Everard. Why, it might even be better for everything to go to the other branch than to him.”

“So far as we have got it doesn’t follow that it need go to either. You were saying something just now, Grantley, about your first wife being in possession of certificates proving this man’s, Develin Hunt’s, death. Now, did you ever see anything of the sort attesting his marriage to her?”

“No; I never thought of it. No; I never saw any such certificate. The poor thing admitted that it had taken place; and that was enough for me, for it was a painful business, so I made it worth his while to clear out.”

“You committed an error of judgment, Grantley, not only in failing to require such a certificate and establishing its genuineness, but also in omitting to institute a thorough and searching inquiry into the antecedents of this Develin Hunt prior to the alleged marriage.”

“You think, then, that such may not have been valid?”

“I am not in a position to think; I only know—we both know—that such things have happened. This man, you say, has led an adventurous life in various parts of the world. Who knows what experiences it may hold, any one of which would invalidate this alleged marriage, thereby rendering yours valid?”

“Ah-h!”

Grantley Wagram drew a long breath as he straightened himself up in his chair; his face lightened.

“In that case Wagram would be safe,” he said.

“Safe as yourself; but it doesn’t do to build too much on such an uncertain foundation. Still, what I should do in your place would be to take steps immediately to have this man’s past traced. Of course, the lapse of years will have added enormously to the difficulties of the search, but by sparing no expense, and setting the right people to work, the thing ought to be feasible, I imagine.”

“I had thought of some such plan myself; but two heads are better than one—by Jove, they are! I’ll set to work about it directly; but meanwhile this fellow threatens to call round for his price.”

“When?”

“In a few days, he said, whatever that may mean; and it’s about a week ago now.”

“Wait till he does call, then. But, of course, you won’t pay him any ‘price.’ Give him rope instead—and plenty of it.”

“Yes; I shall require the certificate of his marriage, and it will be easy to verify it, unless, of course, it took place out of England—then it will be more difficult.”

“Not necessarily. It will take more time, and I don’t know that that’s altogether an unmixed evil—the gaining of time in an important and critical matter seldom is. By the way—er—I suppose Mrs Wagram never informed you where it had taken place?”

“No. You see, the whole thing came as more than something of a shock, and we agreed never to refer to it. Heavens! my working life was spent in defeating the wiles of the potential enemies of my country, and when it became a question of my own nearest affairs I seem to have acted the part of a very complete and unsophisticated idiot.”

“Not an uncommon thing, my dear Grantley. I seem to remember more than one instance of an eminent judge or counsel whose will, drawn by himself, was productive of a fruitful crop of lawsuits. But now you have not got to let yourself get flurried or out of hand in the matter. This man, from your account of him, seems to be a singularly confident and level-headed type of adventurer. If his position is as secure as he would have you believe, why, then, he can afford to play a waiting game, and will be too much of a man of the world to spoil his own play by hurrying yours. If he shows an

unwillingness to play the said waiting game, why, then, I think he will be giving away his own hand, which in that case is sure to be weak."

"That's sound wisdom," said the Squire, "and I'll act upon it. I'll put it to him straight that, until I've had time to have inquiries made, I'll do nothing for him."

"Meanwhile don't give him a shilling."

"Oh no; certainly not. In any case I should never dream of embarking on that idiocy over again."

"I suppose you have let drop no hint of that matter to Wagram?"

"No hint. If anything comes of it, why, he'll know soon enough—if nothing, why disturb him? And—Wagram is so ultra conscientious. He'd never have done for the Diplomatic Service."

Both laughed, but it was somewhat mirthlessly.

"There is Wagram," went on the Squire as a step and a whistled bar or two sounded outside; and then the door opened.

"Ah! how are you, Monsignor? They told me you had arrived."

The old prelate's keen, kindly glance took in the man before him as they shook hands, and there was sadness in his heart, though sign thereof did not appear. Yes; he took in the tall, straight form and the refined, thoughtful face, and realised what a blow hung over their owner. Should it fall, how would he take it? How? He thought he knew. But—it would be terrible, disastrous, ruinous. Heaven in mercy avert it!

"What do you think, father?" said Wagram as they were seated at lunch. "You remember that fellow who escaped from that wreck we were reading about the other day—the fellow with the quaint name—Develin Something—ah, Hunt—that was it? Well, he's staying in Bassingham. Charlie Vance pointed him out to me. Says he's stopping at the Golden Crown. Funny, isn't it?"

"Very. That's the man at whose expense you perpetrated that infamous pun, isn't it, Wagram?" answered the Squire, with a twinkle of the eyes, and as complete an insouciance as though the man's very existence were not a matter of life and death to them.

“Well, I wasn’t as bad as Haldane. I only fired it off once; but Haldane—you know, Monsignor, Haldane spent the rest of the day suggesting to everyone within hail that a chap named Develin Hunt must have had a bad time throughout life in that he would be continually in the way of being told that he had the Develin him.”

“Capital—capital!” said Monsignor Culham, with a hearty laugh. “I read the case in the papers at the time. And what sort of a fellow did this shipwrecked mariner strike you as being, Wagram?”

“Oh, he looked a hard-bitten, unscrupulous sort of pirate. They say he’s been a West African back-country trader—a life, I imagine, likely to turn a man that way.”

The prelate laughed again, so did the Squire. Thus admirably did they keep their own counsel these two finished old diplomats. But—beneath!

Chapter Nineteen.

Interim—Peace!

One glowing summer morning saw Delia Calmour spinning her bicycle along at a great rate up the Hilversea drive. It was Sunday, and she had come to attend the chapel, a thing she had done more than once of late, since the time she had given efficient musical aid on a certain informal occasion we wot of. Some weeks had gone by since then, and now it was golden August. The beautiful landscape lay in a shimmer of heat, but the glad shout of the cuckoo echoed no more, and the chorus of bird voices had undergone considerable abatement, but the stillness and the glowing richness of the summer haze shed a peace around as of the peace of heaven.

She was late; yes, as she alighted and chained her bicycle to the railings she heard the roll of the organ within. She was late, but not very. Mass had hardly begun, she decided, as her ears caught the opening bars of the Kyrie in Mozart Number 1. She hesitated a moment whether to do so or not, then went up to the choir-loft. Two things struck her as Yvonne handed her the score: one, that the choir was in less strength than usual; the other, that Wagram was at the organ. He half turned, astonished, as the full, rich soprano sounded forth among, if not slightly above, the rest, then settled down to his work with renewed satisfaction. She was doubly glad that she had come, for she knew that her musical talent was of genuine practical assistance, and as such was thoroughly appreciated.

“Take the organ for this,” whispered Wagram just before the offertory. “You can sing and play at the same time; I can’t. We are going to have Arcadelt—your favourite.”

She complied, and was astonished at herself and the tone and expression she managed to get out of the instrument, while not in the least drowning the voices, among which her own led, clear and rich. So were others, for more than one head turned round inquiringly towards the choir-loft, among them that of the old Squire.

“No—no; keep it all through,” whispered Wagram, as she would have got up. “I shall be free to make one more to sing then.”

Again she obeyed, and threw her best into it, and her best was very good indeed. The music at Hilversea was above the average, but to-day it had surpassed itself.

“Well done, Miss Calmour,” said Haldane enthusiastically as they met outside after the service. “What degree in music have you taken, may I ask?”

“None, Mr Haldane. But I know you’re only chaffing me.”

“’Pon my honour, I’m not. If you haven’t, you ought, to have. They ought to make you a Mus. Doc. at least. Oughtn’t they, Wagram?”

“Of course,” said the latter, joining them. “Thanks so much for your help, Miss Calmour. If you had come a bit earlier I would have asked you to play from the very first. Our regular organist’s away, and someone had to take his place, so I threw myself—rather heroically, I think—into the breach. He’d have been jealous, though, if he’d heard you.”

“I’m afraid you’ll make me very conceited, Mr Wagram,” laughed the girl rather deprecatingly. “But I am so glad if I have really been of any use.”

“By Jove!” Haldane was saying to himself. “By Jove! but she is a pretty girl.”

Nor was he overstating matters. Delia was dressed, plainly as usual, in cool white, which suited well her clear, mantling complexion and light hazel eyes, the latter bright with animation. She looked her best here now in the hot August sun, and what has been said of her musical accomplishment applies equally to her physical aspect—her best was very good indeed.

“You’ll come up and lunch with us, Miss Calmour?” said Wagram. “It’s much too hot to ride back all the way to Bassingham in the middle of the day, especially after all your exertions on our behalf.”

Delia accepted, hoping she was not betraying too much delight by her tone. Sunday at Siege House was the least tolerable day in the week, and now she wondered if she were going to have a day of heaven.

“Here, Gerard,” called out Wagram, as two boys came up, accompanied by Yvonne, with whom one of them at any rate seemed to be engaged in altercation. “Miss Calmour, this is my rascal,” he explained genially. “The other has a parent of his own to give him a character, so I won’t.”

Both were straightly-built, handsome boys of fourteen, a complete contrast to each other, though both of the same height—one dark, the other golden-haired and blue-eyed. The first, however, moved Delia’s interest the most as they came up and shook hands. So this was Wagram’s son! The other was Haldane’s. The two were sworn pals, and were at the same school.

“Why didn’t you go and serve Mass, you scamps?” went on Wagram.

“Oh, we do that enough at Hillside, pater,” answered Gerard, hanging on to his father’s arm in a sort of insinuating and conciliatory way; “besides, we got in—er—a little late.”

Delia, listening, remembered Wagram’s remark when they had come upon the speaker’s acolyte dress in the sacristy the day that she had first tried her hand at the organ. He was an exact replica of his father, she decided—just what Wagram might have been at his age.

“Reggie’s just as bad, Mr Wagram,” struck in Yvonne, who deemed it her mission to “round up” her brother in matters of the kind. “He slipped away from me when we were talking to old Mrs Clancy, and I believe he was at the bottom of it.”

“Oh, well, as it’s the beginning of the holidays, I suppose they must be allowed some law,” rejoined Wagram.

“Give me your key, Miss Calmour, and I’ll unlock your bike and wheel it up to the house,” said Gerard.

“That will be good of you,” answered Delia, with a smile that won the boy’s heart there and then. She was mentally contrasting him with the raw, uncleanly, unlicked cub, which mainly constituted her experience of the animal hight ‘boy’ of the same age. Yet about this one on the other hand there was nothing priggish, nothing self-conscious. He was purely and entirely natural.

During lunch the old Squire congratulated her on her playing, and also on the excellence of her illustrated article in The Old Country Side, which had appeared that week.

“We were wondering how in the world you managed to say so much in so limited a space,” he observed, “and to say just the right thing, too. What a memory you must have, child!”

Delia was thinking that, whatever else might slip her memory, no single detail about Hilversea Court was likely to do so.

“And the illustrations were excellent,” went on the Squire—“excellent.”

“Rather,” assented Haldane. “I wish my box were not too insignificant for The Old Country Side, Miss Calmour, then you could scare up an illustrated interview with it.”

“And bring in Poogie,” said Yvonne. “Oh, and—incidentally—father.”

“Where do I come in?” hazarded her brother.

“To spoil the picture, of course.”

“Thanks,” answered the boy, with a good-humoured laugh. Yvonne looked at him and shook her golden head.

“Do you know, Miss Calmour, Reggie is the most provoking child. It’s simply impossible to tease him. I’m always trying, and you’ve just got a sample of how I succeed. Is he the same at Hillside, Gerard?”

“Can’t tell tales out of school.”

Then Yvonne retorted, and the banter went on fast and furious, but always good-tempered, and sometimes really humorous, until it finally merged into plans for fishing on the morrow.

“They are threatening to take us all down to the west park presently, Miss Calmour,” said Wagram soon after lunch. “Do you feel up to that amount of exertion?”

Delia replied that she would have been delighted, only it was time to think of getting back.

“Of getting back?” repeated Wagram. “Are you obliged to? Because if not, won’t you stay and play for us again this evening? It would be a great help.”

“Yes; do stay, Miss Calmour,” urged Yvonne, cordially impulsive.

“There will be a bright moon to ride back by, and I can offer you my escort.”

“Can I go too, pater?” said Gerard, eagerly scenting the fun of a moonlight bicycle ride.

“Certainly. You wouldn’t leave your venerated dad to return over three miles of lonely road unprotected, would you?”

“Then I shall be very pleased to stay,” answered the girl, her whole face lighting up. Days such as this constituted to her everything that was worth living for, and now there was more of it before her than behind.

The old Squire had withdrawn, laughingly explaining that he could not do without his forty winks on a hot Sunday afternoon. The workings of Fate, or Providence, are indeed strange. Some such working it must have been that moved Haldane to declare that he too felt drowsy, and it was much too hot for exercise. In a word, he resisted all persuasion to join in the walk; had he yielded the subsequent events of this our history might have turned out very differently.

They reached the paddock, and the great sable antelope, which was inclined to be tame, condescended to stalk up in a lordly manner and be fed with some crusts they had brought for the purpose. The gnus, however, kept their distance away in the middle, whisking their tails, and prancing, and shaking their fierce-looking heads. Suddenly Wagram, chancing to look round, became aware of the propinquity of a stranger. He was a little distance off along the fence, and with the aid of a bough had managed to climb up, and was holding on, watching the animals.

“That’s a cool customer,” he said after watching him for a few minutes. “I must go and talk to him.”

“Going to turn him away, pater?” asked Gerard.

“No, I won’t do that; but I’ll drop him a friendly hint that he mustn’t make this the scene of his daily walks. You remain here.”

The stranger was not in the least confused or apologetic as Wagram accosted him. The latter recognised with some interest the weather-beaten, white-bearded face of the man who had been pointed out to him as Develin Hunt.

“Good specimens these,” he said approvingly. “I’ve shot many of them, so I ought to know.”

“Yes. They’d be dangerous if they weren’t shut in,” said Wagram.

“Very likely. Wild animals enclosed generally do get that way.”

“Now you’re here you’re welcome to look at them,” said Wagram pleasantly, “but I thought I’d just mention that this is private ground.”

The man dropped from his perch with a cat-like nimbleness, rather noticeable in one of his apparent years.

“Meaning I’m trespassing?” he said shortly.

“That’s the word,” laughed Wagram. “But, as I said before, as you are here pray see all you came to see; I have no wish that you should hurry away. Good-afternoon.”

The stranger stood gazing after him.

“So that’s Wagram Wagram!” he said to himself. “Why, chalk from cheese isn’t in it in the difference between him and that bright boy Everard. Lord, Lord! it’s a rum world. To think that now he should be turning me off, and soon I shall be turning him off—bag and baggage. But I hope it won’t come to that. No; somehow or other I don’t think it will. He has every inducement to be reasonable—oh, and I hope he will. He’s a fine fellow, but—necessity knows no law.”

“I say, pater, that chap’s got some cheek,” said Gerard as his father rejoined them. “Look, he hasn’t moved. Didn’t you tell him to clear?”

“No; I told him he needn’t hurry as he was here.”

And, indeed, the stranger seemed to have taken Wagram literally at his word, for he had climbed up again to his former position, and was placidly puffing at a pipe.

“Look at those three, Miss Calmour,” said Wagram presently, referring to the children, who had started some romping game; “they can no more keep quiet for half-an-hour when they get together than a lot of kittens. Yvonne is generally the one who sets it going. Look at her now—issuing her commands as usual.”

The tall, beautiful child was standing erect, her blue eyes sparkling, and cheeks flushed with the glow of health and exercise, tossing back the golden flash of her flowing hair. There was grace in each unstudied gesticulation, music in the high, sweet key in which she was expostulating rapidly with her playfellows.

“She is too sweet,” murmured Delia.

“Isn’t she? By the way, you haven’t told me yet what you think of my son and heir—”

Breaking off, the speaker turned. It was only the trespassing stranger, who raised his hat and passed on his way.

”—Though, really, it’s hardly a fair question, as coming from me.”

“I think he’s one of the best-looking and best-mannered boys I’ve ever seen; Mr Haldane’s son is the other.”

“You do us proud,” laughed Wagram. “But Hilversea is a dullish place for one boy to get through his holidays in, shut up with two old fogeys, so he’s generally over at Haldane’s, or Haldane’s boy is over here. They divide it up between them, and get all the fun they want.”

Delia was about to reply that she could not imagine the word “dull” in connection with Hilversea under any circumstances whatever; but it struck her that the remark would sound banal, and she refrained.

“We shall be going North on Thursday for the grouse,” he went on. “Haldane and I always ‘split’ a moor. Then these young scamps will be in clover. We’re going to let them take out a gun this time, and they’re about half mad with anticipation.”

“I expect so,” said Delia, to whom, however, the whole of this announcement brought a heart-sinking. She knew enough by this time of the manners and customs of Hilversea to be aware that such a move was probable; but somehow, now that it was on the eve of becoming an accomplished fact—well, she felt depressed. “Does old Mr Wagram shoot?”

“Doesn’t he! If he isn’t quite so good at right and left now as a few years back, even yet he can hold his own with the great majority. We must round up those riotous children now and begin strolling homeward.”

Of late something had occurred to Wagram and set him wondering, and to-day it struck him more than ever. This was a certain unaccountable change which had come over this girl. She seemed of late to have acquired a subtle and unconscious refinement, not only in speech and manner but also in look, which certainly was not there when he had first made her acquaintance under dramatic circumstances; indeed, were that acquaintance to be made over again, and now, assuredly one dictum in which he had summed her up would be omitted. The fact was there, but there was no explaining it. It puzzled him. To one other this change had become manifest, and her it did not puzzle at all. That one was Clytie; and, going over things in her mind, that extremely attractive schemer nodded her plotting head complacently and smiled to herself.

The westering sunlight flooded down upon the vernal sheen of tossing oak foliage and smoothly undulating grass with a richness of glow that was well-nigh unearthly in the sensuous stillness of the August evening. One of this group sauntering there it thrilled through and through. The children, excited with their game, were laughing and chattering—frequently all at once. But Delia, while bearing her part as brightly and

intelligibly as ever in conversation with her host, was conscious of an absorbing arrière-pensée—that, if there were such a thing as a day of paradise, she was going through just that. The while a yet further back and subtle thread of thought kept crying aloud that the paradise was a fool's paradise.

Chapter Twenty.

A Forced Hand.

“Now then, old josser, where are you coming to? have you bought the whole room or only half, eh?”

The time was the middle of the morning, the place the saloon bar of the Golden Crown in Bassingham, and the speaker Bob Calmour, who had been indulging in more John Walker than was good for him, incidentally at the expense of an opportune friend. The man thus unceremoniously expostulated with was a tallish man with a weather-beaten face and a white beard, who had committed the grave indiscretion of being there what time the unsteady Bob had lurched backward, thus cannoning against him. We have seen him twice before for a short space—once at Hilversea Court and once in Hilversea park.

“See here, young man,” was the answer, drily given, “I think it’s time you went home.”

“See here, old cock, when I want to know what you think I’ll ask; till then I’ll trouble you to keep it to yourself.”

And the tone was particularly aggressive and insulting.

“If you don’t keep a civil tongue in your head I shall be under the necessity of starting you on the first homeward stage by firing you into the street,” said the stranger with the most provoking tranquillity.

That white beard proved Bob’s undoing. He associated it with age, and age with decrepitude.

“Will you?” he yelped. “You couldn’t do it—no, nor three of you.”

“Not, eh?” said the stranger; and then Bob Calmour hardly knew what had happened, except that some irresistible force had got him by the scruff of the neck and was propelling him rapidly towards the swing doors. The latter swung, and Bob shot down the steps outside, and would have fallen bang on his nose but that he cannoned into a passing stranger just in time.

“Here! Hi! Hold up! Why the devil don’t you look where you’re going, you silly young ass!” cried the latter angrily as he collared him. All the swagger and bounce had evaporated from the luckless Bob. The whimpered apology died away into a sort of yelp

of terror, and his pasty face went ashy white as he realised that he had run bang into no less formidable a person than Haldane. And in the hand of the latter was a riding-crop. Visions of the ghastly thrashing he had deserved at that individual's hands, and would certainly receive, finished him off, and he dropped limply on to the pavement in a sitting posture, half fainting.

"Awfully sorry, sir," he was just able to whine; "but I've been violently assaulted by a ruffian in there, and—er—couldn't see where I—I—was going."

Haldane looked at him with a sort of good-natured contempt, seeing before him just an ordinary raffish young pup who had probably got quarrelsome in his cups and come off worst.

"Well, you'd better go away home," he said shortly, and passed on, leaving the unspeakable Bob to pick himself up with feelings akin to those of a criminal reprieved on the very drop itself, then as one condemned afresh as he saw Wagram cross the road and join Haldane. The two stood talking together, then, turning, they looked at him. Of course, Wagram was giving him away, decided the terror-stricken Bob, whose every instinct now was flight—headlong flight; wherefore, having shuffled rapidly round a friendly corner, he sprinted for cover all he knew, nor stopped till he found himself, panting, within the—for once welcome because protective—offices of Pownall and Skreet. Nor did he more than half hear the acrid jobation to which Pownall, who had seen him arrive, treated him by reason of having taken so long about the business upon which he had been sent out.

Here again came in the strange, mysterious workings of Fate—or Providence. Had the African adventurer been a little more roused to ire it is conceivable that, not content with throwing the offensive Bob into the street, he might even have kicked him along a section of the same, which, of course, would have befallen exactly what time Haldane was passing. In which event the whole course of this history might have been changed; in fact, we will go as far as to say that it certainly would have been. And it has been recorded that Haldane seldom came to Bassingham.

"Hope I haven't been the means of spoiling custom," said Develin Hunt pleasantly as he returned to where he had been standing, "because, if so, I hope that all here will put a name to theirs and join me by doing something to make up for it."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr Hunt," said the landlord, who, attracted by the scuffle, short as it was, had come in. "Not much 'custom' about that young waster."

"Who is he?"

“Young Calmour, a clerk at Pownall and Skreet’s. I only wonder they haven’t given him the sack long ago.”

“I must say he brought it upon himself,” said the man who had been “standing” him. “Bob can be pretty abusive when he’s got anything on board. Mine? Oh, thanks; another Scotch, I think. Here’s luck.”

The landlord’s answer had given Develin Hunt food for thought, not for astonishment; he had seen too many queer phases of life to be astonished at anything. So this egregious young pup stood in the relationship of brother to the exceedingly pretty and even refined-looking girl he had seen with Wagram and his party in Hilversea park some Sundays ago! It seemed hardly credible, but then, as we have said, he was astonished at nothing.

He had not spent all the intervening time in Bassingham, where at the Golden Crown he was very popular, and instrumental in an increase of custom; for he was open-handed in setting up “rounds,” and could tell strange, wild stories of strange, wild lands and stranger, wilder people, and this led to an increasing roll up of the good citizens of Bassingham of an evening. But he had not as yet made acquaintance with old Calmour, for the very good reason that that worthy had transferred his custom elsewhere, from motives that may be readily divined.

Now, although Haldane had not seen Develin Hunt the latter had seen Haldane. It was a mere glimpse snatched between the swing doors as they let out the obnoxious Bob; but in the school which had afforded the African adventurer his life training a mere glimpse to him was as good as half-an-hour’s scrutiny to most men, and to this one and his plans it now made all the difference in the world.

“Who was the man I shot that young pup against?” he said. “Tallish man, sunburnt face, and riding-gaiters?”

“Squire Haldane, worse luck!” answered the landlord.

“Why ‘worse luck’?”

“He’s a magistrate. He don’t often show up in Bassingham, and now, when he does, get’s nearly knocked down by a chump fired out of my bar in the middle of the morning. Maybe he’ll have a word to say, when licensing day comes round, that I keep my house rowdy.”

“Shouldn’t think he’d do that, Smith, he looks too much of a sportsman. I’ll bet drinks all round that man has been in countries where firing anyone out doesn’t constitute the liveliest side of a bar worry.”

“I won’t take you, then, because he has,” replied Smith. “But what made you think so?”

“Quite simple. He never got painted that colour by any sun that only shone over the British Isles.”

“Here, I say, sir, excuse me,” struck in the young man who had brought in Bob, “you’re not Sherlock Holmes, are you?”

“No. Who’s he?”

“Who’s he? Never heard of Sherlock Holmes?”

“Now you’re trying to get at me, young man. I suppose you’re going to answer he was a chap who’d forgotten that everybody’s glass had been empty too long. All right. Set ’em up again, Smith, for all hands.”

There was a big laugh at this, and three persons started in to explain at once.

“Come to think of it, I had heard of the party, but I’d forgotten,” said Hunt with his usual easy good humour. “But about this one, the one we were talking about—where did you say he’d been, Smith?”

“Squire Haldane? Oh, everywhere. Mostly in South Africa, I believe. He lives out Fulkston way—a goodish step from here.”

Assimilating this piece of information, which, from the point of view of his purposes, was satisfactory, the adventurer easily and imperceptibly switched the conversation on to other matters, and shortly retired to his own quarters.

He sat down to think. He had made an important discovery that day—important to the last degree. Haldane in the neighbourhood, and a resident at that! Heavens! what a near thing it had been that they had not run right into each other! The adventurer’s hard face grew quite moist at the thought of it, and of what a volcano he had been sitting over during his sojournings in Bassingham the last few weeks. This discovery had clean altered his plans, and now in their altered stage he must proceed to put them into operation without a moment of unnecessary delay.

And yet throughout that day, until after dark, Develin Hunt never ventured outside the doors of the Golden Crown.

Chapter Twenty One.

The Bolt.

“Well, Squire, I’ve called to settle up that little matter that has been outstanding,” said Develin Hunt pleasantly as he took the seat indicated to him—exactly the same seat, by the way, that he had occupied during that first interview in which we made his personal acquaintance.

“Yes?”

“Yes. But first of all you’ll admit that I haven’t hurried you any over the inquiries you’ve been making; in fact, have afforded you every facility I could in the making of them.”

“Yes; I’ll admit that.”

“And it’s a case of ‘as you were.’ Well, it’s satisfactory to both of us, because now there’s no room for any little mistake. I have enjoyed my stay in this charming neighbourhood. By the way, I hope you enjoyed yours at the moors, Squire, and had good sport. Well, now, I’ve got a modification of my former proposal to put to you. I’ve decided that this part of the country, delightful as it is, won’t suit me for more than one reason; so, instead of becoming a neighbour of yours, I would suggest some comfortable little arrangement in hard cash.”

“Yes. May I ask what would meet your requirements? Don’t be too modest, pray.”

The adventurer’s face brightened. The easy tone, the satiric banter was only the other’s philosophical and courtly manner of making the best of a bad job. He had won the game at last.

“What do you say to thirty thou? Not all at once; I would be prepared to accept a cheque for twenty-five thou, down, and the rest six months later.”

“That would be very considerate of you,” laughed the Squire. “I begged you not to be too moderate.”

“And I haven’t met your wishes, Squire. Thirty thou, is a substantial figure, but it is a mere half-crown to the Wagrams of Hilversea. It’s surprising how much I know about the family and its circumstances, you see. Nearly ruined in fines for persistent recusancy under the penal laws, a lucky speculation or two in building-land and coal mines made it a millionaire over and over again. That’s correct, I think, Squire?”

“Nearly.”

“And all this for the benefit of Everard—‘Butcher Ned,’ we used to call him—never mind why. Well, I’m truly glad it needn’t go to him after all. So we’ll consider my terms accepted, eh, Squire?”

“Not so fast—not quite so fast. You don’t seem to realise, Mr Develin Hunt, what an exceedingly perilous position you have placed yourself in. How do you know, for instance, that there are not those present, unseen by you, who have been taking down every word of our conversation?”

The adventurer laughed easily.

“Oh, as to that, I know it; because Grantley Wagram of Hilversea is considerably too complete a gentleman to admit the secret presence of a third party at a confidential conversation.”

In spite of the momentous issues at stake the consummate assurance of this man tickled the old Squire’s diplomatic soul.

“I don’t know. There is such a thing as fighting the devil with fire—no play on your somewhat peculiar name intended, Mr Hunt,” he parenthesised, with a smile. “And the fact remains that you have been demanding money from me—a large sum—very civilly, I admit,”—with a courtly wave of the hand—“but still demanding it by a threat. That, as I reminded you on the occasion of our first meeting, means in this country a long term of penal servitude.”

“For me?”

“For whom else?”

“For Everard.”

Even the cool old diplomat felt his cheeks go waxen, nor could he repress a slight gasp. He remembered the other’s assertion on a former occasion—to the effect that he had a hold upon Everard—and, bearing in mind Everard and his propensities, he thought it very likely to be true.

“For Everard,” repeated the adventurer. “Every year that it would mean for me it would mean two for Everard; indeed, it is possible—I don’t say certain, mind—that it might

result in something shorter, sharper, and much quicker over, but—more irrevocable."

The other felt himself growing paler still. A hopeless, beaten feeling came upon him now. Curiously enough, he was not without a consciousness of appreciation of the courteous way in which this man urged his demands. There was nothing of the common, bullying insolence of the blackmailer about him. He might almost have been a disinterested friend urging a certain course for the good of the family.

"Do you mind opening that window a little, Mr Hunt?" he said. "I do believe I really am getting old."

"Delighted, Squire," said the adventurer with alacrity. "Getting old!" as he returned to his seat, "why, you are not even beginning to get old; or, if you are, all I can say is that many a much younger man would be glad to do so on the same terms. But, in any case, why add another anxiety—a totally unnecessary anxiety—to your afternoon of life, and all for a paltry thirty thousand pounds, which, as I said before, can only be, relatively, a mere half-crown to you?"

"That's all very well; but what guarantee have I that it would end there?"

"I would give you an undertaking, cautiously worded, of course, to make no further demand upon you, nor upon anybody after you, for another farthing."

"Legally, not worth the paper it's written on," said the Squire.

"I'm afraid that's so; still, it would make a very strong piece of presumptive evidence against me if I did fail to keep my word. You may trust me this time. I don't profess to be a saint or angel, I own to having done some pretty tough things in my time, but one thing I never have done, and that is to go back on a fair, square, and honest deal. Think of your son, Squire—Wagram, I mean—I have seen him more than once, not always when he has seen me. By the way, he turned me off here once when I was trespassing, but he did it in such a nice way, as between one gentleman and another. He's a fine fellow—a splendid fellow—and I've heard a good deal more about him than I've seen. Well, isn't it a thousand pities that life should be ruined for him, and his son after him—I have seen him too, by-the-by—and all because you can't bring yourself to look at things from my standpoint, which is that necessity has no law?"

There was silence for a few moments. In saying that he had seen more of Wagram than the latter knew Develin Hunt was speaking no more than the truth. He had noted the quiet happiness of the man's flawless life, had gleaned some idea of his intense joy of

possession, and had done so with considerable satisfaction in that it would all go to further his own plans. No man living, he argued, would think twice as to what his action would be when called upon to choose between paying down what was, relatively speaking, an inconsiderable sum and throwing up his possessions and his name, and the name of his son after him—and to the case of this one was added an almost unlimited power for good. To do so would be the action of a stark, staring, raving lunatic, and it was abundantly certain Wagram was not that.

"Well, Squire, now is the time to make up your mind. It is important that I should go up to London to-night, and unless I take your cheque for twenty-five thousand with me I shall be under the necessity of postponing my departure for a day or two and applying to your son Wagram. I believe he would gladly give double the amount. Think! it is to save his name—his name, mind—and his son's after him."

The old man felt beaten. It was not the money value that afflicted him; he would cheerfully have parted with double the amount if by so doing he could close the other's mouth for ever, but he doubted whether in any case he could do this for long. Sooner or later Hunt would come down upon him for more—it was the way of blackmailers for all time—nor did he in the least believe this one would keep his undertaking to make no further demand. And this disreputable adventurer had the power to hold a sword over Wagram's head indefinitely. He remembered as a far-off thing his agreement with Monsignor Culham—here in this very room—not to give this man another shilling. Yet now matters looked differently; he felt himself cornered beyond all hope of deliverance.

"Give me the undertaking you mentioned just now," he said at last. "Sit down there and draw it up," pointing to another writing-table.

"No need, Squire, I have it here all ready; I knew we should come to terms. Here it is, and you may rely upon my adhering to it rigidly."

He produced a paper with some writing on it as the Squire, slowly unlocking a drawer, produced his chequebook. A moment more and the adventurer could hardly contain his exultation. A cheque for 25,000 pounds was in his hand.

"It will be a satisfaction for you to see me sign this yourself, Squire," and stooping over the writing-table he affixed his signature. As he did so the door opened, admitting Wagram.

Even had the latter no other reason for coming in, then one glance at his father's face would have told him that something was very wrong indeed. The Squire seemed to have aged by twenty years.

“Ah, good-morning, Mr Wagram,” said the adventurer cheerily, looking up. “Your father and I have just been getting through a little piece of business together, and we have got through it with complete satisfaction to both parties. Yes; to both parties,” he repeated emphatically.

“May I ask its nature? My father’s business affairs are mine in there days.”

“Ah, but not this one—no, not this one. It’s an exception, believe me,” was the answer, accompanied by a pleasant laugh. “And now I think I will say good-bye.”

“One moment, Mr Develin Hunt,” said Wagram, “but I fear I must detain you a little longer, there is something that needs explanation.”

The other looked at the tall form, literally barring his way, and a ghastly misgiving was upon him. The cheque for 25,000 pounds—would he be forced to disgorge? But he replied, easily, pleasantly:

“Quite a mistake. No explanation needed. Is there, Squire?”

Wagram looked sharply at his father, whose only answer was a feebly-assenting headshake.

“Ah, but there is,” he resumed. “For instance, there is one remark you made just now to the effect that I would gladly give double the amount to save my name, and that of my son after me. Now, that remark does emphatically need explaining.”

“You heard that?” said the adventurer shortly.

“Couldn’t help it. This room is only one storey from ground. Given an open window and still autumn air, and—”

Develin Hunt mentally ground his teeth and cursed. So it was with a purpose the Squire had asked him to open the window! As a matter of real fact, this was not the case. Oh, the old fox, with all his blandness and soft sawder! He felt vicious.

“That all you heard?” he said shortly.

“Enough, wasn’t it? Now, will you kindly tell me in what way my name needs saving; for, looking back, though I have been through hard times, I cannot—thank God—call to mind any instance of having ever disgraced it.”

The adventurer felt a wave of intense relief. This was how Wagram had read his words! Well, he would reassure him on that point; perhaps he might even yet save the situation.

"No! no! no!" he said emphatically. "Great Scott! Mr Wagram, but you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick there. Why, your name stands on a pedestal all around here, and, if you will allow me to say so, it thoroughly deserves to. Now, be advised by me. Leave this affair alone. It is between myself and your father, and reflects discredit upon nobody named Wagram—take my word for that."

You see, he was plausible, almost persuasive, this rough-and-tumble West African adventurer. But Wagram shook his head.

"Not satisfactory," he said. "I still demand to know in what way my name needs 'saving'—and that of my son after me, you added."

"You demand?"

"Yes."

Develin Hunt looked at the man standing over him very stern and straight, then he looked at the Squire. He would have given anything to have avoided this, but since his hand had been forced it was, perhaps, as well that Wagram should know all—should know where he stood. Perhaps the Squire thought the same, for he said no word, gave no sign.

"In the name of God, leave things where they are, man!" conjured the adventurer in a real outburst of feeling. He was not all bad. He had got his price, and he felt an intense respect and pity for the man before him. He would make one more effort. "I tell you nobody's discredit is involved here. We can't always know everything—it isn't good for us. As for me, I have pledged my solemn word you shall never be troubled by me again. Now, let me go."

Still Wagram did not move. He had heard of this man's former visit, but as his father had not mentioned it to him he himself had kept silence on the subject. But he had put two and two together, and had connected it with days of depression under which the old Squire had suffered. Moreover, it struck him that his father had undergone a subtle change, had not been quite the same ever since. Now he had come in and found him in a state of collapse after another interview with this man. His own name, too, had been brought up, and in such a manner.

“No,” he answered; “not yet. This mystery must be cleared up before you leave this room. I repeat my former question: In what way does my name require ‘saving’?”

“Oh, if you will be so obstinate!” answered Develin Hunt excitedly, “you have only yourself to blame. I’ve done all I could for you. Since you will have it, your name—well, it isn’t your name.”

“Not my name?” repeated Wagram in a strange voice. “Man, are you mad, or only drunk?”

“Neither,” returned the adventurer doggedly. “Well, then, your mother was married to me before she married your father. She was not to blame. She thought I was dead. If you don’t believe me ask the Squire here.”

There was no need to ask the Squire. The old man nodded assent; he was incapable of speech just then.

“Are you—trying—to make me believe, then, that you are, my father?” said Wagram in a dry, hardly articulate kind of voice.

“No, no—not for a moment. But, of course, the second marriage was invalid. Now, do you take in the position?”

“Yes.”

Wagram’s face had gone livid and his tall form seemed to sway. No further word would come. But for the set, gleaming stare of the eyes he might have been a corpse trying to stand upright. The sight was awful, indescribably so. Even the hard, unscrupulous adventurer was moved to concern and compunction.

“For God’s sake, don’t take it like this,” he adjured. “Pull yourself together, man. The thing is a secret between us three, and need never be anything else. Send for a big tot of brandy, or something to steady your nerves. It’s a facer, but nothing need come of it.”

For answer Wagram only shook his head, and moved unsteadily to the open window, where he stood, looking out. There was nothing to prevent Develin Hunt walking out of the house with his 25,000 pound cheque in his pocket; and, to do him justice, it was not the thought that this might be stopped by telegram that restrained him. Yet he did not so walk out.

Chapter Twenty Two.

"Nobody of Nowhere."

Had Wagram been a sufferer from weakness of heart it is highly probable that he would have fallen down dead there and then.

The shock was sudden and complete. As he stood gazing out through the open window its full meaning swept over his mind as in a very flash of blasting flame. He, Wagram of Hilversea, whose intense pride in and love of his noble inheritance and the almost illimitable opportunity for good which the position entailed upon him were as the very breath of life, now learned, all in a moment of time, that he was in reality Nobody of Nowhere—that he had not even a name. It seemed as though the very heavens had fallen upon him, crushing him to the dust.

"Not a soul need ever be one atom the wiser. It's strictly between ourselves."

It was the adventurer's voice that had broken the awful silence. Wagram turned, wearily.

"You have proof of what you advance, I take it—sufficient and convincing proof?" he said.

"Oh yes; abundant. Look at this," exhibiting a marriage certificate of many years back. "You can go down and compare notes with the original parish register; it isn't a very long journey from here. Besides, your father will bear out what I say."

Again the old man nodded feebly. He seemed incapable of speech.

Wagram took the certificate and examined it earnestly. It was from the register of a parish in a small county town. Then he handed it back.

"What have you received as hush-money over this business?" he said.

"Not a farthing until to-day. But the Squire has been very liberal, and has behaved like a thorough gentleman. You may rely upon it that no word will ever pass my lips."

"May I see the cheque?"

"Certainly."

Develin Hunt produced the cheque, intending to keep a firm hold of it while the other scanned its contents; but, marvellous to relate, he actually and deliberately placed it in Wagram's outstretched hand. The latter looked at it.

"Twenty-five thousand pounds!" he said. "I suppose you are greatly in need of money?"

"Greatly isn't the word for it," answered the adventurer quickly. "I'm stony broke—and the worst of it is, I'm too old to be able to make any more."

"Destroy it, Wagram, destroy it!" burst from the old Squire. "He's broken his side of the contract already."

The adventurer was conscious of a tense and anxious moment. He was fully aware, as we have said above, that the payment could be stopped by wire; still, while he actually held the document itself, he seemed to be holding something substantial. Wagram handed it back unhesitatingly.

"No, father," he said; "it has been given, and we can't take back a gift; and if anyone is the loser it will be me."

"No, it will not," declared the adventurer with vehemence. "No, certainly not. And—pardon me, Squire, for reminding you that I have not broken my side of the compact. Your son forced the information from me—very unfortunately, but still he did. But nobody else ever will if only you could bring yourselves to believe it. Come. Remember how, for all these years, I have kept absolute silence, even to Everard—though I have been seeing him day after day—in fact, for a devilish sight more days than I wanted to. Well, then, why should I begin to wag my tongue now?"

"Only to Everard?" repeated Wagram. "Then you've seen him?"

"Seen him? Rather! Seen a great deal too much of him. I don't mind admitting that, if I hadn't been a sight smarter man for my age than he reckoned, I should have had six inches of his knife between my ribs one time."

"Where is he?" said Wagram.

"Ah-h! Now you're asking for some information it wouldn't be a bit good for you to have, so I think I'll withhold it in your own interest—purely in your own interest, mind."

Wagram was about to reply, but did not. The adventurer went on:

“Don’t let this knowledge make any difference to you. I give you my word of honour—though, I daresay, you won’t think much of that—that this secret shall die with me. You have both treated me handsomely and fairly and squarely in this matter, and, so help me God! I’ll do the same by you. Wagram Wagram, you might have torn up that cheque when I put it into your hand, as the Squire there advised you, though I know he was speaking without thought when he did. But it was with the knowledge that no more honourable man treads this green and blue world than yourself that I did put it there. Well, then, I swear to you that what I told the Squire on a former occasion is absolutely true. I have a hankering to end up my days decently and respectably, and, perhaps, in the long run this will turn out not the least amount of good of all the good you have done in your time, and I have some sort of inkling what that is. Now I’ll go, and once more I say you’ll never hear of me again.”

He rose, and, with a bow to both, walked to the door. No attempt was made to detain him this time.

“I’ll just see this gentleman out, father,” said Wagram. “I won’t be a moment.” The Squire nodded.

But Wagram had something further in his mind than merely seeing an exceedingly unwelcome visitor off the premises. He made a commonplace remark or two until they were clear of the house; then, once fairly in the avenue, where the ground was open around, and no chance of being overheard, he said again:

“Where is he? Where is my brother?”

The adventurer’s answer was the same.

“You had better not know,” he said.

“But—I must.”

“But—why? Have you gained anything by being too curious before? Didn’t I warn you to leave it alone—that there might be things it were better that you should not know? This is another of them. Leave it alone, I say. ‘Where ignorance is bliss,’ you know. Well, in this case it is, believe me.”

“That is impossible. What sort of ease of mind, let alone happiness, could ever travel my way again while every moment of my life was spent in the consciousness that I was keeping somebody else out of his rights?”

“His rights! Good Lord! His rights! Now, do you really mean to tell me that you would abdicate, would turn over all this”—with a sweep of the hand around—“to Butcher Ned—er—I mean Everard? Why, to begin with, it would kill your father.”

“No; because he could have no rights here—at least not in the sense we mean—during my father’s lifetime. After that, well—”

“After that—well, you would put him in here—would install him in possession. Good Lord! Wagram Wagram, I can only suppose you don’t know your—er—brother one little bit.”

“Not lately, of course. But that doesn’t touch the principle of the thing anyhow.”

“Not touch the principle of the thing, eh? Have you reflected what would be the result of putting Everard in possession here? No; of course, you haven’t. Well, then, you may take it from me that hell let loose would be a merry little joke compared with Hilversea six months after that sucking lamb had got his finger on it. I tell you it would be a by-word for—well, for everything that you, and all decent people, would rather it were not.”

“Have you some grudge against him?” said Wagram.

“Grudge? No; not an atom of a grudge. But, honestly, I’d be sorry—more than sorry—to see him in your place. I haven’t any grudge against him; but—I know him, and I don’t think you do.”

“Possibly not. But if he is all you imply, all the more reason for finding him out. No one is utterly irreclaimable, you know.”

“Pardon me. I don’t I would say I know the exact contrary; only that is a point on which we should certainly disagree. And the first instance I should cite in proof of that contrary would be your half-brother. Now, this time be advised by me—you would not before—and leave Everard—well, exactly wherever he may happen to be.”

“No; I cannot do that. We had thought him dead, having heard nothing of him for years. Now we know he is alive it is—well, my duty to find him, in view of his future rights and great responsibilities. Now, Mr Hunt you owned just now that you had been well treated by us, so I put it to you to make some little return; therefore tell me where Everard is to be found.”

“The return you mention is to bury what I know as surely as if I were dead, and that you seem determined to prevent me from doing.”

“No. Nothing need be known of—of—the other matter any the more. But Everard must be restored to his rights.”

The adventurer stood stock still and stared at Wagram. His experience had been wide and diverse, yet here was a man who stood clean outside it. Why, he must be mad; yet as his puzzled glance took in the tall, straight form and the strong, thoroughbred face, still showing traces of the recent shock, he shook his head, puzzled, and decided that the man was as sane as himself, only clean outside his own experience.

“Look here,” he said shortly, “supposing in refusing you this information I am trying to protect myself against myself—oh, not from Everard, don’t think that. He couldn’t harm me; the boot, if anything, is rather on the other foot. Now, I’ve made a compact with you and your father, and I mean to keep it, but I’ve made no compact with Everard. Yet, I’m only human, and what if you let him in here and I felt moved to take advantage of it? I have a considerable hold over him, remember, and might easily be tempted to turn it to account.”

“In that case you ‘might easily be tempted’ to turn this other knowledge to further account as regards ourselves,” said Wagram, with a dry, wan smile.

“No, no; the cases are entirely different,” rejoined the adventurer quickly, and with some vehemence. “Look here. Like yourself, I, too, have a son, of about the same age as yours. Well, it is for him—to keep him as far apart as the poles from becoming what Everard and I, and others, have been—that I am so urgently in need of this money. Now I can do it, and if I could have done it without your forcing this secret from me Heaven knows I would have been far more glad.”

Wagram softened. “It could not be helped,” he said wearily. “And now, in return, tell me where to find my brother. I don’t say I am going to rush up to him with the good news—for him—all at once; but he must be found.”

The adventurer stood for a moment or two in silence.

“Well, then,” he said at last, “since you are so death on finding him, this is the best—or the worst—I can do for you. Go to Lourenço Marques and make a few inquiries there—not from the police, of course. Then, if that’s no good, work over the Lebombo into Swaziland, and get into touch with some of the tougher samples of white traders there—and there are some tough ones. Then go to work delicately and carefully to obtain tidings of Butcher Ned—that’s how he’s known in those parts—never mind why, as I told the Squire just now. Only be very careful how you work your inquiries, for he’ll be

engaged on the most ticklish and infernally risky game in the gun-running and general information line for the benefit of the Transvaal Government, unless he's changed his mind since I saw him last, and I don't think he has. And, honestly, I hope you won't succeed in finding him, in which case even your scruples, I should think, would be set at rest. And, perhaps, you won't, for I certainly can't give you any information that's more explicit; and it's more than a year old, for I took a look in on the West Coast on my way back from that part, and it lasted me a year."

"Thanks," said Wagram, again with that dry, wan smile, as he made a note or two in a pocket-book.

"Now I will go," said Develin Hunt, "and my best wish is that you will be unsuccessful in your search."

Then he paused, and a strange look—almost a wistful look—came over his hard, bronzed face.

"Look here, Wagram Wagram," he blurted out, "I've done you a devilish ill turn, but I needn't have done that if you hadn't been so infernally persistent. I still hope nothing will come of it; but, hang it all, I want to tell you before I go that I've never seen a man like you in all my experience, and it isn't small. I'm going to ask you a great favour—no, not money this time—and I know you're going to refuse it. I want to ask you to let me shake hands with you."

Instinctively Wagram started, partly with astonishment. This man, as he had said, had indeed done him an ill turn. He had, by a word, deprived him of his possessions and of his very name. He had come as a blackmailer, and had obtained his blackmail—his price. He had spoiled—nay, ruined—his very life. And yet, and yet, but for the grace of God he himself might have been such as he, was the reflection that ran swiftly through his mind. Who was he to set himself up in judgment?

"No. You will not?" said the other, noting his hesitation. "Of course, I ought to have known."

"But I will," said Wagram, putting forth his hand.

The adventurer clasped it in a strong, hard grip. Then without another word he turned and strode away down the avenue at a most astonishing pace for one of his apparent years.

Chapter Twenty Three.

After the Blow.

Facing round to return to the house the sight of the latter met Wagram as with a blow. The last time he had looked upon it from outside, barely half-an-hour ago, it had been with the love of it and everything about it—that pride of possession which had become unconsciously a part of his very life. Now all was swept away. He passed his hand over his eyes as though dazzled; even his walk seemed swaying and unsteady, as that of a man recovering from a stunning shock. But not of himself must he think just then. He must do what he could to mitigate the stroke as regarded his father, he told himself; afterwards he might indulge in the "luxury" of self-pity.

The old Squire was sitting in the library just where he had left him, and as many years seemed to have gone over his head as minutes during the time intervening.

"Well, father, this is rather a facer," he began. "The next thing is to consider what's to be done."

"There's nothing to be done," answered the old man wearily. "Do you think that scoundrel means to keep his word?"

"To do him justice, I think he means to at present; but whether his good intentions will evaporate with the lapse of time, and the temptation to try and extract more plunder, is another matter."

There was silence for a few moments between them. Then Wagram said:

"Father, would you mind telling me all the ins and outs of this while we are on the subject? We shall get it over that way, and then we need never refer to it again."

"Yes; perhaps it is better," said the Squire, with a sigh.

And then he set forth the whole story, which, with some additional but immaterial detail, was the same as that which we heard him narrate to Monsignor Culham.

"You know, this man has just been telling me where I can find Everard," said Wagram when he had done.

The Squire started.

“Where you can find Everard!” he echoed. “But—Wagram, you will never be so mad as to try?”

“How can I do otherwise? Every hour that I am here I am keeping him out of his rights.”

Smiling somewhat feebly the old diplomat asserted himself.

“Hardly, my dear boy. At least not at present—for during my lifetime Everard has no rights. After—”

Wagram looked up quickly, but the old man paused. Then he went on:

“Your first duty is to me; and, that being so, are you contemplating leaving me alone in my old age—my very old age, some might call it—while you scour the world in search of a wastrel who, if you find him, will lay himself out to ruin within six months all that it has taken me—and you—a lifetime to build up? You cannot do it, Wagram. I have not very much longer to live, but as sure as you leave me it will hasten my death. Now, are you anxious to start upon this search?”

“No, father. While you are here—and may that be for many years to come—I will not leave you.”

“Promise me that.”

“Solemnly I promise it.”

The old man’s face brightened as they clasped hands. Then he went on:

“This is no conscious wrong I have done you, Wagram—God knows. We had every reason—legal and otherwise—for supposing this man to be dead. We acted in perfect good faith, but—can one be sure of anything? And now give me your attention. Even if the worst comes to the very worst, and that—that other claim should come to be established, I have already effected my utmost to repair the wrong I have, accidentally, done you. The very day of that blackmailer’s first visit to me I sent instructions for an entirely new will to be drawn up, and under it, after my death, you take the whole of my personalty absolutely. That alone will constitute you what some would call a rich man. But—as for Hilversea, well—”

Earlier in this narrative we heard Haldane remark that its present occupants cherished a conviction that the world revolved round Hilversea, and being, perhaps, the most intimate friend of the said occupants he ought to be in a position to judge. Further, he

had observed that, if possible, Wagram held that conviction rather more firmly than his father. It was a figure of speech, of course, but that both were wrapped up in the place and its interests, far beyond the ordinary, we have abundantly shown. And now one of them would be called upon to surrender it.

"I have left nothing to chance, Wagram," went on the Squire. "The will is signed and sealed and most carefully drawn. And now observe: it seems to me a sort of inspiration that caused me to have you christened Wagram; but, to make everything doubly safe, the terms run: 'To my son Wagram Gerard, known as Wagram Gerard Wagram.' But I want you to go up to town in a day or two and tell Simcox and Yaxley to let you see it. You can then satisfy yourself."

Wagram nodded assent, and the Squire went on:

"This has come upon us—upon you at any rate—in a hurry, and for that very reason we must not allow ourselves to do or say anything in a hurry. Meanwhile we are in possession, which is a strong point. So what we—what you—have got to do is to go on exactly as if this revelation had never been made. There is no telling what Time may work, so give Time his chance. Morally, you are just in the position you would actually have been in—morally, for I repeat again the whole affair was a sheer accident for which nobody is to blame—no, not anybody. And, Wagram, if you distrust my advice as possibly too interested, why not take other advice? There is Monsignor Culham, for instance—no one is more competent to advise you."

"Monsignor Culham? Does he know about this, father?"

"Yes; I laid it before him when this blackmailer first approached me."

"And his opinion?"

"Substantially what I have been telling you. He was not in favour of your knowing anything about the matter. Unfortunately, you forced the blackmailer's hand—as he said himself. Morally, and in the sight of God," went on the old Squire, lapsing into what was, for him, extraordinary vehemence, "your position is just what it would have been but for this—accident. There is no doubt about it. You are the one selected to hold this place in trust, with its many cares and responsibilities and opportunities, so, for God's sake, Wagram, bear that in mind, and do nothing sudden or rash, either now or after my time."

“I will bear it in mind, father; but it is a position which requires a great deal of thinking out, and that can’t be done in a day or a week or a month where such issues are at stake.”

“Quite true; leave it at that, then. And now, Wagram, all this has exhausted me more than I can say. I think I will lie down for a bit and try to get a little sleep. Tell them I am on no account to be disturbed.”

“Mine!”

No longer the ecstatic intonation of the entrancing possessive, as Wagram, strolling forth to wrestle out alone the blank and deadening revelation he had heard that day, gazed upon the surroundings which had called forth that intensity of self-gratulation on the occasion of our first making his acquaintance. He was now but a mere temporary pensioner. He realised that he was here but for his father’s lifetime, for he knew that when left to himself, whatever might be the after consequences, he would leave no stone unturned till he should find his half-brother, and then—

He turned into a seldom-used path in the thick of the shrubbery. The Gothic roof of the chapel rose among the trees at no great distance, and the sight was productive of another heart-tightening. All his pride and joy in the beautiful little sanctuary—and soon it, too, would know him no more. He felt as though about to be cast out of Paradise. But with the thought came another, and it was a wholesome one. What right had he to look upon life as a broken thing simply because one side of its joys had been reft from him? It was not even as though he were about to be thrown forth penniless, or on a meagre, scraping, starvation pittance, which is, perhaps, hardly better, as he had had ample occasion to know during long years of his earlier life. As his father had said, he would be what some would call a rich man in any case; and as an object in life had he not his son’s future to secure and his present to watch over? And then there recurred to his mind a question which Delia Calmour had put to him on a former occasion as to whether he did not find life too good to be real—and his answer to it. There was something prophetic about both. Of late years he had, indeed, found life too good to be real, and was that a state altogether healthy for anybody in this world of probation? He had made an idol of Hilversea.

It was late autumn, and the woodland scents were moist and earthy. Brown leaves, crimped and curled, clustered clingingly upon the oak boughs, and the ground was already carpeted with them. He had followed the most secluded paths, sacred, indeed, to himself and the gamekeepers. The white scut of a rabbit darting across a ride; the rustle of pheasants scuttling away in the undergrowth, or the vast flap-flap of wood-pigeon’s wings—now gathered in flocks—detonating in the deep silence of the covert as they fled

disturbed from their intended roost; a couple of squirrels chattering angrily at the intruder from the high security of a fir limb—constituted the only sights and sounds. In a day or two these woods would echo and re-echo the crack of guns, and now he thought how he had been looking forward with keen enjoyment to the best shooting party of the year. His guests would go as they had come, thinking—as they had often thought before—that Wagram was about the luckiest and most-to-be-envied man on earth; and, up till this morning, would he not cordially have agreed with such opinion! Would he not? The "pride of life!"

Now a sound of voices struck upon his ear. The path he was following ended in a gate, beyond which was the road—a lonely woodland road, intersecting the coverts. As he laid his hand upon this gate to open it he recognised one of the voices—a sweet, full soprano that by this time he had come to know fairly well. The other was strong, harsh, common, but also feminine. Not feeling at all inclined to talk to anybody just then he would have turned back, but—it was too late.

Delia Calmour gave a little cry of astonishment as he opened the gate.

"Why, Mr Wagram, who'd have thought of meeting you here?"

The little flush of surprise, perhaps of something else, which mantled her cheeks as she put out a hand, half shyly, lent an additional sparkle to her eyes, making a whole that was very alluring. She was in semi-winter garb, with a touch of fur, and her bicycle stood against the hedge. The other was a dark, beady-eyed, gipsy-looking woman.

"Such fun!" rattled the girl. "I've been having my fortune told; only I can't make head or tail of it."

Here the other, with a half-knowing leer—for, of course, she had at once decided that this meeting was no accidental one—opened on Wagram with the stock professional whine.

"I'll tell yours too, sir, and it's sure to be bright—and—"

Then she stopped. Wagram's gaze was fixed sternly upon her.

"Go away," he said. "I've seen you before, and I've warned you before that we had no use for such as you in this neighbourhood. You had better leave it at once, for I shall send word to the police at Bassingham to pay you some very particular attention."

The tramp, seeing he was in earnest, and that there was nothing more to be got out of him, waxed bold and defiant.

“You’d do that, would you Squire?” she snarled. “All right. Maybe there’s them as knows more about your little game than you thinks of. Maybe you’ll not be finding everything as easy always; no, and I ’opes yer won’t—tramplin’ upon a pore woman who’s tryin’ to make a honest livin’.” And, cursing and growling, the hag shuffled off down the road.

In his then frame of mind the words were startling to Wagram. What on earth—was his altered position already common property? was his first thought, as he read into the malevolent words the very last meaning that the mind of their utterer could have held.

“I am surprised at you, Miss Calmour,” he said gravely, “listening to the pestiferous humbug of the commonest type of hedge-side charlatan. Really, I had a better opinion of you.”

“And—has it fled?” answered the girl, with a pretty pleading penitence that was not wholly mock. “I only let her tell my fortune for the fun of the thing—and she said some very queer things—not at all after the pattern of stock bosh which I had expected. In fact, they were rather weird—about green seas, smooth and oily, and a battered ship—and terrors—and perhaps death, but if not death, then great happiness. Yes; really it was quite creepy; strange too, for what on earth can I ever have to do with battered ships or green seas—or great happiness either?” she added to herself mournfully. Then again, aloud: “But do you think there may be anything in these people’s powers of prediction?”

“No, I do not,” he answered decisively, and with some sternness. “Certainly not. The knowledge of the future is in other hands than those of a common wayside impostor, whom, if I were doing my duty, I ought to have at once had arrested and locked up on a former occasion when she tried to play that humbugging game in my presence.”

“Oh yes; she got into the wrong corner this time,” laughed Delia. “You are a magistrate, are you not, Mr Wagram?”

“I have seen this particular fraud before, and gave her a trifle, as she seemed really in want,” he answered. “In strict duty I ought to have had her locked up, but strict duty is rather a hard thing to carry out always. But anything that encourages superstition is to me especially abhorrent. The greatest harm these impostors do is not merely in obtaining hard-earned silver from ignorant people but in keeping alive the idea that they can possess any supernatural power—let alone wisdom—at all.”

The girl looked at him with a covert smile.

“Be merciful to one of those ‘ignorant people,’” she said softly. “Though, really, I did not believe in any supernatural power about the affair; I only let her do it for the fun of the thing.”

“I should hope not. With your talents and education I could not have believed it of you. And yet—you hardly know where to draw the line. When you find people, whose upbringing and education, and everything else, ought to put them miles above anything of the kind, steeped over head and ears in such puerile superstitions as throwing spilled salt over the shoulder, scared of having a peacock’s feather brought into their houses, or of getting up first of thirteen from the table, or of walking under a ladder—really it makes one—well, cynical.”

“But—walking under a ladder is unlucky sometimes, Mr Wagram.”

“Very likely to be, if you don’t first ascertain whether there’s a journeyman painter up it with a paint pot—not otherwise.”

Then they both laughed—for Wagram the first laugh he had indulged in since the bolt had fallen. Well, he could still laugh; yet but now it had seemed to him that he never would laugh again.

“But—you’ll admit there are people who can tell you strange—and even startling—things about yourself that they can’t possibly have got at by any ordinary means.”

“I’ll admit nothing of the kind. I know the old stock business—I have had it thrown at me too often. Some fool—usually some feminine fool—goes to one of these impostors—not the hedge-side type of fraud but the fashionable ditto—and pays down her guineas to be told such and such. She is told such and such, and it amazes her. Then, in retailing it, she invariably ends up with: ‘But, how do you account for it?’ I always answer I can’t account for it, any more than I can account for how the clever card conjurer takes ace and king and queen out of the top of the head of the baldest man in the audience; but he does it, and nobody dreams of associating the supernatural with the process. It’s the same thing here. It’s part of the system to find out things; and they do it. If you were let into the secret you’d probably laugh at the simplicity with which it’s done. No; really, I’ve no patience with that sort of absurdity; it’s too childish.”

“Looked at in that light it is. You do put things straight, Mr Wagram.”

“Well, but—isn’t it so? I have even heard people attribute that sort of quackery to satanic influence, which has almost struck me, if one may say so, as insulting to the intelligence of the devil. But it is getting rather dusk. You will want your lamp before you get home. Is it in good lighting order?”

If a momentary temptation beset Delia to pretend it was not, so as to afford a pretext for accompanying him to the house, which was not very far distant, she heroically stifled it; so between them they lighted the lamp.

“Good-bye, Mr Wagram. Thanks so much. I promise you I won’t dabble in the black art again,” she said as they shook hands; and mounting she skimmed away down the now shadowy road, going over in her mind every word, every tone of the, in hard fact, utterly unmomentous interview. And he, striking into a woodland path on the other side, continued his walk in the deepening gloom, to the accompaniment of the ghostly hooting of owls. It was strange that he should have fallen in with this girl just then, and in his then frame of mind it seemed to him that her glance and tone and demeanour were very sweet, very soothing, very sympathetic. And then—he ceased to give her another thought.

Chapter Twenty Four.

"Requiem Aeternam..."

Though beloved by their tenantry and dependents the Wagrams were not exactly popular with the county—as spelt with a capital C. This saw reason, or thought it did, to regard them as exclusive and eccentric. To begin with, they seldom entertained, and then not on anything like the scale it was reckoned they ought. A few shooting parties in the season, and those mostly men, though such of the latter as owned wives and daughters brought them; or an occasional gathering, such as we have seen, mainly of ecclesiastical interest. It was a crying shame, declared the county, that a splendid place like Hilversea Court should be thrown away on two solemn old widowers; and it was the duty of one of them—Wagram at any rate—to marry again. But Wagram showed not the slightest inclination to do anything of the kind.

Not through lack of opportunity—inducement. He was angled for, more or less deftly—not always with a mercenary motive; but, though courteous and considerate to the aspiring fair, by no art or wile could he be drawn any further—no, not even into the faintest shadow of a flirtation. It was exasperating, but there was no help for it, so he had been given up as hopeless. He might have recognised the duty but for the existence of his son. Hilversea would have its heir after him—that was sufficient.

He was eccentric, estimated his acquaintances, in that he worked hard at matters that most people leave to an agent; but this was a duty, he held—a sacred trust—to look into things personally; the result we have referred to elsewhere. As for entertaining, well, neither he nor the old Squire cared much about it. On the other hand, they were careful that many a day's sport, with gun or rod—but mostly the latter—should come in the way of not a few who seldom had an opportunity of enjoying such.

But now of late there had befallen that which caused the county aforesaid to rub its eyes, and this was the manner in which the Wagrams seemed to have "taken up" Delia Calmour. It was not surprised that a brazen, impudent baggage like that should have pushed herself upon them on the strength of the gnu incident, the marvel was that she should have succeeded—have succeeded in getting round not only Wagram but the old Squire as well, and the county resented it. Once when she was at Hilversea some callers, of course, of her own sex, took an opportunity of testifying their disapproval by being markedly rude to the girl. This Wagram had noticed, and had there and then paid her extra attention by way of protest. And Haldane too—he who thought the whole world was hardly good enough to have the honour of containing that girl of his, and yet he allowed her to associate with a daughter of tippling, disreputable old Calmour! What next, and what next!

But if the Wagrams were eccentric they could afford to be, and that for a dual reason: in the first place, they were "big" enough; in the next, they cared literally and absolutely not one straw for the opinion of the county. If a given line commended itself to their approbation they took it, completely regardless of what the county or anybody else might choose to say or think—and this held equally good of father and son—which was as well, for, as time went by, on this matter it "said" plenty.

A wafting of it reached Wagram one day, at the mouth of Clytie's quondam victim—"Vance's eldest fool," as the old Squire had, with cynical aptitude, defined that much plucked youth.

"Take a tip from me, Wagram," remarked the latter one day. "You're making a mistake having too much to do with that lot. They're dangerous, and you'll have to pay up smartly for your fun one of these days."

The other did not retort that the speaker had reason to be an authority on the point, nor did he get angry; he only answered:

"I don't like that kind of remark, Vance. I suppose because I'm not in the habit of taking anybody's 'tips' I always take my own line. Sounds conceited, perhaps, but it's true."

"Oh, I didn't mean anything, Wagram," was the reply, given rather shamefacedly.

But the time had now come when this reputation for reticence, for eccentricity, stood Wagram in good stead. If he had become graver, more aloof than ever under the influence of this new and overwhelming blow, his surroundings hardly noticed it. In anybody else it would have been at once remarked on; in him it was a mere development of his former and normal demeanour. One or two opined that he contemplated entering a monastery, but the general run gave the matter no further thought; and, the very vaguest, faintest inkling of the real state of things struck nobody at all.

There was one, however, whose quick woman's wit had not been slow to arrive at the fact that something had gone wrong—in some absolutely not-to-be-guessed-at and unaccountable way, but still gone wrong—and that was Delia herself. The county need not bother its opaque head any further as to how and why the Wagrams had "taken her up," for the said Wagrams seemed to have dropped her with equal capriciousness. And the girl herself?

No more of these pleasant informal invites to Hilversea when she cycled over to the chapel services on Sundays or other days. Wagram and the old Squire were as courteous

and kindly in their bearing as ever, but—there it ended; and, strange to say, remembering her upbringing, or want of it rather, this daughter of tippling, disreputable old Calmour did not, even in her heart of hearts, feel hurt or resentful. For, as we have said, by some quick-witted instinct of her own she realised that some great trouble, secret and, therefore, infinitely the greater, was sapping the peace of this house, to the members of which she looked up with a feeling little short of adoration. She saw this, but nobody else did as yet.

Delia had carried out the intention we heard her express to Wagram on the occasion of one of those visits which had constituted the bright days of her life. She had placed herself under the instruction of the old priest in Bassingham whose German nationality had first aroused her insular disapproval, and had been received into the Catholic Church; but in the result she had learned that a love of beautiful music and imposing and picturesque ceremonies was not the be-all and end-all of the matter by a long way; wherefore the change had put the coping-stone to the refining process which had been going on unconsciously within her, and the former undisciplined and inconsequent daughter of rackety, happy-go-lucky Siege House had become a self-contained and self-disciplined woman. As to this something of a test was put upon her when one day, on one of the rare occasions now when she had an opportunity of talking confidentially with Wagram, the latter remarked:

"Talking of 'duties,' Miss Calmour, I wonder if you will resent what I am going to say? It seems ungracious after the great help you have given us here from time to time—musically, I mean. Well, then, you have a beautiful voice and great musical talent. Now, don't you think you ought to turn that to account nearer home? The mission at Bassingham is a poor one. With your talents, if you threw yourself into helping to improve its choir, and musical arrangements generally, what a difference that might work in rendering it more attractive to outside people as well as to those within. Of course, music like many other accessories, is a mere spiritual luxury, not an essential, but it is often a powerful factor in the first instance, in attracting those without, and therefore, like any lawful agency in that direction, by no means to be despised. How if this is a talent entrusted to you to be turned to account? But there—I have no constituted right to set myself up as your adviser, and I suppose you are only setting me down as a solemn old bore intent on preaching you a sermon," he concluded, with a smile—a sad one, she decided to herself, as his somewhat rare smiles were in these days.

The natural human in Delia was represented by a feeling of blank dismay. Those rides over to Hilversea, and her part in the musical arrangements of its exquisite chapel, had been to her as something to live for. And now even this was to be denied her. But the self-discipline had become an accomplished fact.

“I am setting you down as nothing of the sort, Mr Wagram,” she answered steadily, “nor do I know anybody in this world more competent to advise me or anyone else. Yes; you are right; I will follow your advice. But I may come up to Hilversea, and help occasionally when I am not wanted in Bassingham, mayn’t I?”

“My dear child, of course; we are only too glad. You know, I was not putting it to you in your own personal interest. In such a matter nothing personal comes in, or ought to. But there—I seem to be preaching again.”

The step Delia had taken involved upon her far less of a trial from those among whom she moved than she had expected. Old Calmour had been nasty and jeering on the subject, and in his cups had been wont to make exceedingly objectionable remarks and vulgar insinuations; but such to the girl were as mere pin-pricks now. Moreover, Clytie had on every occasion quelled, not to say flattened, him with all her serene but effective decisiveness; and the egregious Bob was in a state of complete subjection, as we have shown. To Clytie herself the whole thing was a matter of entire satisfaction, for she regarded it as a step, and a very important one, in the direction of furthering her own darling scheme; which scheme, by the way, did not seem to progress with the rapidity she would have wished.

“You must force the pace Delia,” she said. “The thing’s hanging a little more than I like. You’ve got a first-rate cut in, and you ought to be able to capture the trick. Force the pace a little more; you’re not making the most of your opportunities.”

“You’re wasting a deal of capacity for intrigue, Clytie,” was the answer. “There’s nothing ‘hanging,’ no pace to force, and no trick to capture, as I’ve told you before.”

The other looked at her, shook her pretty head, and—being at times inclined towards vulgarity—winked.

And then upon Hilversea and its surroundings and dependents fell another bolt—swift, sudden, consternating. The old Squire was dead.

He had passed away in his sleep, peacefully and painlessly, for the expression of his fine old face was absolutely placid and almost smiling; and from Wagram downwards the bolt shot hard and grievous through many a heart. Not only of those belonging to the immediate neighbourhood did this hold, for in the crowd which thronged the approaches to the chapel what time the solemn High Mass of Requiem—sung by the dead man’s lifelong friend, Monsignor Culham—was proceeding, not a few strange faces might have been discerned; faces of those whom Grantley Wagram and his son had

benefited—in some instances even to the saving of life, where, but for such benefit, the means of preserving life by affording the requisite conditions would have been lacking.

Very different, too, to the cortège which we saw issue from these doors a few months back is this which now comes forth to lay the dead man in his last resting-place in the little consecrated graveyard beneath the east window of the chapel, but no less solemn. The glow and splendour of light and colour, the mellow flooding of the summer sunshine are no longer here, and the gurgling song of full-throated thrushes is hushed. Instead, the frost and stillness of a winter noon, and an occasional sob as the coffin is lowered into the grave, while the chant of the Benedictus rolls forth mournful and grand upon the crisp air, so still that the lights borne on each side of the great crucifix burn with scarce a flicker, and the celebrant, vested in a black and silver cope of some richness, sprinkles—for the last time with holy water the remains of Grantley Wagram, now laid to his final rest.

"Requiem aeternam dona, ei Domine,
Et lux perpetua luceat ei.

"Anima ejus, et animae omnium
fidelium defunctorum per misericordiam
Dei requiescant in pace."

The words find echo in many a heart as the sad solemnity ends. The crowd melts away, the mourners withdraw—all save one, who stands motionless, with bowed head, looking down into the closing grave—and that one the dead man's son.

Chapter Twenty Five.

The Red Derelict.

“What would happen if we went ashore here? Why, we’d very likely be eaten.”

“Eaten! Oh, captain, you can’t really mean that. In these days too!”

“But I do mean it. Yonder’s a pretty bad coast. As for ‘in these days,’ we haven’t yet captured quite all the earth, only the greater part of it. There are still some rum places left.”

“Oh!” And the inquiring lady passenger stared, round-eyed, to eastward, where, however, no sign of any coast was visible, nor yet in any other quarter.

The steamship Baleka was shearing her way through the smooth satiny folds of the tropical swell, and the light breeze which stirred the surface combined with the air the ship was making to render life quite tolerable beneath the grateful shade of the awnings. Otherwise it was hot—unequivocably hot; and where the glisten of brasswork was exposed to the overhead noonday sun the inadvertent contact of the bare hand with the said brasswork was sufficient to make the owner jump. So completely alone on this shoreless sea was the steamer that the plumes of smoke from her great white funnels seemed as though they had no business to taint this free, pure air with their black abominations—seemed, in fact, an outrage on the blue and golden solitude. Yet the said solitude was by no means devoid of life. Flying-fish skimming above the liquid plain singly or in flights like silvery birds, or a school of porpoises keeping pace with the ship for miles in graceful leaps, as their sportive way is, constituted only hints as to the teeming life of the waters in common with the earth and air; or here and there a triangular fin moving dark and oily above the surface in scarcely perceptible glide. The sight started the inquiring lady passenger off afresh.

“Look, there’s another shark; what a number we’ve seen within the last day or two, captain. Is there any truth in that idea that a shark following a ship means that there’s going to be a death on board?”

“But this one isn’t following the ship; he’s going very nearly clean in the contrary direction.”

“Yes, I know. But do you think there’s anything in the idea?”

“Why, I think that if somebody died every time a shark followed a ship there’d soon be none of us left to go to sea at all. What the joker’s really smelling after is the stuff that’s thrown overboard from the cook’s galley from time to time.”

“Really? Well, there goes another weird legend of the sea—weird but romantic.”

“It’d be a good thing if a few more of them went overboard,” laughed the matter-of-fact captain. “They soon will, too—a good many have already. In the old ‘windjammer,’ days when you had nothing to do half the voyage but sit and whistle for a breeze, these yarns got into Jack’s head and stuck there. Now with steam and quick voyages, and a rattling spell of work in stowing cargo every few days or so, Jack hasn’t got time to bother about that sort of thing.”

“Then sailors aren’t superstitious any more?”

“No more than shore folk. I’ve seen landsmen both on board ship and ashore who could give points in that line to the scarriest old Jack-tar who ever munched salt horse, and knock him hollow at that.”

“Then you’ve no superstitions of your own, captain—you, a sailor?”

“Not one; I don’t believe any such nonsense.”

A solitary passenger, passing at the time in his walk up and down, overhearing, smiled and nodded approval.

The Baleka was steering north by north-west, every eleven or eleven and a half knots that her nose managed to shove through the water that creamed back from her straight stem bringing her an hour nearer England. She was not a mail steamer, or even a regular passenger boat, being one of a private venture embarked in with the object of cheapening freight between England and the South African ports. But besides a full cargo she carried a limited complement of passengers and a quite unlimited ditto of cockroaches; otherwise she was an exceedingly comfortable boat, and combined good catering with a considerable reduction on current rates of passage money by the ordinary lines, all of which was a consideration with those to whom a few days more or less at sea mattered nothing.

The smoking-room amidships was a snug apartment with roomy chairs and well-cushioned lounges. In one corner three or four of the male passengers were hard at work capturing the Transvaal—a form of amusement widely prevailing at that time, although the war had not yet been started; rather should we have omitted the transition

qualification, for they had already conquered and annexed the obnoxious republic, and that with surprisingly little loss or difficulty. Then the discussion waxed lively and warm, for the justifiability of the proposed annexation had come up; meanwhile others had dropped in.

"I maintain it would be utterly unjustifiable," said one. "It's all very well to urge that it would be for the good of civilisation and numbers, and all that sort of thing, but we can't do evil that good may come of it. That's a hard and fast rule."

"There's no such thing as a hard and fast rule, or oughtn't to be," retorted with some heat he who had borne the main part of the argument; "but if there is, why, 'the greatest good for the greatest number' is a fairly safe one. What do you think sir?" turning to a man who was seated in another corner reading, but who had paid no attention to the discussion at all.

"Think? Oh, I don't know. I haven't been in that part long enough to have formed an opinion," was the answer.

"But you don't agree with our friend there that there should be a hard and fast rule for everything? Surely you are of opinion that every question should be decided on its own merits?"

"Certainly," replied the other politely, though inwardly bored at being dragged into a crude and threadbare discussion upon a subject in which he felt no interest whatever. "That's a sound principle all the world over, and a safe one."

"There you are," cried the first speaker triumphantly, turning upon his antagonist. "What did I tell you? This gentleman agrees with me entirely, as any sensible man would on such a point as that."

"We can't do evil that good may come of it," reiterated the said antagonist. "That's a hard and fast rule."

"Hard and fast rule be blowed! You might as well apply that to the Valpy case," naming a somewhat prominent lawsuit then going forward, and relating to a disputed succession. "If the Valpy in possession weren't justified in sticking to possession when he knew the real heir was a congenital idiot, and a homicidal one at that—why, there's no such thing as any law of common sense."

"What were the facts?" asked the man who had been appealed to from outside. "I have not been much in the way of reading the papers of late."

They told him—several of them at once, as the way of a smoking-room gathering is. By judicious winnowing down he managed to elicit that a vast deal of property had been in dispute, that the holder had been an exemplary landlord, and, in short, a sort of Providence to all dependent on him; whereas the man who had successfully established his own claim, and thereby had ousted him, was one of those subjects for whom a few minutes in a lethal chamber would have constituted the only appropriate and adequate treatment. Indeed, the only matter of debate was as to whether the former holder, knowing that he was not legally entitled to remain in possession, was justified in retaining the same. Those here present were of opinion that he was.

"I don't agree with you at all," said the uncompromising man. "We can't do evil that good may come of it. That's the divine law, and—"

"Hallo! What's the excitement?" interrupted somebody, as several persons hurried by the open door, some with binoculars in their hands.

"Oh, we've only sighted some ship, I suppose," said the leader on the other side. "What I was going to say is—"

But ever so little to break the sea and sky monotony of a voyage will avail to raise a modicum of excitement; wherefore, what the speaker "was going to say" remained perforce unknown, for the group incontinently melted away in order to see what little there was to be seen.

That little was little enough. A solitary speck away towards the sky-line; to those who had binoculars, and soon to those who had not, taking shape—that shape the hull of a ship. Little enough in all conscience.

But—was it? The submerged hull of a ship and no more, save for two stumps of mast of uneven length sticking out of her. The poop and forecastle were above water, and in the wash of the increasing evening swell part of the bulwarks heaved up as the hulk rolled lazily, her rusty red sides, glistening and wet, showing a line of encrusting barnacles. This was what met the eager gaze of the passengers of the Baleka in the lurid, smoky glare of the tropical sunset as the steamer swept up to, and slowed down to pass, the sad relic; and there may have been some among them who noticed that the long, straight path of her foamy wake has undergone an abrupt deviation behind her—for the derelict had been lying right in her course.

Right in her course! An hour later and it would have been dark—very dark—and then!

There was quite a buzz of interest among the passengers; the man who had been to sea a great deal advancing, of course, all sorts of wild and impossible theories with regard to the wreck. But though glasses were strained upon her no trace was visible as to her name or nationality.

“By George! I’m blest if it isn’t the Red Derelict herself!” exclaimed the fourth officer, lowering his binoculars. Instantly he became the centre of an inquiring group, chiefly ladies.

“The Red Derelict? What’s that, Mr Ransome?” came the eager query.

“Haven’t you heard of her?” said the other, who was little more than a merry-faced boy. “Why, she’s a sort of Flying Dutchman. She’s been cruising around in these waters some time now, and they say it isn’t lucky to sight her.”

“Luckier than not to sight her—and an hour later we shouldn’t have sighted her—in the dark.”

The rejoinder was significant, and it came from the quiet passenger who had been appealed to for his opinion during the smoke-room discussion. The fourth officer looked not at all pleased at this encroachment on his own privileges as oracle. But he was destined to look less pleased still.

“Mr Ransome,” interrupted the captain’s voice from the bridge overhead, “just send me the second quartermaster here. After that I want you here yourself.” And the captain’s tone was crisp, and his face was grim—and the merry-faced boy looked no longer merry, for he knew a wigging was in store.

“Right, sir,” he answered, starting off with alacrity.

“Powis, d’you hear that blighted young fool blithering away about Red Derelicts and Flying Dutchmen?” said the captain in an undertone to the chief officer. “As if passengers ain’t a skeery enough crowd without filling ’em up with all sorts of sick old sea lies into the bargain. He ought to be sent back to school again and well swished. Well, log the derelict.”

The bugle rang out its second dinner summons to the strains of “The Roast Beef of Old England,” and there was something of a scurry among the passengers, who had ignored the first in their eagerness to watch the derelict. A few, however, remained, gazing after the ghastly eloquence of the deserted hulk, now black and indistinct in the dusk, for in the tropical seas darkness comes down with a rush.

“Wonder if there’s anything in Ransome’s yarn about that beauty,” said one man, shutting his binoculars. “Hang it! I’m not superstitious, but, all the same, I wish we’d never sighted her.”

Chapter Twenty Six.

An Omen.

There was the usual clatter of knives and forks, and chinking of glasses, and scurrying of stewards in the well-lighted saloon, and during dinner the derelict they had just passed took up a large proportion of the conversation. As to this the captain's table constituted no exception.

"What sort of ship would she have been, Captain Lawes—English?" The speaker was the lady passenger we heard making inquiries as to sea superstitions. She was a bright, rather taking woman of about thirty, making the homeward voyage with one child, a sweetly-pretty little girl, who was made a great pet of among the passengers—indeed, a great deal more than was good for her.

"Can't say for certain, but am inclined to think so. She must have been a timber ship or she'd hardly have kept afloat for so long."

"How long do you think she's been like that?"

"Can't say either for certain. She may have been months, and, from the look of her, a good few of them. Or she may have been years."

"And do you think there's anyone on board?" The captain stared.

"Anyone on board?" he echoed. "Well, not anyone living, of course. But it's hardly likely anyone would have remained on board. The fact of her being still afloat shows that they had plenty of time when they abandoned her."

"But if there is? What a ghastly idea it seems, that old ship floating about for ever in those oily seas, a floating coffin for some poor wretches imprisoned within her! Ugh! it's horrible!"

"You've got a lively imagination, Mrs Colville," said the captain drily. "You're not a novelist, are you?"

"Oh no; I wish I were. But isn't a half-sunk ship like that, right in our way, rather dangerous to navigation?"

"That's exactly the wording of our log-book when we report the occurrence: 'Dangerous to navigation.'"

“But why don’t you sink her, then, and get her out of the way?”

The captain stole a quick, comical glance at the passenger on his other side.

“In the first place, as the American lady said when she was asked why she didn’t get married: ‘I guess I haven’t time.’ You see, I don’t own this boat, Mrs Colville, nor yet her cargo. What would my owners say if I spent half the night hanging around trying to sink every derelict one passes at sea? We’re behind time as it is, thanks to the barnacles we’ve accumulated. Again, she may be worth salvaging, though I don’t think so.”

“Mr Ransome was saying she had been around here quite a long while. He called her the Red Derelict; said she was a sort of Flying Dutchman, and it was unlucky to sight her.”

“I know he did,” answered the captain grimly, with a complacent recollection of the savage wigging that rash youth had received at his hands. The other passenger struck in:

“I told him it would have been still more unlucky if we hadn’t sighted her till—say, an hour later. She was right bang in our course.”

The captain looked not altogether pleased at this remark, but the speaker was a personage of some consideration on board.

“We keep a look out, you know, Mr Wagram,” he said.

“Of course. But I always notice that the first hour of these tropical nights is the darkest, perhaps because of the suddenness with which it rushes down. Now, a hulk like that, flush with the surface and showing no lights, would it be discernible until too late?”

The captain knew that the chances were twenty to one it wouldn’t, but for expediency’s sake he was not going to own as much. As he had said before, passengers were a skeery crowd, and didn’t want any extra frightening.

“Chances are it would,” he answered, “especially in a smooth sea like this. There’s always a disturbance on the surface as the thing rises and falls, an extra gleam of phosphorus, or something that the lookout man on the forecastle can’t miss.”

“That’s satisfactory,” rejoined the lady. “Do you believe in luck, Mr Wagram?”

“In the sense in which we are going to be unlucky because we’ve seen a dismantled hulk—decidedly not. The idea is too puerile even for discussion.”

“Oh, I wish I were as strong-minded! Do you know, I’m terribly superstitious.”

“Really? Well, I believe many people are,” he answered politely, with a faint dash of banter.

“Mrs Colville was trying to get at me on that very subject this afternoon,” laughed the captain. “She thought all sailor-men were born fetish-men.”

“It’s all very well, no doubt,” she answered. “You may laugh, and all that, but, all the same, I wish we hadn’t seen that Flying Dutchman of yours. I’m sure it’ll bring us ill luck.”

Hardly were the words uttered than a hush fell upon the saloon. To the clatter of knives and forks, the chink of glasses, and the loud hum of voices—at this stage of the dinner at its highest—had succeeded a dead silence. It had seemed compulsory, for it had begun without. The regular, monotonous thrashing of the propeller—which had become almost a necessity, so habitual was it by now—had ceased. The ship lay still upon the smooth, oily waters. The engines had stopped.

Those who have experience of sea voyages will be familiar with the effect produced by such an occurrence. So thoroughly has the churning beat of the propeller become a part of one’s existence that the sudden cessation thereof is enough to awaken the soundest sleeper, and when it befalls during waking hours, and in mid-ocean, why, then, it is not the constitutionally timid alone who can plead guilty to a misgiving, and the conjuring up of a disabled ship rolling helplessly on the swell, and waiting for assistance that may be long enough in coming.

Such was the prevailing state of mind among the passengers of the Baleka at that moment. The timid decided that it was a case of breakdown; those not timid hoped it was not. Tongues began to wag again, but not so briskly, and immediately a steward came in and reported something to the chief engineer, who presided at another table in the saloon. The latter went out.

“What has gone wrong, captain?” said Mrs Colville, not without a dash of anxiety. “Have the engines broken down?”

“I haven’t been down to the engine-room to see yet,” was the bland reply. “McAndrew has just gone out, so we shall know directly.”

“Ah! There now, Mr Wagram, look at that!” she exclaimed. “Didn’t I say that wretched derelict would bring us ill luck? And just as I was saying so we stop.”

“Is that ill luck?” said Wagram, with a smile. He himself had made no comment whatever on the occurrence, but was going on with his dinner as if nothing had happened. “It is no uncommon event at sea for the engines to stop for a few minutes for various intelligible and harmless reasons. Am I right, Captain Lawes?”

“Perfectly.”

“But why don’t they send up to let you know what’s gone wrong, captain?” persisted the lady. “I should have thought that’s the first thing they’d do.”

“The fact that they don’t shows that there’s nothing the matter. McAndrew knows better than to set up a scare among the passengers by sending despatches into the saloon in the middle of dinner.”

And the speaker, like Wagram, continued tranquilly to ply his knife and fork. At heart he felt annoyed at the turn events had taken. He knew—while despising it—the depths of asininity to which the average human understanding will plunge in the matter of “luck” and “ill luck,” and such a coincidence as that which had befallen was sufficient to start some idiot among the passengers getting it into the newspapers on arrival in England. Moreover, he knew, of course, that a merchant captain is by no means the almighty little tin god that most landsmen think him, even while at sea, and that in the eyes of owners he is of fairly small account. And, strange as it may seem to the enlightened mind, the reputation of an “unlucky ship” is easier gained than lost. So when, a minute or two later, a note was brought to him from the engine-room he at once stood up and addressed the saloon.

There was no cause whatever for alarm, he explained. The stoppage was due to something wrong with the machinery, but of a trifling nature, and which was even then nearly repaired. Any minute they might be under way again.

There was clapping of hands at this, and cries of “Hear, hear!” Reassured tongues began to wag again, and the lowered voices and murmurs of misgiving were heard no more. And lo! even before dinner was done, there came a pulsation through the fabric of the ship, gentle at first, then increasing. The beat of the propeller was heard as well as felt. They were on the move again, and now a marked increase of hilarity was significant of reaction after the recent depression of alarm.

“The world is very full of prize idiots, Mr Wagram,” observed the captain when the bulk of the passengers had gone out, including the lady at his right. He had purposely sat on longer than usual.

“Yes. You could scrape together a considerable fool show out of it,” laughed the other, filling his glass. “But between ourselves, now that we are alone, why don’t the naval people send out a gunboat to look for this confounded hulk and sink her? They can’t have so much to do on this West Coast Station, and she must be infernally dangerous to shipping.”

“So she is really. But at sea we have to take a lot of chances—a sight more than you landsmen would dream of, I don’t mind telling you.”

“So I should imagine. Look at this.” From a notecase he extracted a newspaper cutting and handed it to the captain. It was the identical account of the appearance of the derelict which Haldane had read out that happy summer morning at dear old Hilversea, and something of a sigh escaped him at the recollection. “Think it’s the same?”

“‘The Rhodesian... Latitude 10 degrees 5 minutes North, longitude 16 degrees 38 minutes West... about 900 or 1000 tons’” ... went on the captain, skimming the report. “H’m, h’m—it’s rum, certainly, but it might easily be. The description seems to tally exactly. Why, it’s quite a long while ago too. And the latitude isn’t far out with our present position. Yes; it’s rum.”

“But how the deuce can the thing stick about in one place? Seems as if it were bound to drift away, Heaven knows where—perhaps on shore and get broken up.”

“Ever heard of circular currents, Mr Wagram? It’s that that forms the Maelstrom. There are some queer currents hereabouts too, which may account for the thing hanging around here till the crack of doom. I knew she’d been a long time in the water by the look of her. But may I ask, without being curious, what made you keep that cutting—let alone carry it about with you?”

“That’s more than I can tell you, for I hardly know myself. I suppose the circumstance struck me as an out-of-the-way strange one, so when all at once I made up my mind for a voyage or two it came back to my mind, and so I hunted up the number it was in and cut it out.”

“Yes; it’s a rum thing, very,” repeated the captain, glancing again through the newspaper cutting. “‘About eight feet of iron foremast standing, and rather more of mizzen-mast, with some rigging trailing from it.’ That’s exactly the description of the hooker we’ve just

passed, except that there was no rigging trailing from it. But that may have carried away or been knocked off."

"Well, it's behind us, at any rate," said Wagram, rising. "Let's hope it'll soon go to the bottom of its own accord. I suppose the thing can hardly keep afloat for ever."

To his fellow-passengers Wagram was a sealed book, in that all conjectures as to his identity and his circumstance failed. He was very reticent, and this they were at first inclined to resent; but a certain charm of manner and a never-failing courtesy to all quickly dispelled any idea that "side" might be the underlying motive of such reticence. The fact that he had paid extra for the privilege of having a cabin to himself, and that nearly the best on the ship, seemed to throw some light upon his circumstances. Though reticent, however, about himself he could not exactly be called unsociable, for he would spend his evenings in the smoke-room, entering into the current chat over a pipe or so. But who he was, and where from—that nobody knew.

Not much inclined for sociability was he to-night. The incident of the derelict had brought back the past—the old happy past—and again he seemed to live through those bright sunny days at Hilversea, surrounded by all that made life joyous, and, underlying all, the ecstatic sense of possession. But now—! Well, his quest was ended. He had carried it out conscientiously, energetically, and—nothing had come of it.

No; nothing whatever. He had followed out Develin Hunt's directions to the letter—sparing not himself. He had betaken himself, always with care and absence of ostentation, to the locality in which that worthy had pronounced his half-brother to be, but of the latter he could learn nothing. Once he had lighted on what seemed a clue, but it had ended in smoke. Then, acting upon another, he had taken ship for Australia, and had followed it up, with like result. Once more he had returned to South Africa, to meet again with no reward to his efforts. At last, baffled at every turn, he had concluded he might legitimately abandon the search, and so here we find him again on his way homeward.

His wanderings, although he had spared no expense towards the attainment of his object, had been undertaken on no luxurious lines. He had roughed it in strange wild places, had undergone real hardships, and on occasions real peril, and the experience had hardened him. He was in splendid condition, dark, sunburnt, and as hard as nails. But now had come upon him a great home-sickness, and he was regretting the easy-going lack of foresight which had moved him to take passage on board the Baleka instead of upon one of the more crowded but swifter steamships of the regular mail line.

Pacing the deck in the tropical starlight he recapitulated to himself the whole situation. All had gone below now, but he remained, as his custom was; the swirl of the phosphorescent lines from the stem of the ship; the muffled clank of the engines; the weird, long-drawn cry of the lookout on the forecastle as the bells were struck every half hour—the sole accompaniment to his meditations. It all came back—the weeks of blank desolation following upon his father's death, and how the voice of conscience, proving stronger than that of his advisers, had spurred him forth upon his fruitless quest. Well, it had proved fruitless, which seemed to point to the certainty that his advisers had been right.

It all came back. The wrench of that uprooting—of tearing himself away from Hilversea, and all it involved; the farewells, too, though he had avoided these as much as possible—in cowardly fashion he now told himself. Haldane's hearty regrets and expectation to see him soon again; Yvonne's blue eyes brimming with tears, which the affectionate child was at no pains to conceal; the genuine grief of his humbler friends; the last Mass in the chapel; and the final shutting out of everything behind him as the carriage whirled him off to Bassingham station in the murk of the winter day. Delia Calmour, too, whom he could not but think that he and his father and the indirect influences of their surroundings had been incidental, under Heaven, in guiding into the way of light. Poor child! He knew she would miss him, as he recalled the brave effort she had made to subdue all manifestation of the extent of her regret when he had bidden her good-bye; and he smiled to himself as he remembered certain arrangements which he had made with his solicitors providing that, in the event of anything happening to him, this girl whom he and his father had befriended should never be thrown upon the world to combat that uncompromising enemy with her own unaided resources.

Yes; Hilversea rose up before him now, fair, pleasant, restful in its sunshine as the very plains of heaven. Soon he would be within it again. He had trampled all considerations of self under foot and had followed the voice of conscience—and the result had been "As you were!" Surely he had done enough. Clearly his stewardship was his still, and, Heaven help him, he would endeavour to fulfil it to the utmost of his power, and would teach his son to do the same after him. Gerard? He must have grown quite tall, he reflected. What a splendid-looking fellow he would be.

Pacing up and down, hour after hour, Wagram's thoughts ran too fast for his mind—and ever the silence, the swirl of the sea, and the streaking fall of a star in the murky tropical zenith. Then came a sudden jar, and a crash that shivered the ship from stem to stern. For a few moments this horrible jarring vibration continued, then the whole fabric gave a convulsive kind of heave, and the tremor ceased. All was still—but the thrash of the propeller was no longer felt, no longer heard. The throbbing of the engines had ceased—again.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

A Sacrifice in Vain.

The solitary watcher realised instinctively that this time something was wrong. So, too, did the residue of his fellow-passengers, for in an incredibly short space of time they came swarming up from below in various stages of dress and undress—mostly the latter—and many and eager were the inquiries heard on every side, and anxiety was depicted on every face; while on others there was a look which spelt downright scare—these, too, by no means exclusively the property of the ornamental sex.

There was some excuse for it; for to find oneself started out of one's sleep by a jarring shock, to realise that the vessel is no longer moving, to rush up on deck only to find her lying helpless on the black midnight sea, the hurried gait and speech of officers and crew, to the accompaniment of the hoarse roaring of the steam pipes—all this is well calculated to try the nerves of the ordinary passenger; to conjure up visions of collision, or running on a rock, and the swift and sudden foundering with all hands.

"What is it? Are we ashore? Have we collided?" were some of the questions uttered on every side, and from the more fearful: "Are we going to the bottom?"

"Going to the bottom? Of course not," snapped the chief officer, who had come up in time to catch this last query. "There's no cause for alarm. The propeller shaft has snapped, and we shall have to lie to and signal for assistance. Soon get it too; we're in the line of steamers. Look! here goes the first."

The sharp hiss of a rocket rent the air as the fiery streak shot up high into the heavens, exploding with a reverberating boom. It was followed immediately by another.

"I came to tell you," he went on, "that the captain's orders are that all the passengers go below. Wine and refreshments will be served in the saloon immediately."

"Then we are going to the bottom," pronounced one fool. Upon him the "chief" turned.

"Grub would be a rum sort of preparation for that, wouldn't it?" he said scathingly. And there was a laugh, though, truth to tell, somewhat of a hollow one.

In the saloon the grateful popping of corks was already audible, and on the tables the stewards were setting out bottles of champagne and glasses, while others were bringing in the materials for a cold supper. When well through this the ship's surgeon announced that those who were not dressed had better get into all their clothing, and also collect

any valuables they might possess, but that absolutely no luggage of any kind would be allowed. At the sound of the bugle all were to repair on deck. No; there was no occasion for panic of any kind. Ample time would be afforded—"only, of course, they mustn't make it till next week," appended the doctor, by way of raising a laugh.

"That means the boats," pronounced one man decidedly.

"Well, I'm for another go of 'the boy,'" reaching over for the nearest champagne bottle. "It may be long enough before we get another look in."

"It's all that damned derelict," said another. "I'm not superstitious, but I wish to the Lord we'd never sighted her. I said so this afternoon."

"This afternoon? Why, it hasn't come yet," retorted the first. "Man, you might as well have said to-morrow."

Again there was a laugh—not much of a one—but the more they could laugh the better.

"Mr Wagram, I am dreadfully frightened," said Mrs Colville, to whose wants he had been attending. "Is there really much danger, do you think?"

"No. There's plenty of boat room—that's where we score off the overcrowded mail steamer. Why, it'll be quite an adventure to look back upon after we are picked up. Now, I think you had better collect whatever you may want to take—valuables, papers, anything of that kind. And, it's time to dress the child."

"Oh, that won't take a minute. I've let her sleep as long as possible. For the rest, I've hardly anything worth collecting. But you? You haven't been to bed, have you?"

"No; I was doing my usual midnight tramp on deck when the smash came. Like yourself, I've nothing much to collect either."

She stole a look at him, and it was one of admiration—evoked not only by the tall, straight form and dark, refined, pensive face. His consummate coolness under the stress was what appealed to her now. Not one among the others but had shown some slight sign of flurry, or at any rate excitement beyond the ordinary. This one had not. Had they been planning a trip on shore at some port of call his tone and demeanour could hardly have been more even, more thoroughly composed.

"Are you a fatalist, Mr Wagram?" she said. "You treat all this as a matter of course."

“I am no sort of ‘ist,’” he answered, with a smile. “Well—what?”

“Great heavens! I was forgetting,” she said. “We won’t be able to land anywhere. The captain told me if we were to go ashore anywhere off here we’d very likely be eaten—by savages. He was telling me only this afternoon. Good heavens! what is to become of us?”

“The quarter you have just invoked twice will take care of that—never fear. Now go and waken Lily. I’ll wait for you here.”

Hardly had she left him than the bugle rang out. Its notes, almost like the trump of doom to some of the more frightened, came pealing down the companion-way, and immediately the saloon was filled with a scuffling crowd making for the upper air. Now more distant, in different quarters of the ship, its blast sounded again and again. Still Wagram sat motionless in his chair.

“Hallo! ain’t you going up?” cried one of the last, thus seeing him. “Man, but the bugle’s gone again and again.”

“I know it has,” said Wagram calmly, finishing off his glass; “I’m waiting for Mrs Colville.”

The other went his way without another word. Wagram, thinking it about time to hurry up his protégé, started in the direction of her cabin, and as he did so a pealing shriek of utter and complete despair brought his pulses to a momentary standstill.

The while, on deck, the more or less scared passengers were quickly lined up in rows—the women and children apart. They, for their part, noticed two things: that the surface of the sea was much nearer than it had been the last time they had stood here—in fact, appallingly near; and that beside each boat stood its crew, just as they had seen them at ordinary Saturday afternoon fire drill. A thick, sickly murk had settled overhead, shutting out the stars—and by the glare of the lanterns it might be seen that the ship was very low down in the stern indeed. The roaring of the steam had now ceased, and the great funnels towered above, white and ghostly. And now what had actually happened began to be whispered around. The propeller rod had snapped, and in snapping had fallen through the keel, ripping away plates, and tearing open a tremendous leak, through which the water had rushed with alarming rapidity. Then it was found that the watertight bulkheads were of no use. The doors had somehow got jammed, and would not close. During all the time that the coolness and forethought of the captain and officers had utilised by sending the passengers below for some final refreshment the ship had been slowly settling.

The expedient had been a good one. To that degree invigorated, the passengers, lined up there, were less susceptible to panic, and the work of loading the boats and lowering went on with clockwork regularity and order.

That shriek had the effect upon Wagram of the lash on a racehorse. He sprang in the direction whence it proceeded. Mrs Colville's cabin was at the end of a long passage out of which other cabins opened, and now he found her standing in the doorway of hers with an awful look upon her ashy face.

"Lily. My little one. She's gone!" she screamed at sight of him.

"Gone?"

"Yes. She isn't here. Oh, God! Oh, God! Where is she?"

"Keep cool. We'll find her," urged Wagram. "She may be on deck. Go up there and see. I'll search here meanwhile."

But the frantic woman refused. She dashed into each cabin along the passage, searching everywhere, screaming aloud the little one's name.

"Go up—go up," repeated Wagram. "I'll bring her to you if she's below, but she can't be."

The noise above—the trampling and the hauling—increased. The lowering of the boats had already begun.

"I won't," she screamed. "Oh, my Lily—my little one! Where are you? Oh, God—where are you?"

She turned to dash along the passage. As she did so the ship gave a sudden lurch, flinging open a cabin door with some violence. It came in full contact with the forehead of the frenzied woman, and sent her stunned into Wagram's arms.

"Better so," he said to himself as he lifted her.

The last boat was lowered and ready—in the settling state of the ship, not far below her taffrail. As she lay alongside a man rushed up from the companion-way bearing a limp, unconscious figure.

"It's Mrs Colville," said Wagram quickly as he handed over his burden. "Her child's lost below; I'm going to look for it."

“Into the boat with you, sir,” ordered the captain decisively. “Not a moment to lose.”

But Wagram’s answer was to make a dart for the companion-way. He disappeared within it.

“Shove off!” cried the captain. “I’m not going to sacrifice a lot of lives for that of one splendid fool. Shove off!”

“Ay, ay, sir.” And at the words, with sudden and cat-like rapidity, two of the boat’s crew sprang upon the captain, who was standing at the rail, and in a trice he was tumbled into the boat, and still securely held while quick, long pulling strokes increased her distance from the sinking ship.

“No, you don’t, sir,” said the men, restraining with difficulty their commander’s furious struggles. “The old hooker can go down without you for once. Get back to her? No, you don’t. For shame, sir. You’ve got a missis and kiddies waiting at Southampton, remember.”

The captain fumed and swore, and called them every kind of damned mutineer, and worse—in fact, a great deal worse—so much worse that they had to remind him respectfully that the boats containing the women and children must be within easy earshot. Why should he go down with his ship, they pointed out to him, instead of remaining above water to command another? Not the last man to leave her did he say? Well, that couldn’t be helped—if a passenger were such a lunatic as to go below just as she was taking her last plunge.

There was no bombast about Captain Lawes’ intention. While there was a man on board he would not have left her, and in this case he would not have, even though that man, being a passenger, had ignored his authority. But his crew had taken the matter into their own hands.

The steamy sea murk was thickening, and came rolling in from seaward in damp, hot miasmatic puffs. But the settling hull of the Baleka was still discernible with tolerable plainness. To her many a hail was sent but—front her, to their straining ears, none was returned.

“I think, sir,” said young Ransome, the fourth officer, slyly, “that I didn’t quite deserve all you—well, all I got for saying that infernal Red Derelict was unlucky to sight.”

“You damned, impudent, mutinous young dog!” growled the exasperated and captive skipper. “Shut your blasted head. As it is, I’ll log you for mutiny and insubordination and general incompetence. I’ll bust you, out of this service at any rate. See if I don’t, my man.”

The fourth grinned to himself, and said nothing. He was not greatly concerned. He knew his skipper well enough, you see.

“She’s goin’! There she goes!” sang out one of the men.

All eyes were bent on the ship. Her row of lights gave a great heave up, then rapidly disappeared. A heavy, booming cavernous plunge, and then a great volume of white water shot upward in the dimness.

The Baleka had disappeared; but the lives of those on board her were saved so far—all but one.

All but one, we repeat, for the other life which that one had been sacrificed to save was safe too, for at that moment the missing child was being transferred from the boat into which it had been handed in the scurry to the one which contained its still unconscious mother.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Rusted Pistol.

Down—down into the far depths, the weight of a world of water pressing ever down; suffocation, the bursting of myriad stars in a black, roaring sky; then upward, as though hurled by some giant catapult—and—air once more!

Wagram found himself instinctively battling for life amid the tumultuous eddyings that met and swirled above the spot where the hapless Baleka had taken her last plunge.

It was dark—darker than it had been, for the sea mist had deepened, shutting out the stars, shutting out everything around, shutting out in turn the sight of an exhausted man battling for life with the whole immensity of a vast ocean, keeping afloat by mere mechanical instinctive effort.

It seemed ages since he was sucked down by the sinking ship; in reality, it was hardly a minute. Providentially he had returned on deck before the last plunge, and, seeing that it was now or never, had leaped into the water, and struck out for all he knew how. Thus he had not come within the inner vortex, and so had risen to the surface in due course. He had refrained from shouting when he took his leap, lest one of the boats should return to his rescue and be sucked under herself.

Now he lifted up his voice, but the result was a hoarse whisper. Semi-suffocation, sea water, and exhaustion had done their work, and he was speechless. The boats would certainly lie around in the faint, forlorn hope that he might have got clear of the wreck. One hail might reach them, yet he was speechless. Aid was at hand—yet, O God! he must drown like a dog in the midst of the black, oily, midnight sea.

Then he felt contact with something, and instinctively he grasped it. It was a deck-chair, a large, closely-woven wicker chair; and, though it would not support his weight, at any rate it would serve to lighten it, to ease the strain upon his sole unaided efforts. He looked around for more substantial wreckage, but the mist and the darkness combined rendered it impossible to have descried even a boat, had such been within a few yards of him. But even for this miserable support he felt thankful.

Yet who may imagine the horror of those awful hours to the waif floating there in the silent, midnight sea—the solitude, the hopelessness, the consciousness that every hour was but prolonging his agony? The tropical water was warm, or numbness would have supervened, and claimed its victim long before the day should dawn upon the face of the deep; and, realising this too, again he felt thankful.

But now came the terror of another thought. The tropical waters, if warm, abounded in sharks. The unutterable horror of it! Here he was as completely at the mercy of the ravenous monsters as a worm thrown into a stream is at the mercy of the first fish that comes along. Death was one thing—such a loathsome and agonising form of it as this was another. Against it—in spite of his faith, which was great—all that was human in the man cried out in dread and recoil.

So the dark hours wore on, and as they did so a merciful lethargy came upon his mind and imaginings; and, with his frail support, but the smallest and most mechanical of efforts sufficed to keep him afloat on the salt, buoyant surface of the tropical sea.

Day dawned—yet what hope did it bring? Soon the fire rays of a furious tropical sun would beat down upon his unprotected head, burning his brain into molten pitch. With the dawning the mist had thinned, and though it still lay in hot, steamy folds yet a greater area of the surface was visible. And now to the waif was vouchsafed the first gleam of a great hope. Athwart the shadowy dimness an object was visible—an object long, low, and substantial. A ship!

Again he essayed his voice. This time his efforts were able to compass a feeble raucous shout. Help at last! Rescue! Oh, he would make them hear this time.

The sight sent new life through him. Mustering all his strength he struck out, yet not abandoning his frail support, ever with hopeful gaze strained upon that blessed ark of refuge—and then—and then—

The mist curtain rolled back farther, and it was as though some demon had been mocking him. There lay the ship, but she was nigh flush with the surface as she lay log-like upon the water, still and lifeless. Two jagged stumps of masts arose from her, and tattered fragments of rusty ratlines scraped her rusty sides. The unutterable stillness of her was the unearthly eloquent silence of a dead ship upon a dead sea. It was the Red Derelict again.

How had they come together once more? But a few hours ago he and others had gazed with curiosity upon this dead hulk from the deck of the bounding powerful steamship pulsating with life as she swept past. Now the live steamship was gone for ever to the utmost extremity of the far depths; but the dead hulk rode on, riding, as it were, throughout eternity upon a dead sea.

For the first few moments of this revelation the revulsion of feeling was so great, so overwhelming to the despairing waif, that he was tempted to cast away his frail support, and, abandoning all further effort, let himself sink for ever. One brief struggle, then rest—at least, so he trusted, so he ventured to hope. But to that some mysteriously conscious voice of good counsel seemed to reply that the gift of life was not to be voluntarily relinquished even then, that he had been brought back from the very depths of the sea, that a means of support, frail though it was, had been literally thrust into his hand, and now here was an even more substantial form of temporary safety. He remembered, too, how this wreck had been drifting for years, and was occasionally sighted by passing vessels; who could tell but what it might be the means of safety for himself, desperate and, humanly speaking, hopeless, as his plight now was? He decided that he would get on board the derelict; and no sooner had he come to this decision than he saw that the sooner he should carry it into effect the better, and that for reasons very weighty, very imminent indeed.

A dark, glistening object was moving above the surface, and well he knew what it represented. It was the dorsal fin of a shark.

As yet it was some little way off, moving slowly, and not coming in his direction. This was something; but as he strained every effort now to reach the derelict it seemed that even that weird refuge was a Heaven-sent one. But it seemed, too, that the hulk was receding from him as fast as he was approaching it. He remembered the captain's dictum as to the strange action of currents. What if a current were moving it faster than he could move? He looked round. The glistening fin seemed almost stationary, but—it was nearer. Yes; he felt sure it looked larger.

Often from the deck of a ship he had looked down upon the grim monsters of the deep with an interest enhanced by a sense of absolute security. Now, here he was, floating helplessly in their natural element. Small wonder that his whole being should recoil, his flesh creep at the realisation of his utter helplessness.

There was no mistake about it now. The thing was coming straight towards him, and—the hulk was quite twenty yards away. What, too, if there were more of them?

Nearer, nearer, came that cruel glide, and still he could make but slow headway. He would have abandoned the deck-chair, and so got along faster, but for an inspiration that, perhaps, the strange appearance of it might scare the sea-tiger, suggesting possibly to its instinct the idea of a trap. The beast was very near now.

Wagram began splashing mightily, at the same time uttering as loud a shout as he could compass—and that was not very loud. It seemed to answer, though. The gliding

triangular fin became motionless; then, as if the great fish had altered its course, it turned broadside on, as though concluding to manoeuvre a little further before closing.

Now the hulk was almost within grasp. Two or three strokes, and the waif was about to seize the taffrail, when he was conscious of a swirl beneath him. Rising from under the keel of the derelict came into view a monstrous shape. It stamped itself upon his brain—the gleaming white belly, the snake-like writhe of the tail, the great open mouth with its rows of awful teeth, and then—those teeth closed with a snap upon the deck-chair, which Wagram had, with rare quickness and presence of mind, thrust down where his legs had been when the rush was made, and, before the sound of the crunching of wood and wicker was stilled, by a mighty effort he had hoisted himself on board the hulk.

It was a near thing. He stood for a moment chest-deep on the submerged main deck, then clambered up to the poop and looked forth. The dark, glistening fin which had first alarmed him was still moving lazily at about the same distance off; but immediately beneath, the fragments of the deck-chair and the lashings and soundings of the monster that had tried to seize him made him vividly realise the awful peril from which he had escaped. It seemed as if the evil beast had indeed bitten off more than it could chew, for it darted to and fro, and sank and rose again in quite an abnormal way, as though seriously uneasy within.

The first feeling produced in Wagram by the sight was one of intense thankfulness, and yet his position was still desperate enough in all conscience. Here he was, on board a waterlogged hulk in mid-ocean without a scrap of food or a drop of water. He had a brandy flask which he had filled and put in his pocket with an eye to emergencies on the occasion of the first alarm, but that was all. Still, he would not by any means abandon hope. The idea uppermost in his mind was less that he had escaped so far than that he had been preserved—and if he had been preserved it was with some good reason. So far, too, he felt neither hunger nor thirst—his immunity from the latter perhaps due to his prolonged submersion. The poop deck was dry—in fact, very dry—and if he wanted to reach the forecastle he had only to wade along the main deck.

He glanced around seaward. The mist had completely disappeared, and from sky-line to sky-line the sea was open—open and blank; not a speck, not a sail. The hope which had sprung up within him that when the mist lifted some or all of the Baleka's boats might be in sight was dispelled. He was alone.

Turning, he glanced down. Some loose rusty iron lay at his feet, remnants of the old rigging. This he was turning idly over when an object attracted his attention. Stooping, he picked it up. It was a pistol, a five-chambered revolver, but the woodwork of the stock had all but rotted away, and even as he held it something came off it and fell on the

deck. Picking this up he examined it, then nearly dropped it again. The thing was of metal, and had come loose from the rotting wood. It, like the rest of the metal, was red with rust; but now, as Wagram stood staring at it, he thought he must be dreaming. It was a nameplate which had been let into the stock of the weapon, and through the rust there stood forth two letters—"E.W."

Half dazed, he stared at the thing; rubbed his eyes, and stared again. Then he examined the pistol itself. No; there could be no mistake about it. The weapon had belonged to his brother. He ought to know it, if anybody ought, for it had been a present from himself when Everard had first left home years ago, and he himself had specially designed the fashioning of the initials on the nameplate—"E.W." It was a five-chambered weapon, too, and five-shooters were not so common as six. And now—and now here it was, here it came into his hands again, on board a battered and abandoned hulk which seafaring authority had pronounced to have been afloat in its battered and derelict condition for years. What mystery—what awful mystery of the deep lay behind this?

For long he stood gazing at the relic in his hand. It had been a powerful weapon, one of large and heavy calibre. Did its presence here bear silent witness to an unseen and buried tragedy; to a grim fight for life here on this ghostly craft before she had been abandoned to her endless driftings? What ghastly remnants of such might even then be lying below within her hull, perhaps even of the man to search for whom he had travelled over half the world—sepulchred for ever beneath the water which precluded any further exploration of the fabric? Again, was it for this that he himself had been so wonderfully preserved—that he might light upon this long-forgotten object to serve as a clue in his further search? Who might say?

Now a great drowsiness came over him—the drowsiness of exhaustion—and, almost without knowing it, he sank down upon the deck. One thing he did half instinctively, half mechanically, and well was it for him he did so. That was to divest himself of his coat, and with it shelter his head from the fierce sun rays. Then he fell into a profound sleep—the slumber of exhaustion.

The red sun sank like a great globe in the smoky offing of the tropical sky. The intense heat of the day was about to give place to the dews of night, which, however, served to abate but little of the sultriness; though relief from the burning rays was something to be thankful for, thought those in the boats. But before the rush of night should settle down with its accustomed rapidity an incident was in store for them. A dark object lay outlined against the lurid sky-line. Quickly, eagerly glasses were brought to bear. Those who had not got glasses hung no less eagerly on the result. A ship?

But more than a smothered curse broke from those who saw.

“It’s only that derelict again,” burst from young Ransome, the fourth officer, wearily. “Only that derelict—that damned Red Derelict. We’ve seen enough of her.”

And the boats of the Baleka, with their castaway freight, held on their course, running before a light breeze which had sprung up with sunset, leaving behind them the Red Derelict with its one human passenger—the missing one from among themselves who had thrown away his own life to save that of a child who was already safe. And he lay, still fast asleep, with his coat over his head, drifting away with the grim hulk—away, away, over the pathless plain of the vast lonely sea.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

A Break-up at Bassingham.

We have hinted that Wagram's departure on his self-imposed quest had taken place quite quietly; nevertheless, after it he was very greatly missed, by none more so, perhaps, than the Haldanes. To Haldane, indeed, he had confided some inkling of his strange mission—not the whole of it—but had bound him to secrecy: for the benefit of the neighbourhood at large, certain family and business matters had necessitated the undertaking, and with this the neighbourhood must perforce rest content. Then, as time wore on, and nearly each few and far between letter, instead of announcing the wanderer's early return, only notified a fresh start farther afield and in a contrary direction, Haldane grew puzzled.

"Confound the fellow! Why the deuce can't he come back instead of wasting time and energy over some wild-goose chase?" he would say on such occasions. "It isn't that he's fond of travel, and all that sort of thing. I believe at bottom he hates it."

"I'm sure he does, father," chimed in Yvonne. "Every day away from Hilversea is a day not lived, according to him. And the place looks so dismal all shut up. I vote we go away for a change ourselves."

"Wrong time, Sunbeam. The weather's exceptionally beastly abroad, from what the papers say. And the Continent in vile weather is—well, unfit for publication."

"I'd have liked to take Delia Calmour with us," went on the girl. "She's so companionable and intelligent, and takes such interest in everything; never talks the silly idiotic bosh most girls do. She'd have enjoyed it so much, too."

"Poor girl!" said Haldane. "It's a thousand pities she's so confoundedly handicapped. She'll never get a show now on the strength of those awful relatives. Yes; it's a thousand pities."

In saying that the absent Squire of Hilversea was missed by none more than by the Haldanes we should have recorded an exception, and it was named Delia Calmour. To her it seemed that the light of day had gone out. And yet, why? It had been seldom enough she had seen him of late before his departure; and even on such occasions, a little ordinary conversation in his quiet genial way. That was all. And yet—and yet—the girl would cheerfully have yielded up life itself to have heard once more the sound of his voice in just one of those ordinary conversations. To such a pass had things come.

But she kept her own counsel heroically. Never by word or look did she betray herself. Even Clytie was puzzled. She had read through her up to a certain point, but had failed to credit her sister with the secretiveness and self-control to the highest point of which the latter had nearly attained. So she was puzzled.

To her dying day Delia would never forget the announcement of that departure. It had been made to her one Sunday when she had cycled over to Hilversea by Wagram himself, in his pleasant easy manner, and she had received it with a frank natural regret, that came from her well. Not all at once did she realise that she had received a blow between the eyes.

"Be missed?" he had repeated, echoing her words. "Well, I am selfish enough to hope I shall be missed a little. One thing is certain: I sha'n't stop away any longer than I can help. I'm not going for fun, anyhow."

Then he had invited her in for lunch. The Haldanes were there, and Father Gayle, and on this occasion four or five other people; in fact, it was a sort of "send-off" affair, for he was to start early on the following morning.

"I shan't stay away any longer than I can help," had been the words, uttered in an easy natural way. Yet he who uttered them knew that in the event of his quest proving successful he would stay away—for ever. But there he sat, chatting with his guests easily, smilingly, as though his very heart were not half broken over the thought of what was about to pass away from him and his for ever. And the girl? She too was chatting, outwardly light-hearted, with her immediate neighbours, or joining in the general conversation, and the while she, too, in her innermost heart was thinking what an awful blank this man's departure would leave in her life; in it, moreover, as long as it should last. Here was an instance of the extraordinary freaks which may run through life's tragedies. Who would have thought of the ghastly canker which lay behind Wagram's easy gaiety? Who would have guessed at the yearning ache which underlay Delia Calmour's ready conversational flow?

"Who is that Miss Calmour?" one of the guests had remarked to Yvonne after they had left the table. "Such a pretty girl, and talks so well and brightly. So nice-mannered and refined. Does she belong to this neighbourhood?"

And Yvonne had replied evasively, though not seeming to do so, that she did, and that she was all the other had said; that the dear old Squire had taken to her wonderfully shortly before his death, and that she herself had grown very fond of her. Then she let drop that Delia was a recent convert, which at once prepossessed the inquirer in her favour, as she intended it should.

The acquaintance of the two girls had grown into friendship, then intimacy, the difference between their ages and bringing up notwithstanding. It had still further brought out all that was good in Delia; and what was good in the eldest daughter of disreputable, tippling old Calmour was, strange to say, very good indeed; and, as is not infrequently the case, a certain amount of knowledge of the seamier side of life rendered her all the more safe and useful a companion to the younger girl, every day of whose existence had been spent in sunshine. She had the tact not to push her standpoint unduly—indeed, more than once Yvonne wanted to half quarrel with her because she would hardly ever come over to see them without a distinct invitation. But when she did come she always entered so thoroughly into the child's studies and pursuits—painting or music, or whatever it might be, especially the latter, and the organ in the chapel at Hilversea underwent a good deal of work in those days, for the girls would delight to cycle over, and enjoy a long quiet practice all to themselves. Frequently Haldane would make the third of the party, for he had a fine voice, and was fond of music.

Then Wagram had gone, announcing his departure suddenly; and the only mitigating gleam of sunshine which flashed into Delia's life was on occasions when she was over at the Haldanes and they talked about him. This they did pretty frequently, and the burden of their remarks ought to have rendered the absent man uncomfortably conceited could he have heard them.

The two boys, too, when home for the holidays, for Gerard always spent his at Haldane's now his home was shut up, took to her wonderfully. She would enter into all their interests and school experiences as though she were an elder sister, and was full of life and fun when and wherever they were concerned.

"That Miss Calmour is a jolly girl, Yvonne," Gerard would pronounce. "No humbug or bosh about her. No; and she never lectures us either, as some people do. I say, get her here a lot before we go back; she's no end fun."

And Reggie would duly second the proposal. Delia had, in fact, won both their hearts, but the one nearest to her own was Gerard. She would, too, subtly get him to talk about his father, but not too often.

"You know, Miss Calmour," he said on one occasion, "people don't half understand the pater. They think him no end cold and stand-offish and all that, but I can tell you he isn't. Why, what d'you think? I was asked once if I weren't awfully afraid of him. Fancy that! Did you ever hear such bosh?"

"Bosh, indeed, Gerard."

“Rather. They seem to think that because he isn’t always talking at the top of his voice, and laying down the law, and all that sort of thing, that he’s stiff and starched. Is he, though! I can tell you there’s no one I can more jolly well get on with—and would rather be with—not even among any of the fellows at school. I wish he’d come back, don’t you?”

“Of course. I should think everybody who knew Mr Wagram would wish that. You miss him a lot, then?”

“Rather. I’m having a ripping time here, of course—always do have—but I miss the dear old pater no end. I don’t see any too much of him as it is.” And the boy had turned away his head to hide the tears that had welled to his eyes.

It was all Delia could do to keep herself from following suit, but she did, with an effort.

“Your father is one of the best and noblest men that ever lived, Gerard,” she answered. “It is a privilege to have known him.”

There were times when she would take herself to task. What right had she to indulge in such feelings? Ought she not rather to crush them? Yet why? Their influence upon her was wholly for good, never for evil. Were her days dark—what would he have had her do? This she thought she knew, and did it accordingly. He had known dark days himself, she had gathered in course of some of their conversations, very dark days, yet look at him now—a man ideally perfect in her adoring estimation. Yes; it was good for her this obsession—doubly good. If she had passed through the fire it was a refining one.

And, strange to say, the helping hand of the absent man seemed stretched over her still. From several quarters came in orders for newspaper work akin to her illustrated venture at Hilversea Court, for articles descriptive of country life and scenery. Clytie, too, found herself receiving almost more typing orders than she could execute. The joint income of Siege House was beginning to look up.

“By Jove, but Wagram is a good chap!” exclaimed Clytie one day with characteristic outspokenness. “This is all his doing, of course. I tell you what it is, Delia, if you don’t bring off my scheme within a reasonable time of his return I’m blest if I don’t cut in myself.”

“Why do you think it’s his doing, Clytie?” had been the answer, ignoring the last threat.

“It wasn’t for nothing he came down here pumping us that day. Well, he is one in a good many thousands, as I shall tell him some day when he’s my bro—”

“Oh, shut up, Clytie. You know I hate that sort of chaff,” interrupted Delia testily, for the remark jarred upon her hideously.

“Right oh!” cried the other, with a good-humoured laugh. “Keep your hair on, dear. You can, too, for it’s all your own, and a jolly good lot of it too—that’s where you dark ones score over us—though I don’t come far behind. Let’s shut up shop now and go for a bike ride. We shall skim over these frost-bound roads; only we’ll get jolly red noses. We can ride to Fulkston, and back through Hilversea—and adore the empty Court in the distance,” she added slyly.

They made an attractive pair as they skimmed along, both sitting gracefully and well; the serene classical features of the one, and the more rich and sparkling brunette beauty of the other, together with the well-formed, graceful figures of both, constituted a picture which caused more than one male head to come round in admiration as its owner half halted.

“The Calmour girls! oh yes, pretty—devilish pretty—but—” constituting the comment, either uttered or thought. But the fourteen-mile ride out, and rather more back, added to the glow of health which mantled each very attractive face.

“There’s the old Court, all shut up,” commented Clytie as the pile rose clear against its background of now naked trees in the bright frosty moonlight. “What a sin to own a place like that and leave it shut up. I wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t you! You’d vote it slow in a month, and start off for town, if I know anything of you,” answered Delia, starting out of a brown study; for they were just passing the very point in the road where Wagram had surprised her while having her fortune told by the gipsy. A little farther, and they came to the scene of the gnu incident. There was the white gate gleaming in the moonlight; but the slumbrous wealth of foliage had given place to bare boughs, forming a frosted network against the winter sky. And with that day there came back to her another—a golden, glowing August day—that Sunday, the last long day of interrupted sunshine—when they had surprised the mysterious stranger and trespasser. Somehow from that day the rising of the cloud had seemed to date, but of this she said nothing to Clytie.

On arrival home they were met by Bob, looking more than scared.

“About time you came,” he grunted. “Don’t know what’s up with the old man.”

“Oh dear. The usual thing,” said Delia, not scornful now, for she had undergone something of a change in every way.

“No, it isn’t,” returned Bob quickly. “He’s not ‘fresh’ this time, but he’s devilish queer.”

Old Calmour was lying on the sofa, breathing stertorously, and looking, as Bob had said, “devilish queer.”

“Get on your bike, Bob, and go and fetch Thorpe,” commanded Clytie the capable, at the same time loosening her father’s shirt collar.

“Can’t; it’s punctured.”

“Take mine, then. Only—go.”

“Good Lord, Clytie! But it’s not serious, eh?”

“Go—d’you hear, you jackass,” she repeated, with a stamp of the foot. “And bring him back with you. None of his—‘look round directly.’ Bring him back with you.”

The old man lay, staring up at them, his red and bloated face showing no sign of recognition; and on the prompt arrival of the doctor they were not long in learning that it never would again, for in less than an hour old Calmour was dead. Stroke, greatly accelerated by intemperate habits, was the medical verdict.

“What’s to be done now, Delia?” remarked Clytie a day or two after the funeral, while she and her sister were holding a serious council of war—or rather of ways and means. “What the very devil is to be done? We can’t go on running Siege House at our rates of pay, and the poor old dad didn’t leave a cent.”

This was a fact. The sale of the furniture would not put them in funds to any great extent. Old Calmour’s pension had died with him, and there were three boys to keep at school. Well, this, of course, was out of the question. Bob would have to live on the by no means princely salary he received from Pownall and Skreet, and very blue did the said Bob look over the prospect. One thing was certain: the household would have to be broken up.

The funeral, as may be imagined, had not been largely attended; in fact, except the dead man’s family, hardly anybody had been present One of these exceptions had been Haldane, and the circumstances had appealed to the girls with a very real sense of appreciation.

“I expect he turned up on your account, Delia,” Clytie had remarked. “But it was brickish of him, all the same. By the way, I suppose there’s a sort of freemasonry among your people. If you hadn’t joined them he wouldn’t have shown up.”

“I don’t know about that; it may have been on account of our acquaintance. But it was just the sort of thing Mr Haldane would do,” answered Delia.

Incidentally, we may remark that, whatever the motive, it was not the last thing that Haldane did for this unfortunate family, now reduced to real straits, after it had been decided to give up Bassingham and remove to the metropolis—that universal, and frequently illusory, refuge for those who “have their way to make.”

Chapter Thirty.

Concerning a Terror.

A dark, comparatively cool, and restful retreat—a blaze of outside sunshine glimpsed through the aperture of a low doorway. A sense of awaking to yet another phase of passage through the shades; of a weird kaleidoscopic phantasmagoria which represents a wholly or partially suspended consciousness of days or even weeks; of the stirred, uneasy rest of supposed death—such were the first gropings of the mind of him who lay there.

Where was he? A recollection of the battered hulk, heaving to the oily swell; of hunger and thirst—especially thirst; of a furious sun pouring its rays down upon him in molten streams; of a fierce, maddening desire for shade—almost equal to that for cool, liquid drink; for blessed shade, to shut out, if even for one moment, that awful blinding glare—these were the recollections that came upon his mind with the first glimmerings of returning consciousness.

Others followed—a sense of movement, of being borne helplessly onward, through mysterious tracts, to the accompaniment of strange, mysterious voices, and glimpses of weird, dark shapes. Then oblivion—again to be followed by fitful awakenings—but ever to sink again into the same lethargy, the same utter indifference to all things that ever had been, that ever would be—in short, to life itself. And now—and now—Where was he?

He stared upward. A large cockroach dropped from the palmetto ceiling, and scurried away, almost over his face; but he heeded it not. He stared around. The circular wall of the place was uneven and rough. As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, or rather the gloom, he made out that it was the interior of a large hut constructed of grass and withes. Two poles supported the centre, and on these were hung sundry implements of fantastic make and appearance—such as he had seen in museums and private collections representing barbaric trophies of far-off lands. A hum of voices—utterly unintelligible—came from without; and there was that in the very tones which savoured of the scarcely human—at any rate to one whose lines had been cast hitherto exclusively within those of civilisation.

He tried to rise, tottered, and then fell back. He was very weak, far too weak to rise unaided. Things grew dizzy around him. Then the sun strip which cut the gloom was darkened. Somebody had entered; and then he became aware of the presence of two beings—black, and of ferocious aspect, with wool standing out from their heads in stiff, rolled-out spikes, and the white of their eyeballs glistened when the ray of light coming in through the low doorway fell upon it. They bent over him; and having peered into his

face for a moment one of them raised his head with no gentle touch, while the other put a calabash to his lips and poured its contents into his mouth. This at any rate was not an unacceptable operation. The stuff was cool, and had a combination of sweet and acid taste. What it was he had no notion, but he drank gratefully.

"That's good," he ejaculated faintly.

For answer they uttered a clucking sound, and grinned; but the grin was not a genial one—it was hideous, ghastly, showing rows of filed teeth. It reminded him of the shark which had risen to seize him, and had seized the deck-chair instead. As they stood over him, watching him, he took them in—their appearance, their demeanour, their stature. The latter was tall and muscular. For the rest, they looked a pair of about the most ferocious and bloodthirsty savages the imagination could by any possibility conjure up. And yet—they had just been engaged in a distinct work of mercy.

Wagram's brain power began to return. How he had got off—or been got off—the derelict he had not the faintest conception; but obviously he had, since here he was. Then came back to him the captain's pronouncement as to what would happen to anybody unfortunate enough to be stranded on the coast they were then off. "We'd very likely be eaten," had been the dictum. So this "work of mercy" was, in reality, nothing of the sort. It was equivalent to that of doctoring an ailing ox or sheep. He was being brought back into fitting condition for butchery. He was to supply the material for a cannibal feast. And these two ruffians looked the part—every inch.

They had squatted down on the floor, and were watching him, keeping up the while a subdued conversation in a kind of guttural hum. One carried a formidable-looking native axe, and both had big, broad-bladed knives, with a curious crook inward, on the edge side, towards the point. The demoniacal aspect of the pair—the hungry expression of their revolting countenances, as they sat like a pair of evil beasts watching their expected prey—was too much for Wagram's nerves, all defenceless as he was, and absolutely in their power. He tried asking them questions, but, of course, they did not understand one word he said. They did not even shake their heads, but sat staring at him as before. So he gave it up, and made signs that he wanted to go to sleep. This seemed intelligible, and they rose, and with an evil, snarling chuckle left the place.

This was a relief at any rate. Where was he? speculated the castaway. Where was he, and how far from the sea-coast? What would be his fate—alone, unarmed, helpless, in the power of such as these? Even if he were not to be butchered immediately—all sorts of visions rose before his mind, of lifelong slavery in the interior, or figuring prominently in some ghastly and hideous human sacrifice on a gigantic scale. Heaven help him! And then Heaven did help him to this extent. Whether due to the effects of the potion that

had been administered to him, or to the weakness following upon all that he had gone through, a lassitude came over him, and, forgetful of surroundings—of present or future peril—he fell fast asleep.

While he slept, in another part of the native town things were happening. The two who had entered the hut were haranguing others of their kind—all of similarly hideous aspect; but, on the other hand, it might have been observed that this race, whatever it was, Nature had exceptionally favoured in thews and stature. Low howls, and beast-like, of savage delight greeted the words, echoed more shrilly by women hanging on to the outskirts of the gathering. These began to produce knives and examine the edges; then the whole rout moved with one consent towards a hut rather larger and more important-looking than the rest on the outskirts of the town. Into this one of the number entered—one of the two, it may be remarked, who had just come away from "tending" Wagram on his awaking to consciousness.

But if he entered he could not have remained there long, and his method of egress must have been artificially hastened, for in a moment he shot forth again, half stumbling, half running. Behind him, beneath the low verandah, now appeared another man.

From this man's lips there rolled forth thick and fast a very torrent of imprecation, and that in about six of the different dialects understood in those parts. Anyhow, it was intelligible to these, for they shrank back for the moment quiet and abashed. And, in truth, this was not without justification, for there was something in the man's aspect that was absolutely terrific as he stood there confronting the savage mob with the aspect of a slave-master, whip in hand, standing over a mob of cowering slaves. Yet these were not cowering, far from it. He was very tall and athletic. His face, strong and hawk-like, half covered by a heavy beard, was working with passion; but it was in his eyes, bright and piercing beneath the shaggy brows, that the charm seemed to lie. They were absolutely snake-like in their flash of demoniacal cruelty—eyes of one who delighted to look upon all that against which human nature revolts; eyes that, when moved to wrath, blasted; eyes of a very fiend, in short. Yet among those who crowded before him were eyes every whit as cruel, among those before him were frames every whit as sinewy and athletic—and all these were armed, and he to all appearance was not. But—he was a white man.

They stood sullenly while he invoked every mysterious and terrible imprecation of sorcery upon themselves and their fathers and mothers, upon their children unto the third and fourth generations—dooming them to awful and mysterious forms of dissolution for daring to invade his privacy and disturb his rest. They waited through it all; for quite a new and unwonted form of hideous enjoyment lay now before them. Then their clamour broke forth afresh.

This white stranger they had taken from the water, whom they had borne carefully over this weary distance in order to bring to life again. He was alive again, and could see and hear and talk. Him now they must have. The feast to which they had been looking forward must now begin.

And the ghastly proposal was confirmed with a roar, whose vibrating savagery was sufficient to have appalled the most iron-nerved who should set himself to withstand this clamouring of fiends.

This one, however, must have been iron-nerved beyond the ordinary, for he did set himself to withstand it and that deliberately. He laughed—an evil, sneering, yet wholly mirthful laugh. What? Did they not know him yet, to think that they were in a position to come and lay commands upon him? Upon him? The stranger was not to be touched—for the present; no, not until he should give the word—and death should fall upon whoever laid a hand upon him; yes, and upon the whole town for that matter.

They hesitated. Perhaps the qualification "for the present" may have had something to do with determining their attitude. It was only a joy postponed, then. But their awful appetites had been whetted, and needed some appeasing. A murmur—soon growing to a shout—arose among the group. Atonement ought to be made for the feast they were not to have. He who refused it to them had plenty of slaves; he would give them one of them. And then they named one of his favourite female slaves.

He, for answer, looked at them, and laughed again—the same sneering, contemptuous laugh. Then he called aloud a name.

In a moment there came hurrying round from the back of the palisades a woman—a young woman, tall and finely formed, with rather a pleasing countenance, and lighter in colour than those here. She stood in an attitude of obeisance. Then the man—the white man—said:

"Take her."

A howl went up; ferocious, beast-like, as the howl of a pack of wolves. The crowd surged forward, and a score of hands were laid upon the wretched creature. She struggled and screamed at sight of the fiend-like faces and brandished knives, wailing forth despairing entreaties to her master, who, not one whit less fiend-like than these black barbarians, looked stolidly on, finally repeating "Take her." Then he turned and re-entered the hut, to fling himself down and resume in a moment his disturbed sleep.

The sun was dipping lower and lower, flooding the tree tops with his hot, steamy, but golden light. One wretched victim would behold it no more—one more wretched victim whom human-shaped demons were dragging off to the accustomed shambles to furnish them with one more awful, indescribable feast.

Chapter Thirty One.

A Dark Place of the Earth.

Wagram awoke, feeling strangely strong and well, considering all he had gone through. Moreover, he felt hungry. The stuff that had been administered to him must have worked wonders, for to it he attributed his sudden cure. He must have slept more than the whole round of the clock, for now there was no mistaking the feeling of early morning.

He rose and looked outside. The sun had not yet risen, and there was a freshness in the atmosphere not to be missed even in the most torrid climate just at the hour of dawn. He stepped forth and looked around. The town seemed wrapped in slumber, and now he was able to take in something like its extent. There seemed no end to the palmetto huts, not only filling a large open space but straggling into the surrounding foliage—the whole not devoid of a certain picturesqueness, but utterly, unqualifiedly, savage. A shadow fell between himself and the now rising sun.

He turned, to behold a tall, evil-looking barbarian armed with a formidable axe. In him he thought to recognise one of the two who had visited him the day before, and now he strove to convey by signs that he wanted water for a wash. Clearly he was understood, for the other lifted up his voice in a harsh guttural shout. Immediately there appeared a woman, an ugly, brutal-looking creature, whose countenance bore no more human an expression than that of the male. She, in obedience to an order, withdrew, soon to reappear with a big calabash bowl of cloudy water. Into this he gratefully plunged his head, and managed to indulge in a fairly invigorating splash; the while the pair stood watching him with wooden indifference. Then he made signs that food would be acceptable. These, too, were understood, for presently a big platter of cooked grain was brought. This he attacked with an avidity surprising even to himself; and, while thus engaged, more and more collected, standing round, eyeing him with the same indifference, the while exchanging a few remarks among themselves, whose burden, could he have understood, would have utterly put to flight his new-born appetite there and then. But he did not, and as the said appetite began to experience satiety he found himself taking in with considerable interest the outward characteristics of his hosts or captors, or whatever they might be.

But the result was not encouraging; in fact, it was depressing. All were much of the same type as the first he had seen—large, fine specimens physically, but in type of countenance bestial. Young or old, male or female, there was not a single pleasing countenance among the lot. They were utter animals, and evil-looking animals at that.

The hut he had occupied had, in common with the others, a sort of extended porch or verandah running all round. Seated in the shade of this he fell to ruminating over his position. The savages soon grew tired of watching him, and dispersed. Yet others who happened to pass all glanced at him with a stare of curiosity. First of all, where was he, and how soon could he effect a return to civilisation? That he would be able to do this hope now began to tell him. After all, these people, though unprepossessing, had treated him with a certain rough hospitality. No doubt a promise of substantial reward would induce some of them to guide him to some post inhabited by his fellow-countrymen, or at any rate by Europeans. But how was he to convey such promise to their intelligence? You can make signs that you want food or drink, but when it comes to effecting a negotiation of that sort, why, the matter takes on a totally different aspect. Where was he? He assumed that he had been cast ashore somewhere on the west coast of Africa; but, then, that was a sufficiently vague, not to say wide, limitation. Again, was he on the mainland or on an island—and in any case, how far from the sea? He had absolutely no idea at all as to the time which had been consumed in bringing him hither, or even whether he had been taken off the submerged hulk by these natives in their canoes, or whether the derelict had actually gone ashore with him, and they had found him there.

With the thought of the negotiations he put a hand into an inner pocket in search of his notecase. It was not there. Hurriedly, eagerly he searched his other pockets—with like results. It was gone, and with it all means of purchasing anything, for it had contained his stock of ready money for the voyage, and something beyond; in fact, a considerable sum in bank notes. It could not have got lost in the water, for he remembered placing it in a thoroughly secure inner pocket; and this had been nearly the extent of his preparation when it became known they would have to take to the boats. Clearly he had been relieved of it since, and during his unconsciousness, and yet—and yet—what attraction could bank notes—mere slips of uncoloured paper—have for these savages, who seemed to have not the slightest glimmering of civilisation among the lot? With gold it might have been different. However, it was gone, and the consciousness of this was unpleasant, for a penniless man is akin to an unarmed man—helpless—and, however remote from civilisation he may be, the lack of the power of the purse counts for something.

Slowly, wearily, the heat of the day passed, and night drew down once more. To the captive—or guest, whichever he might be—the day was one of intense and depressing monotony. The natives were no more communicative than before; certainly no more friendly. He would have given a great deal for one companion in adversity—no matter whom—even the lowest sample of the forecastle or stoke-hole of the Baleka. He would likewise have given a great deal to have been among the castaways which constituted her boatloads; yet here he was, in comparative safety, on dry land, while they even now might be suffering the last extremities of starvation and thirst. Night drew down, but

brought with it no restfulness; instead it brought forth innumerable cockroaches of large size, which scurried around and over him in the darkness; for, of course, there was no means of lighting the interior of the hut, short of making a fire, and for this it was too hot already.

With the dawn of day he arose—unrested and unrefreshed. His physical wants were cared for, but all efforts to make the people about him understand his anxiety to return to those of his own colour, and his willingness to pay, and pay liberally, for those who should be instrumental in thus returning him, were futile. They could not or would not understand. Utterly weary of sitting still he made up his mind, unless actively opposed, to seek some diversion in a little exploration around on his own account.

He was not opposed, somewhat to his own surprise, and set forth. He passed through the town openly, and making no attempt at concealment. The inhabitants looked up to stare at him as he went by, then went on with what they were doing, this, in most cases, being nothing. Thus he reached the solitude of the surrounding forest.

This was not thick. Clusters of undergrowth here and there, but for the most part it was open below. Strange trees of a species unknown to him afforded an intermittent shade, and here and there an open space, growing tall grass nearly his own height, had to be crossed. He moved carefully, always keeping the sun on one shoulder, always being careful to note any peculiarity of bough or stem, for he had no mind to lose himself. Then suddenly the whole aspect of the vegetation changed.

Only a ridge had effected the sharp demarcation of this change, a low ridge surmounted by a few rocks, yet affording no extent of view on either hand. But here in front the vegetation was thick and profuse, and in parts tangled. Cool and shady, however, and altogether inviting it looked, and Wagram made up his mind to penetrate it, though not to any great depth.

With his wandering a sense of freedom seemed to return to him. It was a relief at any rate to get a change from that gruesome, depressing, savage town, with its repulsive and scowling inhabitants. Here at any rate he was alone with Nature—and there was a certain soothing solemnity in the thought. Then for the first time he noticed an utter absence of life. Nothing moved; no insects flew humming by; no birds piped. Turn his glance which way he would no movement met or distracted it. He was in a dead forest to all intents and purposes, as far as its accompaniment of animal or bird or even insect life was concerned. It began to look a little eerie.

Still, with many a glance back, to make sure of being able to retrace his steps at will, he moved on. Some irresistible influence seemed to be drawing him on, and with every step

a consciousness came upon him of that. Moreover, it seemed that he was no longer alone. Could it be that he was being followed—watched—that the freedom with which he had been allowed to come hence was no freedom at all, but that spying eyes had been upon him all the time, that stealthy steps had dogged his own? And yet, looking back, there was no sign of anything living, let alone anything human, and, stranger still, the sense of a haunting presence was in front rather than behind—a presence drawing him on.

A wave of recoil swept over his being, and he would have returned; yet, strong-minded and of a robust faith as he was, such return under such circumstances, it seemed to Wagram, would be nothing less than a concession to the promptings of a vague superstition wholly contrary to his nature and his creed. He had been ill, he reminded himself, and his vitality lowered, otherwise no such foolish imaginings could have held his mind for one single instant. To be scared of a place because it was silent, and in broad daylight, or at any other time for that matter—why, the thing was too absurd. He resumed his way.

And yet it was not altogether broad daylight either, for now with every few yards the overhanging trees became thicker and thicker, and all beneath lay shrouded in a semi-gloom that was anything but the broad light of day. An overpowering scent of strange tropical plants filled the air—fragrant, yet not altogether, for it seemed charged with a sense of earthiness and decay; and ever above, around, the same deadness of silence, the same weightiness of oppression, as though he were more and more getting outside the world.

He had gone far enough; it was time to turn back. Instinctively he sought his watch, then remembered that it had stopped during his long immersion. Curiously enough, the savages had refrained from robbing him of it, although a glittering bauble should have been far more likely to appeal to their cupidity than a mere collection of apparently useless and utterly unattractive bits of paper. He was about to turn back, accordingly, when something in front attracted and held his gaze.

Two straight rocks about twice his own height stood close together, forming, as it were, a gate—a door, rather—for spanning the aperture thus formed was a beam, and from it dangled a row of human skulls. Facing outward they faced him, and seemed to take on a forced and painful grin, as though still wearing the expression of an agonised death. Motionless they hung—some touching each other, some apart, looking ghastly enough in the drear silence of the forest. Wagram glanced at them with some disgust but no great awe. This, he decided, was the entrance to some shrine of devil-worship, and he would have turned away, rather contemptuous than impressed, but a motive, not altogether one of curiosity, moved him to enter that grim portal.

Once within he gazed around with an increased curiosity. He was in an oval space barely a hundred yards in length. The centre was open, and constituted an amphitheatre, the sides sloping steeply upward, and grown with thick bush. Above this he could see a rough but strong stockade, and surrounding it, disposed at intervals, were more human skulls. He crossed the open space to the farther end of the enclosure cautiously, but there was nothing in the shape of an altar of sacrifice or any implement of death or destruction. At the farther end was a large flat stone, flush with the ground. That might be worth examining.

And now curiosity began to awaken vividly within him. This place was obviously a temple—a court, rather—used for the heathenish and idolatrous rites of this tribe—whatever it might be. He bent over the stone. It was rudely hewn into something of an oblong, and was covered with a dark and greasy coating which might have been dried blood. Yes; it looked like that, and he straightened himself up again, nauseated by the idea.

And then something like a deep, soft sigh fell upon his ears. It came from right in front, and seemed within scarce a yard of him. He looked up, startled, then resisted an impulse to turn and flee. Before him the bush, thick and green, was as an impenetrable wall. Could the sound have proceeded thence? He started again. In the dim recesses formed by the interlacing fronds two eyes were staring at him—two large beady eyes—not shining, but dull and black, and yet more full, more penetrating, than if they had glared.

Every instinct of self-preservation moved him to fall back. The same instinct moved him to keep his own eyes fixed upon that dull, penetrating, fiend-like stare as he did so. What on earth was the thing? he asked himself. A reptile? No; for the eyes were larger than those of the largest serpent known to zoology. Human? No; not that either. He was conscious of a ghastly chilling of the blood within him as he met that horrible stare fixed upon him within the mysterious darkness of the bush screen. He was conscious of something more—that his first instinct of retreat had left him, and was now succeeded by an impulse that compelled him forward, that constrained him to look closer into those awful eyes; and then that same soft, heavy sigh was repeated.

He moved a step forward. One foot was on the flat stone. In a moment the other would have followed it—drawn, impelled by an irresistible force—when a strange humming noise behind him—low, but growing louder and louder—made him pause. Someone was approaching, and that by the way he had come. A quick instinct warned him that it would not be well to be found here prying into what was doubtless some sacred if ghastly temple of mystery held in awe by a race of devil-worshippers. The spell was

broken. Withdrawing his one foot from the stone he looked back, then quickly took cover within the thick bush that lined the slopes of the amphitheatre.

His conjecture proved correct. Hardly was he in hiding than a man appeared, entering through the same opening which had admitted himself—a tall, black man, yet not altogether wearing the same appearance as those among whom his own lot seemed cast. The new arrival scarce glanced from left to right, and, still humming his strange, weird croon, advanced straight to the stone even as he himself had done. Then he halted.

In his place of concealment Wagram was no more than a dozen yards from the new-comer, whose every movement and every expression he could distinguish. The man was unarmed, and nearly naked—a fine, well-built, stalwart savage. He seemed to be gazing before him in expectation mingled with disappointment. Then to the hidden watcher's ears came again that soft, weird sigh.

He in the open heard it too, for a change came over his face and bearing. Uttering a deep-breathed "Ah!" he straightened himself up, then bent forward, and seemed gazing upon exactly the place where those dreadful eyes had appeared. Then his behaviour was strange. Once more he rose erect, and withdrew his foot from the stone, and passed one black hand over his own eyes, as though to shut out those others. Then he moved unsteadily to right and to left, and half turned away—but no. It seemed that some compelling force was upon him too, precluding retreat. Back he would come to the centre again and peer forward, then break away as before. This was repeated several times; then, all at once, he stood motionless. His foot was again raised and placed on the stone, his gaze again bent in eager fascination upon that which lay beyond—then the other foot followed. One step forward—then two—and then—

Something darted forward with lightning-like glance from the bush screen—something long and steel-like and gleaming. It transfixed the dazed savage as he stood, then withdrew almost before the heavy thud of his body sounded on the hard stone surface. There it lay, the limbs twitching in muscular spasms. A final shudder and all was still, except the drip, drip of the life-blood falling upon the surface of the stone.

The spectator's own blood froze within him as he looked. The sight was ghastly and horrifying enough in any case, but looked at in the light of his own circumstances it was doubly so; added to which he now knew the fate from which he himself had escaped. As he took his way out of this hell-pit of horror and cruelty, taking care to keep well within the shelter of the bushes until he should gain the gruesome door by which he had entered, he was wondering what hideous rite of devil-worship he had just witnessed, and recalled with a shudder the weird fascination that had well-nigh compelled him to stand in the other's place.

“The dark places of the earth are full of cruelty,” he recalled as he hurried through the sombre gloom of the silent forest—a hundred times more sombre now—and the air itself seemed weighed down with a scent of blood. In very truth he was in one of “the dark places of the earth.” How, and when, would he find deliverance therefrom?

Chapter Thirty Two.

The Open Door.

Those who have fallen among barbarians have seldom been without the experience of their detainers desiring to hold some kind of converse with them, however hostile the burden of such might be. Wagram, however, was absolutely without this experience, for these people were not only totally unable to communicate with him by word of mouth but showed absolutely no inclination to do so.

He had tried to communicate with them by signs, but found that he might as well have been signalling to the surrounding trees. They stared at him but made no sort of response. His physical wants were mechanically attended to, and that was all. They eyed him with stony indifference, not as another human being out of whom they might or might not extract material advantage, but simply as an ox being fattened for the shambles. This, however, fortunately, he did not know.

The night following upon the horrible event he had witnessed in the forest was one of the most fearful experiences he had ever known. Closer and more miasmatic than ever the atmosphere seemed to weigh him down; and alone in the darkness of the hut, with loathsome insects scurrying around and over him, the whole scene came back in all its vivid ghastliness, and again he saw those dreadful eyes glowering at him, the quick, sudden stab out of nowhere, and the limbs of the stricken savage quivering and contorting on the stone which was spattered with his blood. He groped his way to the door and went outside. Anything would be better than this consciousness of being penned up with these awful memories, to say nothing of the long-legged horrors which rendered rest impossible. He drank in the outer air—heavy, fever-laden as it was—with infinite relief, but not for long. Clouds of stinging insects, mosquitoes and others, soon found him out, and forced him to the conclusion that the legged horrors within, being harmless, were at any rate more tolerable. But it was a wearied wreck of a man, indeed, upon which the second morning dawned.

He was about to set forth upon another round of exploration—no matter what he might discover anything was better than the fearful mental strain involved by sitting still—when he became conscious of an unusual stir among those around, as near akin to excitement as those morose, repellent savages seemed able to reach. A man was coming towards him; and now every fibre of his being thrilled with joy, with an indescribable sense of relief. It was a white man!

A white man, a European! No matter what low outcast from his colour this might be he was a white man—and already Wagram looked upon him as a brother. And yet—and

yet—as the man came up Wagram could not but realise that his first estimate of him was likely to be the true one, and his hopes sank somewhat.

They sank still more—in fact, to zero—as the new-comer stood confronting him. He was a tall man, as tall as himself, but his hard, bearded face was repellent in the extreme, and the fierce glare of his rolling eyes did not inspire confidence.

"Well, pard, are they making you comfortable here?" he began shortly.

"I don't know about comfortable; but if it's a little rough I've no cause for complaint," answered Wagram pleasantly. "At any rate I've escaped with life—though how I got off that waterlogged hulk I haven't the faintest idea."

"I know all about that," interrupted the other roughly. "What I want to know is, how did you get on to her? Eh? How the devil did you get on to her?"

The fierce eyes played upon Wagram's face as though they would penetrate his brain. Decidedly this man was a rough customer—very; still, he was a white man, and might not be so bad at bottom. At any rate he would be susceptible to a very substantial reward. So he told the story of the wreck of the Baleka, and how he himself had nearly gone down with the ship in trying to save a child that had been lost below.

"Serves you devilish well right for interfering in what doesn't concern you," was the reassuring comment on this piece of information. "Look here. Have you the remotest sort of notion as to where you are?"

"A very faint one: somewhere on the west coast of Africa, I take it."

The other laughed harshly.

"That's near enough," he said. "Let me tell you this, then. You're among the most devilish set of cannibal niggers this world ever produced. You'd have been eaten body and bones before this if—it hadn't been for me."

"In that case I cannot be too grateful for your interference; and, as a fellow-countryman, I am going to make further demands upon your kindness by entreating you to show me the way out, to facilitate my return to civilisation. And, I assure you, you will not find me ungrateful."

These last words he pronounced with some diffidence. In the man's very ferocity of roughness Wagram's ear had not been slow to detect a refined accent of speech.

Whatever the other might have come to he was certain that he was of gentle birth, and therefore hesitated to offer him material reward. The next words convinced him that he need have felt no such misgiving.

“What’ll you make it worth my while to land you—say at Sierra Leone, this day month?”

“Anything in reason. You shall name your own price.”

“Suppose I say ten thousand pounds, not a shilling less? How’s that?”

It was an enormous sum, remembering the resources probably at the stranger’s command; yet if Wagram hesitated momentarily it was less on that account than because a misgiving shot across his mind that if he agreed too readily this desperado, from whom he inwardly recoiled more and more, once he had reason to believe he was dealing with a rich man, would hold him captive until he had drained him to the bottom of even his resources; so he answered:

“It’s a stiff figure—very stiff; still, I think I might even promise that.”

“You think, do you? Well, come this way.”

He turned abruptly, Wagram following. As they passed between the palmetto huts the forbidding inhabitants raised their heads to stare for a moment, then dropped them stolidly again. They walked on in dead silence, for the stranger uttered no further word. They passed into the forest, still quite close on the outskirts of the town, and came suddenly upon a strong stockade. Before the gate of this several savages stood as though mounting guard. They were fully armed with large, wicked-looking spears, axes, and great curved-bladed knives.

“I don’t allow them any rotten gaspipe guns,” said the stranger grimly; “only things they know how to use. And they do know how to use these, by God! Look there.”

Wagram looked. They had reached the gate by this time. Within the enclosure were clustered a number of human beings chained together in couples by the leg. The place was in a state of indescribable filth, and the personal appearance of its occupants recalled to Wagram that of the wretched victim of yesterday.

“Prisoners?” he said.

The other nodded, then led the way on again. Soon a hum of voices greeted Wagram’s ears, and at the same time a horrible acrid odour assailed his nostrils.

“Takes a little getting used to, doesn’t it?” said his guide. “Look!”

Wagram looked, and then felt as if he must be sick. They had reached an open space; in it several men were at work—at work on the most congenial occupation of all to savages—that of butchery.

“This is their slaughter-house,” went on the stranger. “What’s the matter?”

For, with an exclamation of horror and disgust, Wagram had turned away, had turned his back upon what he had momentarily glimpsed. No mere glimpse of an ordinary slaughter-house had this been, repulsive and revolting as such a sight might be. In this case the victims were human.

“Good heavens!” he ejaculated, glaring at the other with loathing. “And you allow this—you—a white man?”

“I’m not going to interfere with the harmless little customs of my people—not likely,” was the reply, accompanied by a hideous laugh. “Well, if it’s too much for your weak nerves, come away. But—what do you say to my offer now?”

“I’ll take it. I don’t care how soon I leave this place; in fact, I’ll even increase the figure if you get me out at once.”

“I thought so. Well, it’ll be worth your while. You may take that from me—and the sooner the better. Shall we say fifteen thousand if you start to-morrow?”

“Yes; but you know you will have to trust me. I have no means of identification nearer than England.”

The other nodded.

“Seems strange, doesn’t it?” he said, “but I felt I could do that from the very first. I’ve had no fool of an experience in my time, you see, and I know one man from another when I see him. Now, I knew you weren’t a liar directly I clapped eyes on you; I knew, too, you were a coiny chap, never mind how—there’s something I can read these things by. See here, I don’t want to rush you through this business; think it over. I’ll look round at sundown, and then we’ll draw up our little agreement.”

This sounded well. If he were rough the man seemed not without a sense of fair dealing. Wagram was duly impressed; yet he need not have been, for the stranger’s real motive

was a very different one. He had purposely taken Wagram to see one of "the sights" of the place which he knew would revolt and horrify him; now his object was to give him time to think about it; time and solitude could not fail to work the horror deeper into his system—so would his own terms meet with readier acceptation.

At the hut Wagram had occupied the stranger left him; and now, alone once more, the revulsion of feeling was well-nigh oppressive. He would soon be away from here, would soon be back in the home that he loved, and among those who loved him. This horrible experience—well, it, coming as the culminating point to his wanderings, had effected a certain sort of mental cure. Looking back, it seemed as if he had needed a mental shaking-up and—he had got it. Yes; he had been making an idol of "the pride of life," and that pride had received a sudden, perhaps necessary, fall. What act of thanksgiving could he make for this unlooked-for deliverance? was his first thought as he found himself alone once more. The dank shades of the tropical forest, the repulsive picturesqueness of the savage town, the acrid odour of blood which still seemed to hang upon the air—all had faded now—had given way to the hawthorn hedges and running streams around Hilversea Court, as the splendid old pile arose against its background of embowering elms; the wholesome, clear English sunlight instead of the sickly tropical glare; the scent of innumerable wild flowers and the glad shout of the cuckoo, and, with it all, deeper and holier thoughts, enshrined amid the associations of the dearly-loved place; and then—he started wide awake.

"Here I am!" was saying the strong, harsh voice of the stranger. "Been asleep? Well, you'll feel the better for it."

"I believe I have," said Wagram, sitting up. "Well, have you brought the draft of our agreement?"

"Ay, ay! here it is. Look through it and see if it's all ship-shape."

Wagram read the document carefully. It was short, even to conciseness, and set forward how the undersigned was to pay the bearer the sum of fifteen thousand pounds, within fifteen days of being landed at Sierra Leone, in consideration of having been landed there within one month from date.

"You have a code cable with your solicitors, of course?" said the stranger. "You can have the cash cabled there?"

"Yes; I have a code cable. But you say 'the bearer.' Why not have it paid in to your own name?"

“That’s my business,” was the answer. “For the rest, is it all ship-shape?”

“Certainly. But it’s only fair to warn you that I doubt if it’s particularly sound from a legal point of view. It isn’t witnessed, for one thing.”

“Legal point of view be damned. Didn’t I tell you you don’t look like a liar—and I know men? It’ll be good enough if you sign it.”

“Thanks,” said Wagram pleasantly. “You won’t find yourself far out in that deduction.”

“Got a wife perhaps, who’s anxious about you, eh?”

“No; I haven’t got a wife—not now.”

“Ah! had, then. Family you want to get back to?”

“Only one son—a boy at school. But he won’t have heard of the wreck, and if he did wouldn’t connect it with me fortunately. I took passage in the Baleka at the last moment, and didn’t even cable it home. By the way, some of these amiable people have relieved me of my pocket-book, and there were some notes in it. I don’t know whether they can be persuaded to disgorge.”

“Perhaps. But if we start from here to-morrow there’ll hardly be time.”

“No; I suppose not. Never mind, then,” was the easy answer, for the starting to-morrow had a soothing ring, beside which the loss was a mere trifle. But the speaker little thought how his listener had already made up his mind to have those notes in his own possession before the dawning of another day—incidentally, it might be, at the cost of a life or two.

The smoky rays of the sinking tropical sun shot in through the open doorway, illumining the gloomy interior. The stranger had brought a pen and ink with him—strange accessories of civilisation in that remote haunt of barbarous man-eaters. A wooden native stool did duty as a desk, and Wagram, squatted on the floor, proceeded to affix his signature: “Wagram Gerard Wagram.”

“Will that do?” he said, glancing up. Then he started in amazement, not undashed with alarm; for the other, who had been standing over him, emitted a sort of gasp. His face seemed to contract, then harden as he glared at the paper, then at the man who held it.

“That your name?” he said, and his voice took on a sort of growl.

“Yes; of course,” was the wondering answer.

“That’s your name—your real name?” repeated the stranger, and the growl in his voice and the stare of his eyes seemed full of menace and hate.

“Yes; that’s my name, and there it is,” answered Wagram firmly, yet not without a dire foreboding over the extraordinary effect it seemed to produce.

“Yes—of course. Ho-ho! That’s your name—Wagram Gerard Wagram! Of course it is—of course. Ho-ho!” And, snatching up the paper, the other went out of the hut, leaving behind him the echo of his mocking tones and savage, sneering laughter.

Chapter Thirty Three.

The Closed Door.

The stranger walked slowly across to his own quarters in a frame of mind very unwonted with him. Something had moved him—moved him powerfully. A new vista opened before him, and what a promise of the good things of life did he behold. The past, too, came before him, but it he put aside with sneering and bitterness.

Two female slaves greeted him with subservient smiles. They were not of this race, but had been brought from much farther inland. They were much lighter in colour, physically fine symmetrical specimens, and not without good looks. Their smiles he returned with a frown that made them cower.

"No more of these," he muttered in English, staring at them. "White—red and white—white and gold—golden hair—volumes of it—every kind. Aha! No more of this soot."

They cowered still more before his stare, wondering which of their recent or further back delinquencies had come to his knowledge or what their fate would be. But now he ordered them to begone, and, while trying not to show their relief, they lost no time in obeying.

He got out a bottle of rum and poured out a strong, stiff measure. This he tossed off like water. The beginning of a debauch? Oh no. This man knew better than that. He was never seen intoxicated—he valued his influence too much—and were he once seen in a state of incapacity he knew full well that his influence would be gone; further, that it would not be long before his life followed. There were times, however, when he had taken enough liquor to have sent two ordinary hard-headed men to the ground, and at such times the black savages among whom he dwelt were careful to give this white savage a very wide berth indeed. That was all.

His private quarters were in no way ringed off from the rest of the town, in which was reason. No combination could thus be formed against him, or any hostile plan unknown to himself be carried out, as might be the case were he more shut away. But his huts were better and more spacious than the rest, that mostly occupied by himself attaining almost to the dignity of a bungalow—and, indeed, in such dread was this place held that his possessions were as sacred as though guarded by iron safes. For the acquisitive savage had found it unhealthy to pilfer from this his white brother. At first he had tried it. One attempt had been met by a wholly unlooked-for shot, killing the offender. On another occasion a large and heavy knife had fallen unexpectedly from nowhere, penetrating the brain of the would-be thief, with similar result. This was the more

singular in that at the time of both attempts he whom they would have plundered was about fifty miles away, so that it needed not many recurrences of further disaster—in each case mysterious, and taking a varying form—to render this man's goods absolutely safe.

The secret of the extraordinary ascendency of this white savage over the black, apart from the fact that he never interfered in the slightest degree with their manners and customs, especially when he had led them personally in some sanguinary and victorious raid, may have lain in the fact that he tolerated no opposition. If he considered his subordinate devils had a real grievance he would listen to it and redress it, and of this we have seen at least one gruesome instance. Otherwise he simply rose up and killed the offender—killed him with his own hand.

Now he went outside his house, called a name, and issued an order. In the result, about three quarters of an hour saw him in possession of Wagram's pocket-book. This he proceeded to investigate with quite unwonted hurry. A few visiting cards and the notes Wagram had mentioned were all it contained. The latter he put aside. Cash was always—cash.

For Wagram himself another long, trying, well-nigh sleepless night was in store—a night of wearing suspense, and the certainty of a most dreadful disappointment. For he could not disguise from himself the consciousness that something had gone suddenly wrong—that the train of the negotiation had, at a certain point, left the rails—for what otherwise could be the meaning of the sudden change of tone and manner on the part of the stranger directly the agreement was completed? Had he merely been fooling him with promises of escape until he had put his name to a document binding him to pay down a very large sum? At first blush it looked like this, but further reflection served to show that, failing his own co-operation, the document was useless for the purpose of obtaining one single shilling—in a word, was utterly unnegotiable. Could it be that the man was touched in the brain, and subject to sudden and dangerous impulses—hence his unlooked-for change of manner—or was he a renegade, who had, perhaps, undergone the penalty of former crime and hated those of his own blood and colour in consequence? Anyway the whole affair was a mystery, which the morning might solve; and that it would solve it in a way that was speedily favourable to himself he devoutly hoped and prayed.

He fell into an uneasy sleep; and it seemed he had hardly done so when he was aroused by a touch. He opened his eyes, to meet those of a savage who was standing over him, and a shudder of loathing ran through him; and this not entirely due to the strong musky odour wherewith the new-comer seemed to be poisoning the air—the fact being that, since the scene he had yesterday witnessed, these were no longer human beings in

his eyes but so many horrible ghouls. This one, however, beckoned him to get up and go with him.

Wagram obeyed. He had no immediate fears for his personal safety, in view of the presence of a fellow white man in that nest of demons; and as he followed his repulsive guide he glanced around upon the life of the place—the morose, evil-looking inhabitants, fiend-like with their long spikes of plaited wool sticking up from their heads, and their round, black progeny tumbling about like so many sooty imps. There was no trace of the light-hearted, careless good humour of the negro among these. He had never seen one of them laugh, for instance; and their grin had something malevolent about it—something that was more than half a snarl. Could it be that their awful unnatural appetite affected them mentally too, and that by feeding on the bodies of their fellow-demons the spirit of the latter entered into theirs? But his speculation on this head was cut short. He and his guide had arrived at a much larger hut than the others, and there, seated on a native stool in front of it, was the strange white man.

"Well, I've got back that pocket-book of yours," began the latter unceremoniously. "Here it is; only I'm sorry to say the notes are no longer in it. Rum thing that these devils should have any idea of the value of money, especially paper money."

He broke off, and emitted a shrill whistle. A slave girl appeared. A monosyllabic order, and she reappeared, bearing a bottle and two glasses.

"Have a tot," he said. "You don't look over-bobbish, and it'll pick you up. None of your poisonous trade rum this, but real old Jamaica."

"Thanks; it may. I've had another sleepless night, and can do with a little picking up."

In fact, he felt the better for it. And what he was about to witness required some stimulating, for now the other uttered a loud, peremptory call.

It was answered with amazing and startling celerity. A number of spiky-haired blacks came crowding up in front of the place. Wagram, watching his strange host, saw the latter draw himself up to his full stature as, with a scowl that was perfectly demoniacal, he harangued them for some minutes, working himself up to a perfect paroxysm of fury. His eyes glared, and his deep tones took on the thunderous roar of an angry mastiff. Immediately a man was thrust to the forefront of the group. The white man walked down off his verandah and stood confronting this fellow, whose brutal face blenched and lowered before the scathing, stare. Then he seized a great spear from one of the lookers-on, and, half hurling, half stabbing, he drove the blade clean through the body of the ugly, cowering savage, who sank to the earth, pouring forth his life-blood in torrents.

Wagram felt himself growing pale. The slayer, not content with his swift and sudden vengeance, had withdrawn the formidable weapon, and, his eyes rolling and bloodshot, was brandishing it over the staring black crowd, literally foaming at the mouth as he roared forth his deep-toned imprecations. The assembly seemed turned to stone as those fierce eyes swept over it, lighting first on one and then on the other, while the great spear twirled and quivered in that sinewy grip. Each thought that he might be the next victim; and, indeed, it seemed so, for that towering form looked as though endowed with the strength and malevolence of a fiend. Then with a last fierce and frenzied shout he bade them begone, and they, for their part, did not wait to be told twice.

"What was it all about?" said Wagram, hardly able to conceal the disgust and horror which he felt.

The other turned on him his restless, bloodshot eyes. "Your lost pocket-book. It ought to have been brought to me, and wasn't. See?"

"Good God! And you killed a man for that!" The tones of disgust and reproach seemed to sting the other.

"Killed a man for that!" he repeated with a beast-like growl.—"Rather! And I've killed a dozen men for far less—if you call these cannibal swine men. And I'll do it again. No; you know, all these sickening old canting ideas you were raised in don't count with me—not a straw. I'm God here, you understand—and I mean to be."

"Steady. Don't be blasphemous," said Wagram. "Oh, it's you who are going to give me orders, is it!" said the other, not loudly, but in a tone of deadly, quiet resentment. "Well, we shall see; and, by way of beginning, I may as well tell you I've changed my mind since yesterday. In a word, I'd like the pleasure of your company here a little longer."

"But—our agreement?"

"Our agreement? Oh, here it is. That for it!" tearing in several fragments the paper he had just produced. "I don't get the advantage of the improving society of such a good and holy man as you every day, and now I've got it I mean to profit by it—for a time. See?"

Wagram was simply nonplussed. What did it all mean? Was this a madman? It seemed like it. The document under which he stood to obtain a really splendid sum he had torn up in a fit of gusty rage. But the fearful look on the man's face as he stood glaring down

on him was something to reckon with—and the jeering tones. He began to conceive for him an even greater repulsion than for the black, cannibal savages themselves.

"We can easily rewrite it," he said in a conciliatory tone. "Think again. It will be to both our interests; and if there is any service I can render you I will willingly do so."

"Service be damned!" said the other roughly. "I rather think the boot's on the other foot, since it entirely depends upon me, Wagram Gerard Wagram, whether you ever see home again, or furnish beefsteaks for the noble image of God you see around here. Upon me, do you hear? Upon me only."

"Well, of course, it does," answered Wagram, realising that the man was going through a sort of paroxysm of blind, well-nigh delirious rage. "But I should think you would hardly hand over a fellow-countryman to the mercy of a lot of cannibal savages. I have a better opinion of you than that."

"Have you? Then keep your damned opinion for where it's wanted. Now, come with me."

Thinking it best to humour him Wagram did not hesitate. The other led the way through the outskirts of the town. One thing struck Wagram during their progress. The inhabitants hardly noticed them. All seemed to be hurrying towards one point. Soon the same acrid, horrible odour fell upon his nostrils as that which had sickened him on arriving at the human shambles. He stopped.

"I won't go any further, thanks," he said. "I don't want to see that place again."

"But you must," replied the other in a tone that was perfectly fiendish in its menace. "You've no choice. I'm God here, remember."

What could he do? He was unarmed; therefore, to that extent, at everybody's mercy. He had others to think of beside himself—one other especially. So he steeled himself.

The dreadful place of slaughter was thronged, it seemed, with the whole population of the town. Through these a word from his guide cleared a prompt way. Several wooden blocks were let into the ground, and upon one of these a victim was being bound down in such wise that the body, turned face upwards, formed an arc, the head being fixed so as to draw the upturned throat to the fullest tension. And the horrified, blood-chilled spectator observed that the victim was a large stalwart black very much akin in aspect to the one he had seen struck down by the mysterious blow in that eerie temple of devil-worship within the heart of the forest.

“I’ve let them have a little compensation for killing one of themselves just now,” broke in his companion’s voice with hideous callousness. “It was a biggish man among them—as far as I allow any of them to be big. So I’ve stood them a feed. These belong to another breed, and they like them, and I can get plenty more. See?”

“But, you’ll never allow this?” cried Wagram. “Stop it, do you hear? Stop it, man—devil—or whatever you are. Stop it, or I will.”

Without waiting for any reply he sprang forward. A tall black fiend armed with a great curved knife had stepped to the side of the victim, whose agonised, livid, terror-stricken face was sufficient to haunt Wagram to his dying day. It was done in a moment. Quick as thought Wagram had snatched the murderous implement from the grasp of the savage, at the same time dealing him a straight-out blow behind the ear which sent him staggering, and had cut through the bonds which held the wretched victim, who rolled heavily to the ground. A howl, as of a pack of famished wolves balked of its prey, arose from the crowd. A rush was made. But somehow the sight of this man—who had never shed human blood in his life—standing there at bay, a new and entirely whole-hearted Berserk rage blazing from his eyes as he rolled them around, holding the formidable weapon ready, seemed to tell, and they hesitated, still mouthing and yelling like hell let loose. Then great, heavy-hafted spears were raised, ready for casting. But a word from the other white man checked the decisive throw, though still unwillingly. They growled and muttered like dogs, looking from one to the other.

“Give me your promise that he shall be spared,” cried Wagram. “Otherwise not a man comes near him while I am alive.”

“You fool. Are you prepared to stand there for the rest of the day?” was the answer. “After you are dead, will it be any the better for anybody else?”

“I shall die while doing my duty at any rate. As for you—why, the most loathsome savage here is not so loathsome as you.”

“Ha—ha! That’s all gas. Well, it doesn’t suit me that your life shall be taken, Wagram—at least not until I choose. So I’ll give you my promise. Like yourself, I’m not a liar, whatever I may be.”

He harangued the assembled fiends, and in the result the wretched man, still livid with the fears of death, was allowed to slip away, while the crowd sullenly dispersed—Wagram, of course, being totally unaware that he was promising them another victim,

whom they might despatch and feast upon at their leisure, when there should be nobody present to interrupt. Thus his promise was kept—in the letter.

"I thought I'd just let you see where I come in," he said as they walked away together. "Man, you think you have done something blasted heroic, don't you?—but let me tell you that a word from me would have seen you strapped down to one of those blocks too. You don't suppose you could have kept them off with that knife for many minutes, do you?"

Wagram did not answer. His disgust and repulsion for the other had reached such a pitch that he did not deem it advisable to speak, for fear of betraying it.

"You'd better hug your own quarters for a day or two after this," went on the latter. "None too safe to be prowling around. You understand?"

"Yes; I understand."

Hope, raised once more, had fallen to the ground. For some reason or other this white savage had seen fit to detain him prisoner—probably with the object of extracting more in the way of ransom. Indeed, now it dawned upon him that in forcing him to behold all the more horrible side of the life of these barbarians the other was working to bring his mind up to such a pitch that he would be glad to purchase emancipation at any price, however great.

Chapter Thirty Four.

The Alternative.

"Well? And have you now come round to a sweet and reasonable frame of mind?"

Wagram looked his persecutor steadily in the face. He was not secured, but two stalwart blacks stood on each side, ready to anticipate any aggressive movement on his part.

"You've not, eh? That'll come; only the longer you hold out the more personal inconvenience you'll lay yourself open to. I give you fair warning."

"You intend to murder me, I suppose," answered Wagram. "Why not do it at once? I won't agree to your perfectly outrageous proposal."

"Outrageous?" sneered the white fiend. "Let's go over the ground again. A month ago I invited you to make a protracted stay with me. I further asked you to send for your son, thinking that a little wild bush life would make a wholesome change for a schoolboy, and we would have been as jolly as sandboys together. You began to make excuses. Now, I don't like excuses. I'm not accustomed to them, as you must have learnt since you've been here. Then you refused point-blank, saying this was no place to bring a boy to. You yourself couldn't refuse my hospitality, which I'm afraid I shall have to extend to you for an indefinite time. But your son and heir—I'm dying to make his acquaintance. See?"

"Yes; I see. And I give you the answer straight: I have no intention that you should make his acquaintance or he yours. Now—is that straight enough?"

"Oh, quite. Only have you reflected that in that case you yourself will never set eyes on him again? Hasn't that struck you?"

"As a possibility, not as a probability. Look here! you are a white man, not a savage. For some purpose you are trying to frighten me. What is it? Is it that you want a larger price? If so, name it."

"Trying to frighten you? Why, I haven't even begun to frighten you yet. You told me one day you thought I must be the devil. Well, I am—for all purposes as far as you are concerned. Make up your mind to that."

There was no great eagerness in Wagram's mind to dispute this statement. He had spent a month in the power of this fiend, and scarcely a day had passed without some proof that if he were not already within the infernal regions he was at any rate well within the

antechamber thereto. Apart from the fact that the conditions of his captivity had been more and more those of every conceivable harshness, he had been compelled to witness the most ghastly and horrifying sights, of which the blood tragedies of the cannibal slaughter-yard were not the worst. Other fiendish rites, hideous and obscene—hardly imaginable, in fact—he had been thrust into the very midst of; and now within that brief month it seemed that he must have lived for years in hell, and all at the bidding of this devil—his fellow-countryman. His health had suffered, his mind and spirit alike were becoming broken, and every moment he besieged high Heaven with supplications that deliverance—even through the gate of death—might be granted him. So far his tormentor had confined his malice to tortures that were mainly mental. He had been careful, too, to afford him no clue whatever as to the locality in which he was, or even as to the very name of this savage race. His own identity, of course, was undivulged.

"You have the whole situation in your own hands," went on the latter. "You have only to place in mine the necessary letters that will bring your son and heir here. I'll take care of the way of doing it, never fear, once I have your indisputable authority. Now—are you going to give it me?"

Something of the martyr's resolution shone in Wagram's face. Even the brutal savages who guarded him were struck by it, and uneasily stirred. They thought to descry some strange resemblance at that moment between the faces of the two men, between their dreaded oppressor and his—and their—helpless captive.

"No; I am not—not now, nor ever," came the steadfast answer. "I will die first."

Then that glaring paroxysm of rage swept over the other's features, and his eyes seemed to start from his purpling face as he bent down and hissed rather than whispered:

"Then you shall. By God, you shall!" At a sign the two savages pounced upon their prisoner, and flung him face downwards upon the ground. They were muscular ruffians, and he was weakened by ill-treatment and anxiety. Others flocked into the hut in obedience to a call, and in a moment he was pinioned with thongs, his feet being left free enough to enable him to walk with short steps. They dragged him forth into the open, and he found himself staggering along in their midst. Then he realised what his doom was to be. He had travelled this way before, to his horror and sorrow. They were taking him to the human slaughter-yard.

There was the palisade, the stunted trees, and the horrible heads impaled upon them. The effluvium was acrid, sickening. Many hands gripped him, and before he could offer the slightest resistance he was bound down upon one of the blood-stained blocks, with throat upturned, distended, ready for the murderous knife.

In that terrible moment, expecting death amid every circumstance of agony and ignominy, a vista of his past life opened to his brain—opened with a quick flash. This, then, was what his quest had brought him to—his quest which, following the strong voice of conscience, he had undertaken and had prosecuted to his own detriment. Well, what mattered it? His son—his only son—had been left in strong and careful hands. He would carry on his life duties as he himself would have had him do. Then more sacred thoughts succeeded. He trusted he was ready.

A black fiend stood over him, and had already raised the horrible crooked knife; already he seemed to feel it shearing through nerve and artery. But it was stayed.

"One more chance," cried the voice of his arch-tormentor. "Will you do what you have no option but to do? Remember, this is no swift death—no beheading at one blow—as you have seen. A nasty sort of butchering death for a man of your birth and breeding to end up with, eh?"

"Do your butcher work; my mind is unchanged."

At a sign the demon with the knife lowered it. Wagram felt a slash upon his throat, and the blood flowed. In reality it was but a skin cut. The black fiend, instructed by the white arch-fiend, was but playing with him; yet the mind acting upon the strained nerves rendered the torture actual, horrible. Except a quick gasp no sound escaped the sufferer. In the concentration of the suspense every detail was stamped upon the retina of his brain—the bestial, black faces, staring and bloodthirsty; the scarcely less repulsive countenance of his—fellow-countryman, and a strange, vivid scar round the outside of the right eye defacing this. Detail is curiously to the front in moments of extreme tensity. The willing executioner looked again at his superior for the final signal. After a moment of deathly silence—to the sufferer a very lifetime of suspense—it came.

But, what was this? He had been quickly unbound, and rolled to the ground, and as he lay there, dazed with the sudden revulsion, the voice of his arch-tormentor fell once more upon his ears.

"That'll do for to-day, Wagram. You've gone through hell—yes, hell—in the last few minutes, but it's nothing to what's sticking out for you. You thought you'd have been in heaven by now, but, no fear. Moreover, you'll never get there, for before I've done with you you're going to blaspheme Heaven in such a manner that even it'll have nothing to do with you at the end, in spite of your life of piety and sanctimoniousness. Wait a bit. You haven't felt any real pain yet—don't know what it is. To-morrow you shall begin. A

little roasting, you understand; not too much—enough to keep you wriggling for an hour or so. You shall have the whole night to think of it."

"You are wrong, devil," was the answer. "Whatever might escape me through weakness under your hellish treatment will not count, rest assured. And the Heaven which you blaspheme has a longer arm than you think."

"All right. It can't reach as far as this," returned the other, with a hideous laugh.

The sufferer was roughly seized, jerked to his feet, and dragged back to the hut; but even this gloomy prison-house was no longer to be his undisturbed, for now the two black horrors entered it with him, and disposed themselves in such wise as to render it evident they meant to spend the night there. He himself was secured by thongs in such wise as to render any attempt at escape impossible.

And there in the black darkness—with loathsome insects creeping over him, the close, stuffy air rendered absolutely poisonous by the rancid stench exhaling from the musky bodies of his guards—Wagram underwent to the full all the trials of the martyrs destined for the Coliseum of old. He had passed through, as it were, the very extremity of death that day, and had been put back that he might die many deaths. He knew that the words of the white savage had been no empty threat, for among the awful sights he had been forced to witness in that hell-centre had been that of a human being done to death over a slow fire in exactly the manner that had been promised for himself. Well, if that were so, and he were called upon to suffer the fiery ordeal, he trusted that strength might be given him as to the martyrs of old, the prayers of all of whom he fervently invoked, including those of his martyred relative—the recollection of whom turned back his thoughts to Hilversea, and those he had left there; and it was with deep thankfulness that he realised that no flaw existed in the provisions he had made before leaving in the event of accident to himself. These had been effected with business-like foresight and accuracy. All who had claims upon him had been remembered, and Gerard had been left under the joint guardianship of Haldane and the family solicitor. Even Delia Calmour he had not omitted to provide for, by reason of the interest he and his father had taken in the girl, and the disadvantages under which she was placed. Perhaps she would bless his memory and pray for him, and the recollection of her bright young beauty was pleasant now in the gloomy hour of his bondage and the horrible fate which impended. Yvonne, too—she would not forget him, and the prayers of the young and the pure seemed as though they must be tenfold precious and efficacious.

Hour by hour his thoughts ran on, interluded by snatches of sleep, begotten of sheer mental exhaustion, haunted, however, by gusty, disturbing dreams, in which the horrors he had witnessed and gone through would rise up to mock and distress him, as though

instigated by the malice of the powers of hell. The same sun which would rise upon Hilversea, and its joyous, peaceful English life, would rise upon him and the drear abode of blood-stained heathendom; would witness his death amid horrible torment, and that not at the word of merciless, ruthless barbarians but at the bidding of a fellow-countryman—a white man. The situation seemed so impossible, so grotesque, as to wear the aspect of a veritable nightmare. It was incredible.

With the thought came another. Why had this devil in human shape laid such stress on getting Gerard into his power, even to the length of torturing him—Wagram—to induce him to send for the boy? Why had he repudiated his agreement to enlarge him for what was really a princely ransom, and that all in a moment? There was something behind it all—but what? And then upon the deepest darkness of his thoughts one thought flashed in. This man had known Everard—had possibly murdered him. He designed to personate him and claim Hilversea, but in order to do this he must first cut off the present occupant and his heir. That was why he had striven to get Gerard into his power. Yes; the whole thing now stood explained: the effect the name had had upon him—everything. He had got at Everard's history, and now rejoiced that another Wagram—the reigning one—had fallen into his hands. Develin Hunt, too, had come from somewhere about this part. What if the adventurer had lied to him, had sent him off to South Africa on a fool's errand when it should have been West Africa? What if his threat to produce Everard had referred to this spurious adventurer? And yet—and yet—how was Develin Hunt ever to guess that he himself should come to be wrecked and cast away on that identical coast? The puzzle was a tangled one, and at the moment beyond his unravelling. One thing, however, held his mind—a resolve that, come what might, he would defeat this ferocious villain's schemes by the sacrifice of himself if need be.

Hour followed hour, and that dread, suffocating, tropical night seemed to embody a lifetime of haunting fear. Yes; fear, for all the human in this man shrank from the fearful ordeal he would be called upon to undergo. There was no escape—no, none—for did he succeed even in breaking away into the wilderness he had not the remotest notion what direction to take in his flight, or of any aim or objective on which to direct that flight. He recalled the rough, brutal treatment he had already undergone; and what made it worse was his absolute inability to offer any resistance whatever to such indignity as his proud, sensitive nature could never have conceived it possible he should be called upon to undergo. Then, once more, that uneasy slumber came upon him—for how long he knew not—until it was broken in upon by strange, muffled sounds and mysterious vibrations—together with something that sounded like a smothered groan. He started up, and instinctively put forth a hand. It encountered something warm and wet and clammy—in the black darkness causing him to shudder. The ground was soaked with it; and he detected that acrid odour he had learnt to know only too well of late.

Chapter Thirty Five.

Rout.

Instinctively he put forth a hand. But—he was bound? Not so. He was bound no longer, which was one strange side of the new development to force itself upon his returning senses. What had happened? His strained ears had caught a sound as of something or somebody crawling along the ground, together with that of subdued breathing. That some beast of prey had crept in and had seized and slain his guards was his first thought, and now it was about to pounce upon him in the darkness; but the horror of this apprehension gave way to a feeling of reassurance as he remembered that no beast of prey, or any other animal, could, at the same time, have relieved him of his bonds.

Then he heard whispers, and someone touched him. He could not understand the burden of what was said, but that he was being pushed towards the door was unmistakable. In a moment he was outside, and the thrill of a great hope shot through him, with the thought that for some reason or other somebody was contriving his escape.

The black night air was heavy and still, but delicious after the foetid interior of the hut. The hand kept a firm grasp of his arm, and he yielded unquestioningly to its guidance. He would have given much to have understood the import of the whispered words, but that he was expected to do something was obvious.

In this strange way he moved onward through the darkness. He felt, rather than heard, that other presences were moving with him besides that of his unseen guide; then a nauseous taint upon the close air revealed, as in a flash, his whereabouts—they were close to the dreadful slaughter-yard.

What new horror was this? Was it some fresh act of devilry on the part of his tormentor that he should be brought to this ghastly place in the dead of night; and, when he should reach it—what then? To this thought, however, again succeeded reassurance. In that event he would not have been unbound. Then happened that which was more reassuring still. Something was thrust into his hand, something hard and cold. Great heavens! it was a revolver. He was armed now, and with the thought his broken spirits left him. He was armed, and free. But through what agency—and to whom the debt?

The guiding hand now had brought him to a standstill. Listening intently, his ears detected the very same sounds which had alarmed him in the darkness of the hut. Then, advancing once more, he stumbled over something, and almost fell. The trees had thinned out here, and now his eyes, accustomed to the gloom, discovered the nature of

the obstruction. It was a human body, just slain, and hardly lifeless yet. Then, in a flash, something of the situation dawned upon him.

He saw now that he had arrived in front of the stockaded enclosure in which the captives had been secured. The guards had been surprised and silently slain, even as those who custodied him in the hut must have been, he decided. And—the stockade was now empty. All this he made out in the darkness; but to what end had he himself been released—released and armed? He was soon to know.

The first faint suspicion of dawn was lying upon the darkened world. Wagram made out that he was in the midst of quite a numerous band—a formidable one, too. These savages had not quite the stature and physique of his former enemies, and were less brutal-looking. They were armed in similar manner—with large spears, axes, and great crooked knives—and now by very graphic signs they proceeded to foreshow their intentions. This they did with surprising quickness and lucidity.

They were going to rush the town directly it was light enough, and put every living being within it to the spear. The white leader, especially, was to be slain, and to that end this other white man had been released and armed. The chances would be equal thus, or bettered, if anything; for they had the advantage slightly in numbers, in taking their enemies by surprise, and also in having a white man fighting on their side too. All this was explained to Wagram in less time than it has taken us to set it down, and then the whole force moved stealthily forward to take up its prearranged position.

While waiting for the signal to begin, the comic element of the situation came home to Wagram's mind, and that comic element struck him suddenly as very comic indeed. Here was he—a man of peace if ever there was one—Wagram of Hilversea, a highly respectable country squire, whose main object in life had been effectively to steward his family possessions in such wise as to safeguard and ensure the happiness and welfare of those dependent on him—a man who had never seen a shot fired in anger nor, until he came here, a life taken—now to find himself with the honours of generalship thrust upon him without a moment's warning—called upon to lead a pack of utterly merciless savages, of whose very numbers he had no actual idea, and not one word of whose speech he could understand—to lead them in the surprise and indiscriminate butchery of another pack of savages, if possible more bloodthirsty, and, incidentally, a fellow-countryman. Of a truth the complete topsy-turveydom of the eternal fitness of things involved by the arrangement struck him as positively Gilbertian. But there was no alternative, for, did he refuse, he knew that he himself would constitute the first victim; and he was tired of the rôle of victim; he had begun to realise that he had played it long enough. So he did not refuse; he asked, by signs, for more cartridges instead.

These, after some difficulty, were found him. The revolver was a large and thoroughly business-like weapon, but very rusty. He hoped it was in working order; and even then the worst of it was he had not had much experience of revolvers, and would have greatly preferred a double-barrelled shot gun. Then he insisted, by signs, in being further armed with one of their axes and a large knife.

He was under no hesitation as to his course. He would fight, and fight his uttermost, for the freedom which Heaven had restored to him, and, incidentally, on behalf of those who, all unconsciously, had been Heaven's instruments in such restoration. His captivity, and the revolting circumstances and sights almost daily attendant on it, had changed him in some way—had certainly hardened him. These people, for whom and with whom he was to fight, had a cause, for as it grew lighter he recognised among them several of the captives he had seen fastened up within the stockade, while all were of the type of the man he himself had freed from the slaughter-block at the imminent risk of his own life; whereas, on the other hand, these cannibal murderers were a type of humanity of which the earth might well be rid. And the white man—his fellow-countryman, his arch-tormentor—what of him? Well, him, too, he would kill without hesitation if they met in fight; for he was far worse than the black fiends over whom he exercised ascendency. If ever a murderer deserved death it was this white renegade, who boasted that the lives which he himself had seen him take were as nothing beside those which he had taken, and that under every circumstance of more than barbarian atrocity. Yes; he would kill him in self-defence if they met.

At this tense, psychological moment this man of refinement and philanthropic instincts found time to marvel at his own complete reversion to first principles. Here, surrounded by savages, he seemed to have gone back to the savage too in the longing and eagerness for battle which had come upon him. How much more of the experience which had been his of late would suffice to turn him into as complete a savage as the renegade yonder?

Then of what followed his mind grasped but the smallest conception. A series of ear-splitting whistles, a roar and a rush, and he was within the town, borne onward with the rest. The attack was made absolutely without method or order, and no pretence to generalship. It was the onslaught of a wild animal—a surprise and a spring. He saw the black, naked, spiky-headed forms surge from the huts, to be received upon the broad spears of the assailants. In this way quite half the inhabitants were destroyed before they had time to realise that they had been attacked.

So eager and engrossed were the said assailants with slaughter that they seemed hardly to remember his presence. The vibration of whoops and yells was deafening, stunning, in the pearly dawn. But the scenes of butchery and bloodshed oppressed Wagram's senses no longer. For now he was in the thick of the fight, and every nerve was strained

to take care of himself. What if his “followers” ruthlessly slaughtered every living thing that showed?—here was he, with a cloud of spiky-headed fiends driving at him with their broad-headed spears. Down they went, three of them, one after another, for in the heat of battle the coolness of discernment had come upon him, and he was consistently holding his weapon straight and aiming low. Then he whirled round just in time to down a large and nimble cannibal who was within an ace of transfixing him between the shoulders with a broad spear. But still they closed up—and yet, and yet, could not quite. There was a look on this man’s face now which reminded them of him up there, and before it—and his pistol—they at heart quailed.

Still reserving his last fire, knowing he would have no time to reload, he uttered a loud shout, and with axe uplifted he charged forward to cut his way through the opposing horde. It was death—to all appearance; but here again the very hopelessness of it saved the situation, for the moral effect of the terrific appearance of this man of peace forced into action, his tall stature and irresistible Berserk rage, was too much. They gave way before it, before him and the whirling weapon, but—in giving way one more fell.

He had reached his allies now, not before some of them, taking him in the heat of the turmoil for the white renegade, had narrowly missed spearing him. Upon the latter’s quarters was the main attack now directed.

It had been a singularly silent conflict, silent because, except for the few shots he had discharged, the crash of firearms was absent. Of whooping and whistling, of the death shriek, and yelling appeals to the slayers there had been plenty, and now the assailed in a mad rush had fallen back upon the white man’s quarters. There, if anywhere, would safety lie, reasoned the doomed wretches, quite two-thirds of whose numbers had been slain. Upon them, pressing them hard, came their ruthless and avenging foes, encouraged, invigorated by the utter absence of any sign of the terrible white man. And they were now almost upon his house. Could it be that he was away? Already they gloated in imagination upon the rich spoils they would find there. His slaves they would massacre as some sort of revenge for his repeated and ruthless raids upon them, when—what was this?

“Pop-pop-pop! Pop-pop-pop!”

A rapid, knocking sound. Half-a-dozen of their foremost went down. Again that ugly knocking. Down went more. The terror-stricken barbarians halted, dazed. Glaring up at the stockade they could just discern something flash as it moved to and fro, could see a little jet of smoke with each knocking detonation; but what they could not see was the terrible face behind the Maxim as its owner worked his deadly means of defence, grinning in cold and devilish glee. They could not see this, but they could see their own

numbers falling like grass before the scythe with every deadly “pop-pop-pop” of this awful unseen power. Their exultation had turned into blind panic now, and with yells of dismay they broke and fled.

He within laughed. Then, not leaving his weapon, he called to his own followers to start in pursuit, and to bring in as many as they could capture alive.

But before this order could be carried out dense volumes of smoke came rolling across the open, together with the roar and crackle of flames. By some means or other the town had been fired; and, indeed, therein lay safety for the panic-stricken runaways. But for the delay thus caused not one would have escaped.

Their flight was now simply headlong, and for anybody but himself not one of them had a thought. As during the fight there had been no system, nothing organised, so now there was no attempt at rally, nobody to give any order. Owing to the same lack of system Wagram had not been able to make his way to the forefront of the attack, and well, indeed, for him that he had not. Now, seeing his “followers” whirl by in a wild, headlong panic, he quickly decided that it was time to go too. He might stand some chance that way, but by remaining here he was doomed. So, taking advantage of the rolling smoke clouds, he, though not without difficulty, at length gained the adjoining forest in the direction taken by his late allies.

But of them there was no sign. He looked around eagerly, wildly almost, but bootlessly. There was no sound save that of the recent turmoil, growing fainter and fainter behind as he continued his flight—no sign of any human presence. He was in an utterly unknown and trackless wilderness—alone.

Alone, without food or water, and no knowledge how or where to procure either, no knowledge, even, of what direction to take; in truth, the fugitive was in pitiable case.

The one redeeming feature of the situation lay in the fact that he was no longer unarmed. He had a revolver and several cartridges, a large knife and an axe, the bloodstains on which latter proved that he had well known how to use it, and woe-betide whoever should attempt his recapture. He would sell his life, if necessary, and die fighting.

But in the silent gloom of the trees no sign of human enemy reached eye or ear. The real enemy was likely to prove hunger or thirst—and against such weapons were powerless. Instinct moved him to continue his flight as far as possible from the scene of his recent trials; and further, on no account to lose his head and wander wildly, as so many have been known to do when the full sense of being lost, and the full weight of the awful

solitude, is borne in upon them. When he could see it he pitched his course by the sun, and travelled due west; too often, however, he could not see it, for the tall tree tops met overhead, and trailing masses of undergrowth shut out everything.

And, indeed, there was everything in the situation to render it appalling, particularly to an imaginative man. The silence and the semi-gloom, the very tree trunks and boughs taking on weird and fantastic shapes, the sense of being shut in, the sudden quiver of a network of close foliage, as though some beast of prey or colossal serpent were about to rush upon him from behind it. At such times, too, he would recall the devil-sacrifice he had witnessed within the fetish enclosure, when the victim had been drawn by an irresistible fascination to his doom, and would start back in horror, as though to avoid the mysterious weapon flashing forth to transfix him.

Night would soon be here. All the long day he had travelled on, and now thirst had more than begun to assert itself—hunger had not troubled him much. He sank to the ground exhausted—only to spring up again. The ground was alive with black ants of a peculiarly vicious kind. No rest even there—and the incident reminded him as to his possible fate in the event of succumbing to exhaustion. He stood a good chance of being devoured alive by clouds of venomous and voracious insects.

And yet, and yet—he could not stagger on for ever.

Suddenly an instinct of danger started him on the alert, causing him to forget his exhaustion for a time. Something—somebody—was following him.

There was no doubt about it. Turning quickly, a dark shadow glided, then disappeared behind a tree trunk.

Facing this he thought, and thought hard. He was certain that it was the figure of a man—that probably meant danger. On the other hand, the native might prove friendly; and certain it was that unless he fell in with somebody who could show him where to obtain the barest necessaries of life, and that within the next few hours, his own doom was sealed. Accordingly he called out, making vehement signs of peace by ostentatiously laying down his weapons on the ground in front, though holding himself in readiness to snatch them up again if necessary. It answered. The unknown stepped from his place of concealment and advanced with something like a grin on his face. He began talking volubly, then drew a hand across his throat, at the same time pointing back over his shoulder; and Wagram stared, then stared again. Yes; he was certain now. He had thought to recognise the other somewhat, and now he was sure. It was the man he had rescued from the block in the cannibal slaughter-yard.

Chapter Thirty Six.

On the Great Deep.

A flaming sun and a flaming sky; an oily sea, rippled up ever and anon by the skimming rush of a flight of flying-fish; a shark fin or two here and there gliding above the surface. In the far distance a low foreshore with broad palms just distinguishable; and out here, alone on the wide waters, a man in a canoe—fishing.

To be strictly accurate, however, he is not fishing now, though he came out with that intent. He has a line over the side, but seems to be heading out to sea, as though purposing to cross the ocean itself. The line is of native make, likewise the hooks; the canoe ditto, and the paddles. The man is clothed almost entirely with lightly-woven native attire, but otherwise there is nothing of the negro, or even negroid, about the sunburnt face and the thick, dark beard. He is a white man technically, though long exposure to tropical heat in all its changes has rendered him as swarthy as an Arab. The expression of his face is one of profound melancholy, as that of a man condemned to lifelong and hopeless exile. And such, in fact, he is, not through the justice or malevolence of his fellow-man, but through sheer force of circumstances. That distant palm-plumed foreshore is his home, and at the same time his prison. He cannot get away from it.

Now he sends the canoe over the water with each long sweep of his powerful arm—hard and brown and sinewy—regardless of heat or toil, as though the boundless freedom of the liquid plain inspired him with a new life; to those who had made the canoe and its gear the said liquid plain was merely a place where you could catch fish—but they were not imaginative people. Glancing back shoreward an eager then a startled look comes into the man's face. Between the shore and him, in the far, far distance, are several black specks. You or I could not have seen them; but he can, and, with the sight, he puts the canoe straight out to sea with renewed resolve, intending to remain there until dark; for he knows those tiny distant specks to be other canoes—and that spells foes.

The last time we saw this man was on the occasion of his meeting with another man—a savage—in the lonely silence of the forest after the battle and rout. Then had followed weeks, during which he and the savage had led the lives of hunted beasts, and their narrow escapes from other and hostile bands were many and wonderful. Added to such the perils of the wilderness—of weeks threading the sluggish channels of some great, mysterious river, the gloom and awesome silence of it only broken by the weird blowing of gigantic hippopotami or the splash of ugly crocodiles, the thick foliage reaching over the black, smooth waterway rendering their path as though threading some never-ending cavern—and all in a very cranky canoe, which the native had managed to steal at

the risk of both their lives from an unwary village. At last they had gained the coast. For days before they had done so the river seemed to branch off into innumerable deltas, forming islands. Here animal life was plentiful, but of human inhabitants, however barbarous, was no sign. It seemed an utterly wild, unexplored, untrodden region, clean outside any of the known world.

It was a strange companionship that between these two, if only that neither understood a word of the other's speech—and by no possibility did either seem able to impart it. Sometimes while they were resting Wagram would endeavour to instruct his companion by making drawings on the ground with a bit of stick, but hardly any of them were understood. A tree or an animal or a man was recognised, but all attempt to establish any sequence of ideas by dint of such pictorial instruction proved hopeless. But he himself soon became proficient in the sign language, and the two would talk quite rapidly therein; only the subject-matter must fall within the sphere of the latter's experience, or he was hopelessly fogged. He was absolutely lacking in imagination.

Often Wagram had found himself wondering as to the other's motive in sticking to him thus closely. It could hardly be all gratitude; and every attempt to convey that his own restoration to civilisation would result in considerable reward to the other seemed to fail, for on reaching the coast the native had squatted down, as though quite content to spend the rest of his life there. Or, from his barbarous and heathen point of view, the man might have come to regard him as a great magician, and one whose magic was immeasurably greater than that of the only other white man he had ever seen. As to this, he would often beguile the time by singing, a great deal of such being echoes of the choir-loft at Hilversea, and the dusky barbarian would listen, entranced, open-mouthed. It was possible that a belief in his supernatural powers had something to do with this fidelity.

Even as the companionship so had the experience been a strange one. The frequency and variety of peril had inspired in the man thus reft from the peaceful ease of a stately English home, if not a contempt for it, at any rate an indifference to danger. In the matter of food he had long since learned that a native could live in luxury for a month where he would have starved in three days. The whole experience had hardened him into magnificent physical form; but as weeks grew into months, and months multiplied, a great depression grew and deepened upon him. He would already have been given up for dead, when the loss of the Baleka became known, especially on the report of her survivors. Poor Gerard would be in a terrible state of grief, and Haldane and Yvonne—it would be a blow to them, and to others perhaps. And at the thought of Hilversea his depression would take the form of a great bitterness, which it would tax all his robust faith to overcome.

Something of this depression is upon him now as he sends his little craft skimming over the oily sea, a mere speck at this great distance out. Once before, he and his companion had been visited from outside, but had been able to hide in the thickest recesses of their island home in time—a glance at the ferocious-looking savages who constituted the intruders having convinced them that they might as well fall again into the hands of those from whom they had originally fled as into the power of such as these.

Soon hardly the fringe of palms upon the coast he has left is visible above the mirage-like horizon; the shore itself no longer is. Yet to him this matters nothing. He is at home on this blue, mysterious sea. Even the triangular shark fins gliding here and there make no appeal to his imagination. They are just so many incidents, and that is all, for he is thoroughly accustomed to that sort of thing by this time.

And now the sun is drooping, and the cloudless sky takes on that molten, sickly murk so frequently attendant on the sunset in tropical seas. Night will be here directly, with a sudden rush; but that concerns him in no wise, for he has a supply of water, well covered with wet matting, within his canoe, also food of a kind—and he has learnt to do with very little food of late. There is no need to exert himself with further paddling.

With a dewy rush the night falls, and alone beneath the misty stars, alone on the great deep, its silence only broken by the splash and hollow "sough" of some sea-monster, his thoughts wing themselves back to the home which, in all likelihood, he will never see again, and with the idea comes another as though in a flash. This living death prolonged for years—why not end it now? Not in yielding up life—oh no—but only in risking it. Gravely risking it, true; but still, is not some risk, even grave risk justifiable under the circumstances? Why not keep on his way, paddle straight out to sea, on the off chance of falling in with a passing ship? How far he would have to paddle he had no idea. He had been thrown upon the coast in an unconscious state, but it could not have been very distant if his captors had pulled him off the hulk in their canoes—and the hulk had been in the path of shipping. But was it the same part of the coast as that from which he had now put forth, or was it, perhaps, some hundreds of miles farther off, and, in the trend of the coast-line, standing out much farther into the ocean? Anyhow, he made up his mind to chance it. His canoe was a mere cockleshell, out here in the ocean waste; but, then, the seas were placid, and, beyond a ripple, only too smooth.

What of his companion, apparently deserted? Even though a savage, would not that companion feel his loss? No. The utter lack of imagination of the savage would not allow room for sentimental qualms; while, as for the loss of the canoe, that could be remedied in half a day. So, his resolution fixed, he started forth—truly in the very sublimity of

desperation—for, should he fail, death was the alternative, grim death from hunger and thirst amid the awful solitude of the boundless sea.

Hour followed upon hour, and still in the darkness this man urges his craft forward in search of his one chance of life, well knowing that against that one chance there are a hundred—nay, a thousand. Still, he takes it.

He feels neither hunger nor thirst. The heavy moisture of the night dews are effective against the latter; while, as for the first, the hard training he has been through has got him into the way of doing with very little. As hour after hour goes by he begins to strain his eyes over the pathless deep for a distant light, his ears for the throb of an approaching propeller. Then drowsiness overtakes him and he falls asleep, and the canoe drifts at the mercy of the currents—drifts farther and farther away from land.

Now he dreams, and his dreaming is strange. He is at Hilversea once more, at dear old Hilversea, amid the waving of summer woods and rustle of ripening corn, and all the glad sights and sounds of the fairest of English landscapes, and all is as it has been. Yes; all as it has been. This fearful experience is as a thing of the past—a nightmare out of which he has awakened; and yet—and yet—there is still a want—a strange, uneasy, restless want of something, or somebody, which is not altogether sad, or, if sad, is leavened by a confused sweetness. The dream fades into more confusion, then blank. Then the dreamer awakes, and—Great Heaven!

Half of the great lurid orb of day has lifted itself above the horizon, gleaming along the smooth folds of the waste of waters, and on these he is no longer alone. About a quarter of a mile distant lies a ship.

A ship? A wreck. Two jagged stumps of masts rise from the submerged hull, over whose main bulwarks the water is lazily washing, leaving the poop and the forecastle but a few feet above the surface. He has seen it before—not once, but twice. Great Heaven! it is the Red Derelict—the Red Derelict again.

He stares, then rubs his eyes, then stares again. Is he still dreaming? No; there the thing lies, this ghost of a vessel, just as it had lain when it had afforded him timely refuge from imminent peril. A mysterious inner prompting moves him once more to board the hulk—acting upon which not long does it take him to shoot his canoe alongside, and, making her fast with the stout woven grass rope which does duty for a painter, he climbs on to the dry, glistening deck of the poop.

His glance takes in the long length of the ship. Swift, keen as that of the wild creatures of earth and air is that glance now, and it falls upon an object lying under water on the

submerged main deck—the skeleton of a pistol. In a moment it is in his hand. A further glance shows it to be the same rusted weapon he had held in his hand before. The nameplate, bearing the letters E.W., is still lying near at hand. The letters seem to stand out at him.

Thoughts many and various come crowding into his mind as he stares at the thing. All his experiences of blood and horror, since last he stood upon this deserted deck arise. The savage demoniac of his own race and colour, in whose power he had been, who was he? More than ever some strange instinct convinces him that the man is the murderer of his brother. This hulk seems to have drifted about these seas within a very circumscribed compass for years. What if it had been the scene of a bloody fight, a mutiny perhaps, wherein Everard had been slain, and the white savage, with others, had escaped to the mainland? And with the thought comes another. What if the body of his brother is lying below—shut up, with the bodies of others, here in its floating tomb, beneath his feet? Strange, indeed, if his quest should end here.

Three times he has sighted this sad derelict, twice stood on board her. Has this been ordered with a purpose? Yet—why not? And with the thought he flings off his upper garment of woven grass. He is going to explore the interior of the ship—so far as he is able.

On the former occasion of his standing here he would have shrank from such an attempt, not only on account of the possible horrors that he might find, but because doubting his power to carry out so hazardous a venture. Now it is different. Good swimmer as he was before, now he is as thoroughly at home in the water as the barbarous inhabitants of yonder coast—that is to say, as thoroughly at home as in his natural element. He gazes down into the gaping pit of the companion-way, then, drawing a long breath, dives down into the blackness within.

At first he can see little enough as he gropes his way around, then by the sickly green light through the glass ports, and also that coming down the companion-way, he is able to make out the interior of the cuddy. A few small fish, imprisoned, dart hither and thither, but of human bodies there is no sign. Then, unable to hold his breath any longer, he shoots up once more into outer air.

Shading his eyes, so that the glare may not impede his vision for his next descent, he sits for a few minutes taking in the air, then, feeling rested, dives down once more into the heart of the waterlogged ship.

Now he can see better, can distinguish some sodden litter lying about, but still no human bodies. Then, just as he is about to give up all further exploration, his hand encounters something hard.

It is lying in one of the bunks—a small box or case of some sort. Grasping it firmly he makes for the companion-way again and rises to the surface, and on arriving there the fit of gasping, and a desire to vomit, shows that he has been under water long enough. His find is a flat, oblong, tin case of about eight inches by four, and it is hermetically sealed.

He examines it with vivid curiosity—the outside, that is—for he quickly decides that this is no time for investigating its contents. But it is time for a little frugal refreshment; wherefore, hauling in his canoe by the painter, he proceeds to hand up the requisites for a sparing meal. While he does so a great shark rises from beneath the hulk—it might have been the identical one that had so nearly gripped him before—but it inspires in him no particular horror now; in fact, scarcely any attention. A mere shark is a mere nothing to the dwellers on those coasts.

Having taken off the edge of his appetite he leans back against the ragged stump of the mainmast, and for the first time for long, experiences a craving for tobacco. Perhaps the yearning is brought about by feeling the deck of a ship under him, for he has long since learnt to do without it. Looking idly at the tin case the thought comes over him that it may contain some clue with regard to his brother or to his brother's fate, and acting upon the idea he stows it away carefully, together with the skeleton of the pistol, within the skin pouch which is slung round his neck by way of a pocket. Then a drowsiness comes over him, and he falls asleep.

The sun flames hot above him, but this causes him no inconvenience now. He slumbers on, and a light breeze rises, rippling the oily surface of the sea—blowing off shore. It winnows in a grateful coolness about him, lulling into deeper slumber, and—the derelict drifts on.

The red rim of the sun touches the sea, seeming to meet the molten water as with a hiss, for the slight breeze has died down with evening, and the last light floods redly over the ghastly hulk with its single human occupant—this man with the attire and colour of a savage and the straight refined features of a European. The sudden, twilightless tropical night falls, falls blackly, and the sleeper sleeps on.

Crash! Whirr! Splash! The hulk starts, shivers from stem to stern, and a great wave comes roaring over her, sweeping the poop by several feet. Half stunned by the concussion the sleeper starts up, to be knocked half senseless by violent contact with the

stump of the mainmast; yet even then instinct moves him to grip hold of something firm and hang on for all he knows, and well for him that it is so, or he would have been whirled into the sea in a moment by the volume of water sweeping over him. An immense blaze of lights flashes before his dazed gaze, together with a very babel of voices and a wild roaring and a rush of white foam—then another wave rolls over him. Half stunned, half choked, he strives to lift up his voice, but it refuses its office. At last he succeeds in effecting a hoarse attempt at a shout.

But the receding lights away there in the black gloom are receding farther and farther, the receding babel of voices too, and amid these and the roar of steam how shall his hoarse-throated, feeble shout find its way across the intervening waste? It cannot. Instinctively he springs for his canoe, with a wild idea of overtaking his one chance of rescue by sheer strength of arm. But of it there is no sign—except the frayed end of the painter rope by which it had been made fast. Swamped, crushed by the weight of water which had swirled over the hulk, it has gone to the bottom, and with it his slender stock of provisions. And the tiers of lights are now far distant, and he is left here, as one before him was left—alone on this ghastly hulk—left to die, with his one chance of rescue gliding away in demoniacal mockery upon the black midnight sea.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

The Echo of a Prophecy.

“Let me pass. Quick! I want to see the captain.”

“But you can’t go on the bridge, miss; it’s against orders.” And the stalwart quartermaster barred with his substantial form the steps leading up to the bridge.

“But I must see the captain, and I will. Do you hear? Let me pass,” with a quick stamp of the foot.

Seen by the electric lights the speaker was a well-formed, beautiful girl, her face pale, and her eyes glowing with excitement and purpose. Behind her, a little in the background, buzzed a throng of excited passengers.

“Very sorry, miss, but it can’t be done,” reaffirmed the quartermaster, not without misgivings, for the speaker was a favourite on board, and not a little so with the captain himself, a grizzled and, withal, crusty salt, of whom those under him stood considerably in awe. “If there were any message now, miss, I might make so bold as to take it,” he added conciliatorily.

“Message? Message? No; I must tell him myself,” came the quick rejoinder, accompanied by another stamp of the foot. “Let me up! Man, man, a life—lives—depend on it—at any rate one.”

The seaman gave way, resigning himself to a “logging,” and, perchance, other pains and penalties. In a moment the girl had gained the bridge. The captain and two of the officers turned in anger, which subsided on the part of the latter as they saw the identity of the intruder. The first still looked grim.

“Well, young lady?” he began in a voice that would have sent most of the other passengers down double quick with a stuttered apology, but with this one it went for nothing.

“Captain, that ship we just ran into—there was someone on board.”

The captain looked grimmer still. “Just ran into” had a characteristically ugly sound in his ears.

“Humph!” he snorted. “Just ran into! Just ran into! That infernal old blasted derelict hulk, whose owners ought to be—” And then he remembered the sex and identity of the speaker, and with a gulp went on. “Now, how the—how the—well, how d’you make out there’s anyone on board her?” he rapped out in a sort of subdued hurricane blast of a voice.

“Because I saw. I saw a man lying on her deck as plainly as I see you and Mr Gibson now. Do turn back and see—quick—or you may never find her again in the dark. I saw him, mind you—I swear to God I saw him—by the deck lights as we crashed past. You can’t leave him alone to die. You can’t!”

“Saw him? Saw a mare’s nest,” grumbled the captain. “Let me tell you, young lady, it’s not my business to start overhauling derelict hulks at midnight—brutes that might have sent us to the bottom. Fortunately, we only scraped this one. Well, well,” he appended sourly, “we’re ahead of our time, so we might as well make sure of this. Put her round, Gibson.”

“Ah! I thought sailors were always ready to help each other,” said the girl triumphantly.

An order was given, and, in the result, the Runic changed her course, and was bearing round, going dead slow, so as to head for the late dangerous obstruction. The excitement was intense among the passengers, who thronged the bulwarks at every coign of vantage, eagerly scanning the dark, silent sea. Suddenly the engines stopped, and a boat was lowered.

“Where is she? Can you see her?” were among the buzzed, eager comments as the boat’s lantern receded into the gloom. Soon came a hail and the sound of gruff voices over the water. The light of the lantern grew larger and larger. The boat was returning.

Heavens! what was this? With the boat’s crew there stepped aboard a tall, bearded man burned almost to the copper hue of a savage and wearing what looked like the attire of one. Thus he appeared in the electric lights to the eyes of the excited throng.

“Who are you, my man, and what’s your ship?” began the captain brusquely.

“Thank God, I’m going home at last!” exclaimed the stranger, gazing around in a weary and dazed sort of way.

“Yes—yes; but—who are you?” repeated the captain more crisply.

“Why—it’s Mr Wagram!”

The interruption or answer proceeded from the girl who had been the cause of the search. The castaway turned, looking more puzzled than ever.

“Yes; that’s my name,” he answered. “But—I ought to know that voice, and yet—and yet—”

“Of course you ought,” and, casting all conventionality to the winds, the girl sprang forward, seizing one of his hands in both of hers. “Oh, how thankful I am that we have been the means of saving you! What must you have been through! Welcome—a thousand times welcome!”

“Miss Calmour, surely? Why, of course it is. How glad I am to see you again.” And in the face of this sun-tanned and unkempt-looking savage here under the ship’s lights Delia could detect the same look as that which had glanced down upon her in the park at Hilversea that glowing summer afternoon after the life-and-death struggle with the escaped beast. “I was a passenger on the Baleka, captain,” he went on to explain.

“Passenger on the Baleka were you? Then, my good sir, it’s lucky we’re homeward bound, because your people will be just about beginning to go to law over your leavings,” returned the captain, who was of a cynical bent. “The only passenger missing from her was given up as lost. But—you haven’t been aboard that old hooker ever since, I take it?”

“No; indeed. I’ve had some strange experiences—can hardly believe I’m not dreaming now. What ship’s this?”

“The Runic. White Torpedo line, bound for London from Australian ports.”

“And what of the Baleka’s people? Were they found?”

“Yes; all picked up, some here, some there.”

“Captain,” interrupted that same clear, sweet, fluty voice, “I’m surprised at you. Here’s a shipwrecked mariner been thrown on board, and instead of doing all you can for him you keep him standing here all night answering questions.”

“By Jove! you’re right, Miss Calmour,” was the bluff reply. “Gibson,” turning to the chief, “take the gentleman to the saloon, and tell the stewards to get him all he wants.”

“I don’t want much at present, thanks,” answered Wagram. “A barber, and some clothes are my most urgent needs; but I suppose we can compass something in that line to-morrow.”

“Why, of course,” said Delia; “but don’t throw away that picturesque costume. Come along below, now. I’m going to take care of you this evening.”

And she did—laying her commands upon the stewards for this and for that as if the whole ship belonged to her. Then she sat and talked to him as he ate some supper, forestalling every possible want, pressing this and that upon him, and yet without ostentatious fuss. And the castaway, who for months had beheld no woman’s face save those of brutal, debased blacks, wondered uneasily whether he were dreaming, as this beautiful girl sat there attending to his wants with an almost loving assiduity. Yes; he decided, she certainly was beautiful. Time, change, the conditions of a new life, had put the last touches to the sufficiency of her attractiveness as he remembered her.

“By Jove!” exclaimed the chief officer, who had dropped in to hear some of the castaway’s story, “you’ve had some pretty rough ups and downs, and no mistake; and you might as well have tumbled into the boats with the rest after all, for the kid was all right and not left below at all.”

“Is that a fact?” said Wagram eagerly.

“Rather. You were throwing away your life going below at such a time in any case, and in this instance it was all for nothing.”

Delia had been wishing the chief officer anywhere. She wanted Wagram to herself, and here Gibson sat prosing his tiresome old sea yarns. Now, however, she brisked up, and insisted upon hearing the whole story. She had been quite out of the way of newspapers of late, and had not even heard of the loss of the Baleka, or that the man sitting here before her had been given up as lost, a victim to his own heroic act.

“By George! I must go,” said the chief. “Mind you ask for anything you want, Mr Wagram, for I conclude you’ve come aboard in a state of temporary and complete destitution.”

“That’s just my case,” laughed Wagram. “Funny, isn’t it?” turning to the girl in time to catch the look in her eyes called there by the story she had just heard. “And now tell me about yourself, and how they all are in Bassingham.”

“We’ve left Bassingham, you know, Mr Wagram. My father died soon after you went, and we couldn’t stop on at Siege House. So we went up to London, and—well, things were not easy.”

“I didn’t know; I have had no news from Hilversea for a long, long time—have been so on the move, you know.”

“How you must long to get back. Dear old, beautiful Hilversea!”

The bright spirits and former lightheartedness seemed to have left her. Her voice was sad. The other made a mental note of it, and deduced that they had fallen upon hard times. Well, that he would certainly do his best to remedy by some means or other. Then she told him about herself; how her other sister—not Clytie—had married in Australia, married very fairly well, too, and had got her out there on a visit. But they had not got on—she did not tell him that the other had conceived a jealousy of her from the very first—and so she was returning to England.

They talked on until even the other passengers, who, by twos and threes, had been passing through the saloon in quite unusual numbers to catch another glimpse of the castaway, had disappeared, and the stewards were rolling up the carpets.

“Good-night, Mr Wagram,” said the girl as they parted. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you again, and what a happiness it is to think that the ship I was on board of was the one to rescue you. To-morrow you must tell me your adventures in full. You will—won’t you?”

He promised, with some reservations, and they parted. But Delia found that sleep utterly refused to come her way—and she wanted to sleep, wanted to look her best in the morning. Her cabin mate, an elderly lady, was fast asleep, but she herself seemed doomed to night-long wakefulness. The scuttle was open and she lay with her face to it, watching the dark sky with its twinkle of misty stars, half lulled by the rush and “sough” of smooth water from the sides of the liner. What wonderful workings of Fate had thrown this man here? And he would not have been here but for her. But for her persistence he would have been miles and miles behind, left to perish miserably on the lonely deep. The other passengers had treated her statement with good-humoured ridicule; the captain himself would hardly be persuaded to put back—and what if he had not? But he had—and it had been entirely due to her that he had. She had saved Wagram’s life—as surely as any life ever had been saved—she and she alone.

The sweetness of the thought began to soothe her, and sleep seemed to be coming at last. Then, through it, something—perhaps the sight of the smooth sea through which

the great liner was rushing on even keel—brought back to her mind certain words uttered on a woodland road in the dusk of a winter afternoon; weird words about green seas, smooth and oily, and a battered ship, and terrors—and, perhaps, death, but, if not death, then great happiness. The croakings of the old gipsy came back now—and, good heavens! what coincidence was this? Here were all the conditions—the smooth seas and the battered hulk—the terror gone through—terrors of every kind, up to that of being left on the derelict—the agony of seeing this ark of safety recede from reach of call. "Perhaps death?" He had been snatched from death at that moment, snatched from it by her, as surely as though by her own hand. "But, if not death, then great happiness." In the hot, thick stillness of the night Delia's brain was busy. The prediction had been directed to herself, not to him. And then it seemed to merge into a joint prediction, but—great happiness? Well, was it not? She had rescued him from death—she alone. Was not that a great happiness? Further, it would be nearly a fortnight ere they reached England, and during that time she would see him daily, talk with him, under conditions of which a week was equivalent to a year under the old state of things. Would not that be "great happiness?"

And then she remembered not only the prediction, but the scorn and contempt with which he had treated both it and its utterer, extending just an overflow ripple of it to her. And with a smile at the recollection she fell into a quiet sleep. Nearly a whole fortnight of happiness—great happiness—lay before her.

In the event so it proved. From the next morning, when they met—he clothed and barbered, and looking exactly as she remembered him in the dear old days of yore—"clothed, and in his right mind" as he smilingly told her in his old, dry, humorous way—pacing the deck in the cool hours, or seated in some snug, shady corner in roomy deck-chairs, talking about home—they two were nearly always together; and the home-sick wanderer felt at home already, and the girl forgot for the time her own dreary prospects, with the struggle for life all opening out before her, to be begun and gone through again. He would go back to luxury and his high estate, while she—? Yet even this she forgot in those sweet, dreamy, sunny days which would soon—only too soon—be over.

There were others on board, though, to whom this change was not so welcome, and who—for human nature is human after all—fervently wished this picked-up castaway—well—back again on the hulk from which he had been picked up. For Delia Calmour, with her beauty and tact and sunniness of disposition, had reigned a queen among the male section of the passengers, and the long voyage, now nearing its close, had been long enough to render more than one heart rather sore.

"I must not monopolise you all day, and every day, like this, child," Wagram had said to her. "You are good-nature itself towards a tiresome old bore with but one idea in his

head. You must go and make things lively for the others a bit sometimes or I shall feel like an interloper."

"Am I tiring you, then?" she would answer softly.

"Now, you know that is absurd. Still, I must not be selfish."

"You—selfish? What next?"

"I'm afraid I am—very. Now, they are getting up that last fancy-dress dance before we get into what may possibly be rough water. Go and help them in that as you would have done before. I want to see you enjoying yourself. I am afraid I am too much of a fogey to cut into that sort of thing actively myself."

She did not answer that "that sort of thing" was an inane and vapid method of enjoying herself, compared with half-an-hour of ordinary conversation with him. She complied—and submissively. Incidentally, she found that the "enjoyment" involved a heated passage-of-arms with the third officer; item, subsequently with a fine young Australian whom she had refused twice during the voyage; but these were trifles light as air under the circumstances.

Then the days grew fewer and fewer, and the grey waters of the Bay of Biscay gave way to the greyer waters of the English Channel. The Runic would soon be securely docked in her berth.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

Time's Chance.

Wagram was seated in his private study at Hilversea, thinking.

It was a lovely spring morning, and through the open window came a very gurgle of bird voices from shrubbery and garden. The young green was rapidly shouldering out the winter brown of the woods, especially where the sprouting tassels of the larch coverts seem to grow beneath one's very gaze.

Ah, how good it was to be back home again after his wandering and exile and anguish of mind—to be back here in his idolised home, in peace till the end of his days—and surely it would be so. He had done his uttermost to find his half-brother, and had failed—had failed, possibly, because Everard was no longer in the land of the living—murdered by that savage miscreant the renegade, so many of whose atrocities he himself had witnessed. And yet, if Develin Hunt's account of Everard were correct, it was possible that he might have been slain by the other acting in self-defence.

What a unique experience had this last one been. He had no idea as to the identity of the wild tribes among whom he had moved, and the very haziest as to the part of the coast on which he had landed. As to the latter point, the opinions of the captain and officers of the Runic had differed considerably; indeed, he was not quite sure whether they entirely believed his story in every particular—not implying that he had deliberately invented it, but that parts of it might be due to hallucination begotten of anxiety and privation.

"That you should come to board that derelict twice, with an interval of months between, and each time by a sheer accident, is one of the tallest sea experiences within my knowledge, Mr Wagram," had said Gibson, the chief officer of the Runic, one day when he was disclosing parts of his story. And he had laughed good-humouredly, and agreed that it really must be.

As a matter of fact, he had been very reticent over his experiences; partly that they would sound rather too wonderful, and partly that the recollection of them was distressing to himself and he would fain help them to fade.

Well, if Everard were no longer alive he himself was just where he had been. But was he? There were others with a claim. No; there were not. On this point he had seriously made up his mind. The very distant branch of the family—so distant, indeed, that it was doubtful whether it could establish a claim at all—he was not even acquainted with, but it was very wealthy. He remembered his father's solemn declaration: "Morally, and in

the sight of God, your position is just what it would have been but for this accident." And his father had been right. Whatever doubt as to this may have crossed his mind at the time the words were uttered it held none whatever now. He had been brought back to that position, so to say, in spite of himself, had been restored to it by a chain of occurrences well-nigh miraculous, so much so, indeed, that others could scarcely credit them. Surely the finger of Heaven had been directing them.

There was just one thorn beneath the rose leaves, and it spelt Develin Hunt. What if that worthy should, on hearing of his return, conclude to try for a little more blackmail? In that event he had made up his mind to defy him. He was in possession—and such "possession" as that meant was practically unassailable legally; and it was only with the legal side of the situation he felt now concerned. But nothing had been heard of the adventurer since he had received the last instalment of his price. He seemed to have disappeared as suddenly as he had arisen.

Decidedly Wagram's train of thought was strange that morning. Everything had been restored to him—everything as it had been; and yet—and yet—something was wanting. A feeling as of loneliness was upon him—upon him, the envied of all his acquaintance. He missed his father now that he reigned alone—missed him every minute of the day. The dear old man's chair at table, in which he himself now sat—he missed him even while he was sitting there; his constant flow of sparkling reminiscence, his pungent wit, his good-natured cynicism and his affection for himself; and yet—and yet—he missed something else. What was it? The musical flow of a sweet young voice, the bright presence and ready and tactful sympathy of one who had been his companion for a short—in point of time, but in actual fact concentrated—fellowship. He went over again his first meeting with Delia Calmour and his father's unhesitating dictum upon the house of Calmour in general. "A Calmour at Hilversea! Pho!" And now it seemed to him that the one thing lacking to render his cup of contentment full was the presence of one Calmour at Hilversea, and that one Delia. Incidentally, it struck him that for present purposes it was a good thing that old Calmour had been removed to another, and, he hoped, a better world; but only incidentally, for, having come to the conclusion he had, the mere removal of old Calmour and Siege House to a remoter part of the realm than Bassingham, and that under far greater conditions of comfort than that old toper could ever have pictured in his wildest dreams, would have been the merest matter of detail. However, old Calmour was no longer there, which simplified matters.

Then the cynical element came uppermost. His experience of the matrimonial bond had been lamentable; why, then, should he be ill-advised enough to make a second experiment of it? And yet—and yet—he had had ample opportunities of watching this girl, and she had seemed to shine out as pure gold from the alloy of her surroundings and bringing up. He was no fool, and had a large experience of the seamy side of life,

which was sufficient to safeguard him from illusions. She was in poor circumstances, and life to her must be one of struggle. Such a bait as his position and wealth would be under the circumstances irresistible, but it was not under these circumstances that he wanted her. He was considerably her senior in years, and it was probable that in her young mind he ranked as a serious and elderly bore, whom she might have reason to hold in some regard, perhaps; but still—Against that, again, he remembered how that bright, beautiful face used to light up on such occasions as their first meeting of a morning, while on board ship, and on others. No; there was a spontaneity and genuineness about that expression that was due to no sordid motive.

Since his return he had been overwhelmed with calls and congratulations; indeed, part of his aim in life seemed to have become the dodging of such whenever practicable. Invitations, too, had not been lacking, with very propitious "beauty's eyes" in the background, but for such he had no inclination. This girl whose acquaintance he had made in so strange and semi-tragical a manner, whose character he had watched develop ever since, seemed to have become bound up with his life, and now the last phase in the acquaintance was that she—and she alone—had been the actual instrument in the saving of his life. For herself, she had come out splendidly through all her disadvantages. Yes; her presence here was the one thing he needed—and he needed it greatly.

He remembered the arrival of the Runic. Clytie had been there to meet her sister, and the frank, cheerful greeting which she had extended to him had impressed him very favourably. He had been to see them since, and the favourable impression had deepened. There was no pretence about them in their new home. They had got to work, and work pretty hard too, and they were doing it with a brave hopefulness that was beyond all praise. And he had extracted a promise from them that if ever they found themselves in need of a friend—no matter what manner of difficulty might overtake them—they were to apply to him unhesitatingly, which was all he was able to do for them for the present.

Then his train of thought took another turn. The tin case he had found in the cuddy of the derelict he had never yet investigated—had not even opened it. He had been very busy since his return, and had put it aside till arrears of business should have been disposed of. He had resisted an inclination to open it on board the Runic, moved by the consciousness that there is no real privacy on board ship, and this, he felt instinctively, was a matter needing undisturbed and uninterrupted attention. Now he thought the time had come when he might very well do so.

He unlocked a safe and got out the tin case. It was all corroded with its long submersion in salt water but quite intact. It brought back to him that gruesome dive into the heart of

the spectral derelict; and for a few minutes he sat there, going over in his mind that time alone on the oily waters of the glistening deep, and that awful moment in the darkness when the receding lights had betokened that he was left to his fate—the hand of rescue stretched forth only to be withdrawn. He shook the recollection off, as that of a nightmare from which one awakes, then, procuring the requisite tools, set to work to open the case.

It was full of papers—close packed, full to bursting. Some two or three were of parchment-looking substance, others of thin rice paper. The latter were stitched together with a kind of thin thread of animal fibre. This detail he took in at once, the result of his recent and complete savage training. He spread them out upon the capacious writing-table in front of him, and then—

Great Heaven! what was this? "Develin Hunt!" There was the name, not at the end of a document, but in the middle of it. He stared again, and could hardly believe his eyes. Develin Hunt! He had expected to find some clue as to his lost brother's fate, which was his reason for not having handed over the box to the captain of the Runic as containing a possible clue to the identity of the Red Derelict, but instead the first name to meet his eye was that of Develin Hunt!

He pulled himself together, and, with mind cool and business-like, set himself to examine the documents, beginning with this one. And it was the most important of all, for it was nothing more nor less than a marriage certificate.

He gazed at it for a moment, then got up again and went to the safe. From this he extracted a document, and spread it side by side with the first one. It was a copy of another marriage certificate, that which Develin Hunt had produced for the enlightenment of his father and himself, but—the one he had just extracted from the tin box bore date four years earlier.

What then? The man might have been a widower at the time. So far he himself was—well, just where he was—where he had been.

He had forgotten for the moment all about Everard and his fate. Eagerly he turned over the other papers. They seemed to have no bearing on the subject until he got to the thin ones, which, in effect, were a sort of diary, stitched together, as we have said. And before he had gone far through this he realised that the discovery of this other marriage certificate was of very first-rate importance indeed, for it set forth unmistakably that the other party referred to was alive at the time of his mother's marriage with his father—alive, in fact, long subsequently thereto, if not alive at the present day. It was further obvious that any information to be sought for on the subject must be sought in South

Africa. Could this be established it followed that Develin Hunt's marriage with his mother was invalid and that of his father was valid.

South Africa! Haldane might help him here; he had spent years of his life in those parts. And yet, he remembered, to Haldane's mind Develin Hunt's name had conveyed no idea other than as subject-matter for a joke, even as it had done to his own. Well, this need mean nothing, unless it were that, like many adventurers, this man had not always gone under his own name.

Again and again he read through the paper, and with each perusal the piecing together of the puzzle became easier. And as it did so came another thought. Would it not be far easier and quicker to get into communication with the adventurer himself, and, at the possible price of some further blackmail, obtain from him at first hand the solution of the whole difficulty? It was wrong and immoral, no doubt, to compound so grave and dangerous an offence as blackmailing, but the awful anguish of mind he had gone through seemed to justify anything—anything in the abstract, such as this was, and not hurtful to any individual—to ensure relief. Even so, a weight seemed to have been lifted from him—the whole weight, in fact—and, with the consciousness, other words spoken by the old Squire came back to him: "There is no telling what Time may work, so give Time his chance." Prophetic they sounded now, words of gold-mouthed wisdom. He had given Time his chance, and Time had worked accordingly; and lo, from the bowels of this spectral relic of a ship floating for years on the slimy surface of the tropical seas, Time had yielded up this its secret.

And then he was brought back to everyday realities by two sounds—the ringing of the luncheon bell and the voice of his son outside.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Time's Consummation.

"Well, Gerard, old chap? Been keeping your nose hard to the grindstone?" said Wagram as they sat down at table.

"Rather. Old Churton takes care of that," laughed the tall, handsome lad. "He must have been a terror at Rugby."

Wagram had taken his son from school for a quarter on his return. He yearned to have the boy with him after his long separation, and his restoration to life, as it were; but he sent him to read every morning with a neighbouring Anglican rector, an ex-public school master.

"Glad to hear it. Churton's a conscientious man and an energetic one. It must be almost the renewal of his youth to start as bear leader again."

"Don't know about 'leader'—'driver' would be nearer the right word, pater. I say, what are you doing this afternoon?"

"Going over to Haldane's. Want to come?"

"Rather. Bike, I suppose?"

Wagram nodded. "In an hour after lunch, then," he said.

Gerard found his father somewhat absent as they spun along between the newly-sprouting hedges in the spring sunlight, and wondered. The fact was that Wagram had made up his mind to take Haldane into confidence, at any rate partially, and was thinking over how much he should tell him as yet. To this end he had brought with him the tin case.

"Hallo, Gerard," he cried, waking from his abstraction as they neared their objective. "By George! I'm a dullish companion for a young 'un on a bike ride—eh, old chap?"

"That's all right, pater. Look. There's Yvonne under the elm; and, great Scott! what the mischief has she been doing to herself? Oh, I say!"

The girl had started forward to meet them, and lo! her mantle of rippling gold no longer draped her shoulders: it formed a shining crown instead.

“You needn’t stare like that, Gerard,” she began. “It’s beastly rude, you know. Never saw anyone with their hair up before?” this with dignity. “No; but, Mr Wagram, isn’t it detestable? Will have to do the grown-up now, I suppose.”

“We must all grow up one day, Sunbeam,” was the answer. “Even I am not exempt from the process; and as for Gerard here, why he’s gone through it long ago.”

“That you, Wagram?” And Haldane came forward with a newspaper in one hand and a half-smoked pipe in the other. “Come along and find a cool seat, and I should think something else cool would go down after your spin—something long and sparkling and with a musical tinkle of ice in it, for choice. Oh, the child,” following their glances. “Yes. She’s just been trying an experiment. I tell her she’s canonised now with this bright and shining halo round her head. Think it improves her?”

“I don’t know that it does,” struck in Gerard frankly. “Ah-ah! I see. She’s hoisted it all up so that Reggie and I can’t tweak it any more.”

“Quite likely,” retorted Yvonne. “If you did now it’d be a case of ‘great cry and little wool,’ as Henry the Eighth said when he got hold of the wrong pig by the ear.”

“When he did what?” said Wagram, mystified. “History does not spare the memory of that bloody-minded monarch, Sunbeam, but it is absolutely silent on the deed you have just named—at least so far as my reading of it goes.”

Gerard threw back his head and roared. Haldane was absolutely speechless.

“Well, what is it, then? What ought I to have said? Gerard, d’you hear? I don’t believe you know yourself.”

“Oh, Lord! I shall die in a moment. ‘As Henry the Eighth said’!” he gasped. “What you were feeling after is ‘as the devil said when he tried to shear the pig.’”

“Of course! Oh, what an ass I am!” cried the girl, going off into a rippling peal.

“However, the confusion of the identity of the two particular parties is not inexcusable,” pronounced Wagram.

“You’ll be the death of us one of these days, Sunbeam,” gasped Haldane when he recovered his speech. “Hallo, Wagram, what’s the row?”

“Row? Oh, nothing,” answered Wagram in a strange voice. He had ceased to join in the general mirth. He had, in fact, picked up the paper which Haldane had let fall. It was only the Bassingham Chronicle, given over mainly to crops, and Petty Sessions and ecclesiastical presentations, and yet something in it had availed to change the expression of his countenance as well as his voice. Only a name—a name and a paragraph. Thus ran the latter:

“Motor accident—We regret to learn that Mr Develin Hunt, a gentleman who made some stay in our midst a year or two ago, and was so impressed with the natural attractions of our neighbourhood that he came to repeat it, was knocked down last evening by a motor car in front of the Golden Crown Hotel, where he is staying, and received severe internal injuries. He was carried up to his room, and Dr Foss, who was at once sent for, has advised that his relatives be at once communicated with. Those in charge of the motor car made off with all haste, and have not yet been traced.”

“Oh, ah! I meant to have told you,” said Haldane, following his glance. “That’s the chap with the rum name we were all exercising our wit on, if you remember. Poor devil! I expect he’s a ‘goner.’ ‘Severe internal injuries’ always has a dashed ugly sound.”

“By the way, Haldane, I wanted to get your opinion on a matter of importance,” said Wagram. “How would it do now?”

“Right. Come inside.”

“This is it,” when they were alone: “I want you to go over to Bassingham with me while I interview this very Develin Hunt. You’ve no idea what a lot depends upon it—for me. And it may be necessary for him to swear a statement.”

Haldane was too old a campaigner to evince astonishment at any mere coincidence, so he only answered:

“All right. I’ll tell them to inspan the dogcart. That’ll get us there in no time.”

There was something of an outcry on the part of their juniors at this sudden move.

“We’ll be back again before you have time to turn round, Sunbeam,” said Haldane. “Keep that fellow Gerard out of mischief—take him to try for a trout, or something. So long!”

Haldane liked things done smartly, and generally had them so done, consequently the dogcart was already at the door. On the road, for they had purposely not taken a groom, Wagram told him of the finding of the tin case on board the Red Derelict, and how its contents bore largely on his own affairs and on those of the man they were about to visit. "You can't call to mind this man's name or identity in the course of your former South African wanderings?" he concluded.

"No; I'll be hanged if I can. You see, the name was bound to have stuck, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless he ran under some other name. That's not such an uncommon thing in some parts of the round world."

"Ah! Well, it's possible he did. That's just the thought that struck me."

"If you can contrive me a glimpse of the joker I'll soon let you know for cert. I never forget a face."

"That might be done. We might go into the room together—then, if he's the wrong man, you could apologise and clear."

"Then that's what we'll do," said Haldane the decisive.

The fast-trotting nag pulled up at the "Golden Crown" just within the hour of their start.

"Good-day, Smith," said Wagram as the landlord appeared. "How is your guest—the one who got bowled over by a motor?"

"Well, Mr Wagram, I couldn't say exactly. But," lowering his voice, "the doctor says he'll hardly last till night."

"Poor fellow. I came to see if I could do anything for him. He called on us about some business, you know, when he was here before."

"He'll be glad to see you, I know, Mr Wagram. I've just been sitting with him a bit, and he was talking a lot about you—asking if you were at home, and all that. Come upstairs."

He led the way, and they ascended to the first landing, Haldane bringing up the rear. A tap at the door, then the landlord opened it.

“Here’s Mr Wagram come to see you, Mr Hunt,” he announced.

The room was somewhat darkened, but not much. Wagram made out a form half propped up in bed. The red-brown face of the adventurer was of a sallow paleness. He heard the door softly close behind him.

“It’s good of you to come and see me, Wagram,” he began. “Hallo! Who’s with you?”

“Why, it’s Jack—Jack Faro. How are you, Jack, old man?”

The interruption proceeded from Haldane. The man on the bed started and stared, then he recovered himself.

“That’s Haldane, for a tenner,” he pronounced. “I heard you were down in these parts, Haldane, and thought of looking you up, only I heard you’d become such a tearing big swell. Thought you’d not have been over-glad to see me.”

“Oh, bosh! You ought to have known better. By the Lord! didn’t we stand them off in that ruction at Ikey Mo’s, when we’d broken the whole bally bank? Jack and I had to skip over Montsioa’s border for a time, you know, Wagram,” he parenthesised. “We’d done some shooting, you understand—but—we had to.”

“Rather, we had, and we did,” and the adventurer’s eyes lit up over the recollection.

“I say, Jack, d’you ever hear anything of the missis now?” went on Haldane in the cordial-old-comrade tone. “I must have seen her since you did, for I was passing through Kimberley only half-a-dozen years back, and she was throwing out fire and slaughter against you as hard as ever.”

Wagram, taking this in with all his ears, felt that an immense weight had lifted. Haldane had known this man’s former wife, had seen her quite lately. She was probably alive still.

“Oh, she’s got nothing to complain of,” returned the adventurer testily. “I’ve never kept her short.”

“Of course not. But, you know, women are the devil for grievances, and she was always swearing that, as your lawful wife, her place was with you.”

“I’d have murdered her long ago if it had been,” was the weary reply. “I shunted her to save her life and my neck. Women are the very devil, Haldane. I can’t think why the blazes they were ever invented.”

“Oh, you’re not alone in that opinion, old man,” laughed the other. “But, look here, when is Foss going to get you up again?”

“Never. He swears I’ll be a stiff before morning, and for once I believe him—though these quacks are the most infernal set of humbugs, as a rule. Now, Haldane, do me a favour, like a good chap, and skip downstairs for a little while. I want to hold a bit of an indaba with Wagram alone.”

“Right. So long, then.”

There was a moment or two of silence after the door had closed on Haldane. Then Hunt said:

“Well, you heard all that?”

“Yes; it is true, then?”

“Every word of it. I’m glad you heard, because it’ll save me the trouble of going over it all again.”

“Then you obtained thirty thousand pounds out of us under false pretences?”

“That’s one way of putting it, but I suppose it’s the correct one. The thing was a gamble; but, hang it, I didn’t think the money side would have bothered you over-much, Wagram. Why, as I said before, it’s only like a half-crown to you. Haldane and I have brought off bigger things than that in the old Kimberley days.”

Wagram stiffened.

“Do you mean to tell me, then, that Haldane was associated with you in blackmailing? Because, if so, you had better tell it in his presence.”

“No—no—no. Of course, I don’t mean anything of the sort. Haldane is as straight and square a chap as ever walked. This affair was off my own. I couldn’t resist it when I stumbled against Butcher Ned, and he put me up to who he was, and used to talk about his people too. Lord! how he used to hate you—you, especially. I’d have been sorry for you if he’d ever got the chance of squinting at you for a moment from behind the sighting of a rifle or pistol. By the way, you never found him, did you?”

“No. But before we talk further will you make a statement as to this first marriage of yours? Haldane is a magistrate, and you might make it before him.”

“I would willingly, but it isn’t in the least necessary. The whole thing is entirely between ourselves so far, and you can easily verify the facts.”

“I have verified them already. Do you know this?” And he held up the tin case.

“Oh, good Lord! Yes; I ought to. And you have opened it and gone into the contents? Well, then, Wagram, it isn’t like you making an unnecessary fuss. You’ve got all you want in there already.”

“Meaning the certificate. Here it is.”

“That’s right. You can burn the other things. And now, where on earth did you pick up that box?”

Wagram told him, also hurriedly, about his intervening adventures. The dying man’s face underwent some curious changes—not the least curious being that which passed over it on beholding the skeleton pistol.

“Rum thing that you should have stumbled on to that hooker not once but twice,” he said. “But, good Lord! life for me has been made up of even rummier things than that, and now I’ve got to the end of it. Yes; I know that pistol. That bright half-brother of yours plugged a hole into me with it that’ll last till my dying day—which, by the way, has come. And I?—well, I planted a mark on him that’ll last till his.”

He checked himself suddenly, with a queer look.

“What was the story of the Red Derelict?” said Wagram, after a pause.

“Better leave that alone—except that it was a story of red murder and piracy such as you’d think only existed in books. And now, Wagram,” he went on, “I’ve been yarning a lot more than any man in my state ought to yarn, and I’m feeling tired. You’d never guess what brought me down here this time. It wasn’t to fleece you again—no, no. Fact is, I heard you were back, and I was curious to see you again and hear how you had got on. And I have. You shook hands with me once; I’d be glad if you’d do it again.”

But Wagram’s hand did not come forward, nor did he move.

“That was when I thought your story a true one,” he said. “On your own showing you have heaped dishonour upon my family, and I can testify that you hastened my father’s end. It is not in human nature to forgive that—at any rate, all at once.”

“Later than ‘all at once’ will be too late, and by refusing your forgiveness to a dying man you will be denying your own creed.”

He smiled as he watched the struggle going on within the other. Then Wagram slowly put forth his hand.

“For any injury to me I forgive you freely,” he said. “For the rest I will try to. Good-bye.”

“And you will succeed. Good-bye, Wagram. You will never regret this. And ask Haldane to come up for a minute. I should like to bid him good-bye for the sake of old times.”

Wagram bent his head and left the room, and at a word from him Haldane went up.

“This is a bad lookout, Jack,” he began in his downright way. “No chance, I suppose, old chap?”

“No; none.”

“You wouldn’t like, I suppose—er—to see a parson—er—or anyone in that line?”

“No—no. I’ve no use for any parson. The last sight of a man like Wagram’s a sight better than any parson. Has he told you about his adventures and the Red Derelict, eh?”

“Yes; and they sounded so jolly tall that, if anybody but Wagram had told me, I shouldn’t have believed half of them.”

“But they’re true, all the same. I could take you to the very place. And the white man who put him through all that lively time was no other than the chump he was looking for—his half-brother, Butcher Ned, as we used to call him—otherwise Everard Wagram.”

“Good Lord!”

“Fact. But I wasn’t going to tell him that, neither must you—d’you hear?—neither must you. Because if you do nothing’ll prevent him from starting right away to put himself in the power of that infernal cut-throat again—under the pretence of trying to reclaim him. Reclaim Butcher Ned!”

There was a world of expression in the dying adventurer's weakening voice over these last words. He went on:

"Wagram would never have got out of that camp alive if he hadn't got out when he did. Don't you see, that's why Ned wanted to make him bring his boy out there. Then he'd have done for the pair, and come and set up here at Hilversea. He would, sure as eggs. So never let on about it."

"All right, I won't." And after a little more talk the old comrades bade each other good-bye.

"You know, Wagram, it's a deuced rum world," said Haldane as the two were driving home again. "Fancy this poor chap Develin Hunt, over whose absurd name we were roaring when that first yarn about the derelict came to hand, turning out to be my old pal Jack Faro of the early, rousing, Kimberley days! Poor chap! How he wilted over the recollection of that old crock of his. You know, it was an echo of the old camp chaff I was firing off on him—the point of which was that the said old ruin was fond of bragging that she was Jack's real and lawful wife, whatever others might be, and brandishing what she called her 'lines' in the faces of all comers. Poor old Jack! He was fairly straight as men go—and yet—and yet—I don't know—there were things whispered about him even then. Well, he's gone now."

Haldane never learned of the said Develin Hunt's—otherwise Jack Faro's—last coup, for on that Wagram was for ever silent.

That night Develin Hunt died.

Chapter Forty.

Conclusion.

“Oh, how good you have been to us! No; really, when I want to find words—well, I simply can’t.”

“Then don’t try. That’s the simplest way out of the difficulty, isn’t it?” answered Wagram, with a smile.

Delia Calmour shook her head, a puzzled little frown contradicting, as it were, the soft light that was in her eyes, and a certain tender curving of the lips. Her gaze swept over the network of sunlight glinting on the sward beneath the arching oaks, then rested on the adjacent palisade enclosing the African animals, whose quaint bellow would every now and then vie with the shout of the cuckoo to break the stillness of the lustrous summer air. She thought of herself—now enabled to make more than a comfortable living by turning her musical talents to account; of Clytie, doing exceedingly well in her own line; of raffish Bob, removed from Bassingham influences and third-rate Pownall and Skreet, to be given every chance at a fair salary with a first-class legal firm in London; of the three younger ones at school again, only at far better schools than they had ever dreamed of before—and, thus thinking, she did not exaggerate in declaring that she could not find words to express her appreciation to the man beside her—to whom all this was due. And again she repeated this.

“My dear child,” he answered, “haven’t I told you before that it’s our duty to help each other in this world as far as lies in our power? At any rate you seemed to bear in mind that principle when you literally forced the skipper of the Runic to put back because you had glimpsed some unknown poor devil left on board the derelict. Eh?”

“That’s different—quite different.”

Again she felt strangely tongue-tied. The past couple of years flashed through her mind, and how they had seemed to her to contain but one consideration, but one all-engrossing thought—the man now at her side. How their lives seemed bound up together from their first sudden and semi-tragical meeting! Even upon the vast wilderness of the wide deep they had been thrown together once more. And now here they were together again at dear old Hilversea—on the very spot, hallowed, as it were, within her mind, by the associations of those earlier days.

The time intervening, and the experiences it comprised, had rather enhanced than detracted from her beauty; indeed, it was not the fault of more than one pecuniarily

eligible and physically attractive unit of the other sex that she was still Delia Calmour, eke of more than one of whom neither of these qualifications held good. And now here she was at Hilversea again.

She was staying at Haldane's, and had cycled over that morning in response to a note from Wagram asking her to come and look at some old musical manuscripts he had unearthed in his library. Yet, so far, very little had been said about the manuscripts, he declaring it was much too lovely a morning to sit indoors; and the manuscripts were always with them, but the fine weather was not. Now he did not seem inclined to help her through her unwonted fit of silence as he strolled by her side; calm, self-possessed, the very personification of ease and strength and dignity, she was thinking.

"So you are happy in your new line, Delia?" he said at last. "And comfortable? Sure you are quite that?"

"Of course I am—all that—thanks to you," she answered, throwing an unconscious warmth into her voice.

"That's rather a pity, because I was going to suggest that you should change it."

"Change it?" she echoed, looking up at him wonderingly.

"Yes. It is only a suggestion, for, after all, I daresay in your eyes I am only a solemn sort of old fogey. But, darling, I seem to have learnt to love you very dearly indeed, and have been wondering if you would consent to make my life entirely and completely happy. I remember you asking me once—I believe it was here on this very spot—whether I didn't sometimes find life too good to be real; do you remember? Well, now, I want you to make it so. I believe I could make you very happy—we seem to have got to know each other well enough by this time to warrant me in thinking so. Now, child, what do you say?"

The girl seemed incapable of saying anything. It was as though the gates of a blissful paradise had opened to receive her. She seemed to sway unsteadily. Her lips were parted and her breathing came quickly, but in her wide eyes was a whole world of adoring affection, which was in itself sufficient answer without mere words.

"I loved and adored you from the very moment we first met," she managed to whisper as she sank into his embrace. "But you? What can you have seen in me? You?"

"Darling, I suppose I have learnt to recognise pure gold when I see it. So you will make life too good for me after all?"

“Too good for you? But it is going to be too good for me, it seems. Yet listen. You won’t be offended if I tell you something.”

“Offended? No, child; never shrink from telling me anything through fear of that. What is this ‘something’?”

“There was a time when I thought some great trouble had come upon you; of course, I could not even guess at its nature. Well, whatever that trouble might have been, then was the time I would have loved you most, if possible, no matter what it was. If it had been—I am only putting a case, mind—that which should have turned the whole world against you, that is the time I should have gloried to stand by your side. You are not offended with me for saying this?”

He laughed—lightly, happily.

“No, child. Well, you have guessed rightly. There was a trouble; black, overwhelming it seemed, as death. Now it has passed—by the mercy of God, passed for ever. Some day I may tell it you, perhaps, but not now. This is the time only for happiness.”

Happiness! In saying what she had just said Delia had not overstated the case by a single word. Had he come to her ruined, crushed by some unknown weight, even with the whole world against him, and said what he had just said she would have reckoned life almost too good to live. But now, to spend the rest of her life at his side here at beautiful, enchanted Hilversea, his happiness her life’s object—ah! the vista thus opened was too golden, too glowing, too complete. The very perfection of it frightened her as being too perfect for such an imperfect state. Happiness!

“What does all this long silence cover, dearest?” he said at last, for he had been watching with a smile the swift transitions of thought which had chased each other across the beautiful, expressive face. “I believe I know,” looking at his watch. “You were going to say you must get back to the Haldanes or they’d be wondering what had become of you. Well, they’ll have to wonder. You must stay and take care of me this morning—get your hand in a little, you know. This afternoon we’ll go over, and—tell them.”