THE GREEN PACK

BY

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The Green Pack

CHAPTER I

Mount Lodge, Kensington, bore every outward sign of respectability. It stood detached in its own grounds, a solid, sedate, dignified mansion, discreetly withdrawn from the road, with a massive portico over its front door and a massive iron gate in its high surrounding wall.

A relic, obviously, of the austere days of hansom cabs and chaperones, when no lady rode on the top of an omnibus, and the glimpse of a well-shaped ankle would set a young man writing poetry, it gave an impression of rigid conventionality and seemed to stand frowning with heavy disapproval at an age of cocktails and night clubs, in which it declined to take part.

On the gate, as a protest against the vulgar intrusions of modern life, was a small metal plaque bearing the words, "No Hawkers, No Circulars." Monty Carr, who rented the place from a landlord who regarded as a godsend any tenant willing to relieve him of the rates and had not even troubled to take up Monty's unimpeachable references, once remarked that, had there been the least likelihood of the addition proving effective, he would have added the words, "No Police."

Not that the police had ever betrayed interest in Mount Lodge. If the constable on whose beat it lay had been asked what he knew of the house, he would have replied that it was just an ordinary residence, and continued with the more serious business of noting the numbers of the cars which had overstayed their two hours' welcome in the neighbouring park—an attitude of mind which Monty Carr considered to be a tribute to his skill and discretion. For there was little that was ordinary about Mount Lodge,

The only room patronized by Louis Creet was on the ground floor, on the left of the hall—a fact which, had the police ever made a tour of inspection of the house, must have redounded to his credit in some degree and would possibly have saved him from anything more serious than a fine.

In Room A, as it was called, on any night they might have chosen for their visit, the police, provided they had evaded the complicated system of alarm signals devised by the ingenious brain of Monty Carr, and had effected their entrance unannounced, would have come upon a picturesque scene: a spacious, lofty room, with heavy curtains drawn close across the windows and a thick pile carpet that caressed the feet; in darkness save for a patch of brilliance beneath a shaded electric light that hung low over the table; a haze of tobacco smoke; in the dimness that fringed the pool of light, the shadowy outlines of men and women seated around the table—white shirt-fronts and ivory shoulders; and, on the green cloth, ashtrays, glasses, a dainty wisp of handkerchief, a scattering of cards, little heaps of brightly

coloured counters, a woman's shapely arm, a man's hand with restless fingers.

It was here that on one occasion a certain subaltern of the Guards, owing to the utterly unexpected behaviour of the ace of clubs, tossed a four-figure check across the table to Monty Carr and two minutes later, on the steps of Mount Lodge, placed the muzzle of a service revolver against the roof of his mouth and pressed the trigger. This inconsiderate action on the part of an officer and a gentleman had annoyed Monty Carr, for it was only with the greatest difficulty that the affair had been hushed up. Prudence, moreover, had demanded that the four-figure check should not be presented for payment.

Comparatively, however, Room A was a place of innocent amusement. Mount Lodge had other rooms. Since the night when, in one of the rooms upstairs, some puritanical young woman had started screaming, a powerful radio-gramophone had been installed in the hall, and the butler had instructions to set it going whenever occasion arose. It was set going quite frequently. Louis Creet, when he heard it, would glance at Monty Carr and give a queer sort of smile.

Tonight the radio-gramophone was silent, but none the less, as Monty Carr slipped a card from the pack and turned it face upwards on the table in front of Jacqueline Thurston, Louis gave a quick glance in Monty's direction. It was scarcely perceptible; his eyes just shifted for an instant to Monty and then returned to Jacqueline's face.

Jacqueline, as she saw that the card dealt to her was the ace of diamonds, could scarcely restrain the exclamation that rose to her lips. The colour rushed to her cheeks, and her eyes grew suddenly bright with excitement. Novice as she was compared with the other players around the table, she had learned enough from her few previous visits to the room with Louis Creet to realize the significance of that ace of diamonds. The ace of clubs and the ace of spades had already been dealt to other players, and there was only one card left in the pack—the ace of hearts—which could beat hers. Jacqueline had no idea what the chances were against Monty turning up the ace of hearts, but she knew that the probability of his doing so was so remote that it need not seriously be considered.

"Ace of diamonds, Jacqueline," remarked Monty, and glanced enquiringly towards her.

Jacqueline's mind was in a turmoil, and she sat staring at the card, uncomfortably conscious of silence in the room and of the dozens of eyes watching her. A chance like this might never come again as long as she lived, and if she staked her usual £100. But that would be idiotic. The

others had backed their aces for £300, and their chances had been nothing like as good as hers; and what, if she won, would be the use of a pound to her? It would help her out of none of her troubles. If she missed a chance like this she didn't deserve to be helped. If only she dared... enough to clear up everything and put her straight...

"No limit tonight, Jacqueline," came Monty's voice. "Any stake you like. I'm here to be shot at."

The girl glanced up and nodded.

"Thanks, Monty," she said, in a voice which she hardly recognized as her own. "I—I'll make it—a thousand."

Monty Carr's impassive face relaxed into a faint smile. But Jacqueline did not see it; her whole attention was riveted on his slender white fingers as, steady and unhurried, they balanced his cigarette on the edge of an ashtray and moved towards the pack of cards in front of him.

She was making a tremendous effort to appear calm. She had seen others win and lose far more than a thousand pounds without the flicker of an eyelid, and had realized that in Room A the least display of emotion was considered not quite good form. She did her utmost not to fall below the Room A standard; but Louis Creet, watching her closely, noted the whitened knuckles of her hand as it rested on the table, and the pulse throbbing in her neck.

With a deft flick, Monty Carr slipped the top card from the pack, and as it fell face upwards on the table, it seemed to Jacqueline for one suffocating moment that all the blood in her veins went suddenly surging to her heart and as suddenly drained away again—to pound against her temples, pulsate in her throat, and cloud her eyes so that all she could see was a blurred vision of the card which lay exposed in front of her. Monty Carr had turned up the ace of hearts.

She sat rigid, her mind in a panic, conscious that critical eyes were watching her as she stared at the blurred red pip of the card, not daring to turn her gaze from it and meet the glance of Monty Carr across the table. Once she did that, she would have to say something to him, and she had no idea what she could say.

"Hard luck, Jacqueline," came Carr's voice

She looked across at him. With the hint of a smile on his thin lips he was coolly shuffling the cards. Jacqueline forced herself to smile "Beginner's luck won't hold forever," she laughed. That's a thousand I owe you, Monty. I'll send you a check, may I?"

One of Monty Carr's eyebrows just perceptibly rose, but he nodded, and began to deal the cards again Jacqueline pushed back her chair and rose

"Miss me, Monty," she said. "I'm through for tonight. Louis is going to take me home."

Louis Creet rose and followed her from the room and a few minutes later they were seated together in his limousine as it purred along Kensington High Street. Jacqueline was silent, gazing, with puckered forehead, at the back of the chauffeur's head, and nervously drumming her knee with her fingers. It was Louis s voice, smooth and soothing as the purr of the engine, that broke the silence.

"I must congratulate you, Jacqueline," he said "It was magnificent. You took it with a nonchalance worthy of a hardened gambler. It takes a very hardened gambler to smile, as you did, over the loss of a thousand pounds.

The girl glanced at him.

"If it had been a thousand pence, Louis, I probably shouldn't have smiled. But a thousand pounds—" she shrugged. "I can't pay, so why worry?"

Louis raised his eyebrows.

"Can't pay?"

"Of course I can't; and Monty won't expect me to pay. He knew the bet wasn't serious. He took it as a joke."

Creet pursed his lips.

"If I were you, Jacqueline," he said, "I wouldn't count too much on Monty's sense of humour."

She looked round at him quickly.

"You don't think that Monty might really expect—"

"My dear girl," interrupted Louis, "I'm afraid you don't appreciate the position. You seem to imagine, with charming feminine inconsequence, that you can contract a debt of honour, and then, if it is inconvenient to pay, airily dismiss it as a joke. But visitors to Mount Lodge don't indulge in that sort of joke. If .they lose, they pay; if they win, they expect to be paid. Monty Carr will expect to be paid—"

"A thousand pounds?" She laughed. "Monty knows as well as you do that I couldn't write a check for ten."

Louis shook his head.

"You visited Mount Lodge as my guest, and Monty would assume that you would meet your obligations. I don't relish the idea of a guest of mine taking her winnings and shirking her losses."

"Louis, you're being poisonous."

"Only frank, my dear. If you'd won a thousand from Monty you'd have expected him to pay, wouldn't you?"

She gave a little shrug.

"I suppose so," she admitted, and stared again at the chauffeur's head. Then she turned suddenly to her companion and laid a hand on his arm.

"Louis," she said, "I've been every sort of a fool."

He smiled.

"Losing a thousand makes us all feel like that, Jacqueline—"

"Oh, I didn't mean that particularly," she interrupted. "I've made a hash of things all round lately, and I'm not feeling desperately in love with myself I haven't done a single thing during the last six months that has really been worth doing. I've just fooled around with a crowd of wasters and never given a thought to anything but chasing after some new thrill and being just a bit more stupidly up-to-the-moment than anyone else. But somehow nothing has seemed to matter since—"

She paused and shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"The fact is, I'm up to my neck in debt, and I'm scared. Fooling around as I've been doing costs money, and I've borrowed and run up bills, and things can't go on. But it's all right, Louis; I'm not going to sob my heart out on your shoulder. Give me a cigarette and talk of something pleasant."

Creet produced his case.

"And if luck had been with you tonight," he said, "the thousand pounds would have put you right. Was that the idea?"

She nodded.

"Something had to be done," she said. "Things really are pretty septic—I owe nearly three hundred—and messing about on the Stock Exchange has only made matters worse. I was crazy with worry tonight, and when Monty dealt me that ace I suddenly saw daylight. It looked like an act of Providence. With three aces out there was practically no chance of Monty turning up the fourth."

"And as he did so, you propose to pretend that the whole thing was a joke and back out of paying? It won't do, Jacqueline," he said decisively. "You must at least make some effort to pay him. You owe me that much consideration. Perhaps, after all, the simplest way out of the trouble would be to make a clean breast of everything to Dr. Thurston. Your father would be the first to say that a debt of this kind—"

She turned to him quickly.

"Father must know nothing about it," she said sharply. "I've got into the mess, and it's up to me to get out of it."

"It isn't a very pleasant task, I admit," said Creet. "But if you feel you can't face it, I should be quite willing to explain matters to your father for you. In fact, if you refuse to tell him and can suggest no reasonable alternative, I'm inclined to think it will be my duty—"

"Father is not to know," interrupted Jacqueline, with sudden vehemence. "He has no idea what sort of a rotter I've been making of myself lately, and I don't intend that he shall know. It's not cowardice; it's because it would hurt him abominably, and he doesn't deserve to be hurt like that. Besides, you don't suppose he has a thousand pounds to give to Monty, do you?"

"In a case like this, when the honour of his daughter is concerned, any man would do his utmost to pay the debt. I don't profess to know anything of your father's financial position, but I don't imagine the payment of a thousand pounds would reduce him to penury."

She shook her head.

"You can cut Father right out of it, Louis," she said. "He hasn't got a thousand pounds in the world. He's had a pretty rough time lately. He was saying yesterday that he was far better off as an ordinary G.P., curing measles and whooping cough, than he is as a specialist in Harley Street. He never knows now where the next five pounds is coming from. I don't care particularly what Monty thinks of me, but I do care what Father thinks, and I don't intend to let him and Mother suffer because I've been an idiot."

"All very noble and dutiful, Jacqueline," said Louis, "but unfortunately it doesn't help. Unless you can suggest some other means of finding the money, I must, in justice to myself—"

"If you dare to breathe a word to Father or Mother, I'll never forgive you." She laid a hand on his sleeve and glanced at him with pleading eyes. "Louis, promise me—please!" she begged. "They're both such dears, and they think so much of me, and they've had a dreadfully thin time lately, and I simply can't let them down. And I won't let you down, either. If Monty really expects me to pay, I'll manage it somehow. Leave it at that, Louis, will you?"

He laid a hand on hers.

"Very well, my dear," he said. "Since it means so much to you, I'll leave it at that."

She squeezed his arm gratefully.

"Thanks, Louis—and I won't let you down," she said again. "I'll fix things with Monty somehow." She smiled faintly. "And if I can't possibly pay him, you needn't worry. I'll make it quite clear to him that Louis Creet is an honourable man."

As the car pulled up outside a large block of flats she glanced out of the window and turned to Louis.

"I thought you were taking me home?"

He smiled as he opened the door and got out.

"Stimson is going to mix you one of his famous cocktails," he laughed, "and you're going to inspect my bachelor quarters, as you've so often promised to do. I'll take you home afterwards."

He saw her hesitation and smiled again.

"The proprieties?"

"Well, it's rather late—"

"Louis Creet is an honourable man," he laughed, and with a shrug she got out of the car and followed him towards the lift.

CHAPTER II

During the two years of Louis Creet's progress from the position of her father's wealthiest patient to that of a trusted friend of the family, though she had been almost everywhere with him, from such innocuous amusement as is found at the Zoological Gardens to the somewhat less innocent entertainment provided at Mount Lodge, Jacqueline Thurston had never visited his flat; and now, when Stimson had relieved her of her cloak, she glanced curiously round the room into which Louis led her.

"If you will excuse me, Jacqueline," he said, "I've a phone call to make. Stimson will mix you a drink."

The girl nodded, seated herself in a corner of the big settee by the fire, and, when the manservant had supplied the cocktail, continued her inspection of the room. She had a theory that a room was always a true reflection of the character of its occupant; but it puzzled her to reconcile Louis and this apartment.

It was large and lofty, with windows in two walls; the corners were rounded, and the walls merged into the ceiling in graceful curves. The windows were uncurtained and shuttered; the floor of highly polished parquet was bare of even a rug, and the mahogany furniture, though obviously expensive, was of the plainest design without a trace of ornament. Jacqueline decided that it might well be the room of an austere but wealthy ascetic. She had never thought much about Louis Creet, but that description did not seem to fit him. She could not decide whether she liked the room or hated it.

The few ornaments that were in it—some pieces of choice porcelain and a couple of exquisitely carved ivories—she certainly liked. They struck her as a flat contradiction of her theory of an austere ascetic, as did the low, luxurious couch on which she was sitting, and the alabaster statuette on the mantelpiece.

It was the figure of a dancing girl, undraped, a beautiful example of the sculptor's art. Jacqueline picked it up, gazed at it thoughtfully, and suddenly replaced it. She searched for the right word to describe it and could not find it. But emphatically she did not like it.

Louis came in and paused at the door, gazing at her.

"The riddle is solved," he laughed. "I've always felt, Jacqueline, that this room just fell short of perfection, but I could never decide what it lacked. Now I know. It needed the presence of a beautiful woman."

Jacqueline shook her head.

"What it needs more than anything else," she laughed, "is curtains and a few cushions and a rug or two on the floor. At present it's rather like—well, a hospital ward."

With a smile he crossed the room and seated himself beside her.

"A hospital ward has the advantage of being hygienic, my dear," he said. "Rounded corners and no rugs or curtains are a fad of mine. Corners and rugs and curtains mean dust, and dust means germs. You can't be too careful."

Jacqueline smiled. She remembered now. It was common knowledge that Louis Creet was convinced that space was packed with innumerable millions of deadly bacteria intent on inhabiting his person. There was a drawer in his desk stocked with every conceivable drug calculated to discourage their invasion. She knew that he was constantly swallowing tablets from a small silver box which he carried in his waistcoat pocket, and that regularly once a week he made an appointment with her father to undergo a thorough medical overhaul, and as regularly telephoned to say that he was perfectly well and the examination would be waste of time. "A bit of a hypochondriac" was how she had heard her father describe him; but she had never suspected a room with rounded corners and uncarpeted floor. Now she understood: it was nervousness rather than austere taste that accounted for its bareness, and the figure of the dancing girl might not be so incongruous after all.

"I've just been on the phone to Monty Carr," announced Louis. ^'I'm afraid it's a case of paying up and looking pleasant. Monty took the bet quite seriously and is expecting your check in the morning. I'm afraid, Jacqueline, that unless you can find some way of settling with him he is quite capable of making himself a nuisance. He'd probably consider himself justified in approaching your father—"

"But, Louis, he mustn't—you mustn't allow him—"

"I can hardly hope to prevent him, my dear. But we will hope it won't come to that. Perhaps if we put our heads together we can find some way to set matters right. I might possibly be of some use myself."

She glanced at him sharply.

"You?"

He smiled.

"I suppose you've heard what they say about me, Jacqueline? I know. They say it's easier to extract a back tooth from a shark's jaw than five pounds from Louis Creet's pocket. But I don't think I've lived up to that reputation as far as you are concerned."

"You haven't," replied the girl promptly. "You've given me a splendid time, Louis, for the last eighteen months—taken me everywhere, bought me goodness knows what, and I'm terribly grateful. But a thousand pounds... frankly, I can't see you parting with a thousand pounds for nothing—"

Suddenly she stopped. She had realized in a flash what sort of return Louis would expect for his thousand pounds, and her heart beat a little faster. As she stared into the fire, avoiding his gaze, the image of the dancing figure on the mantelpiece came before her eyes, and she understood what it was that had always prompted her, when Louis had pressed her to visit his flat, to evade the invitation.

"Don't you realize, Jacqueline," said Louis, his voice low and caressing, "that you're a very beautiful woman?"

She raised her head and looked at him. Until this moment, though she had known him for two years, she had never really looked at Louis Creet. She had a general impression of him as a well-dressed, well-groomed man, who was always an agreeable companion and had an abundance of time and money which he seemed to like to devote to her amusement, but that was all. She had accepted him as a friend of the family, a kind of adopted uncle, and had never troubled to ask herself what he was really like.

Now for the first time she looked at him critically and appraisingly, and discerned a Louis Creet utterly different from her careless conception of him. For the first time she realized, with something of a shock, that he must be nearer fifty than forty, and that his eyes were restless and elusive. She noticed their heavy lids and the pouches beneath them. She saw that his lips were too loose, his hands too plump and white and faultlessly manicured, and his feet absurdly small. She saw now nothing incongruous in the presence of the dancing figure in Louis Creet's room. "Wanton," she realized, was the word which had eluded her.

"Very beautiful," repeated Louis, and caressing fingers touched her bare arm.

She drew back sharply.

"Louis—please 1 I—I don't understand."

He smiled, and his hand slid round her, drawing her towards him

"Innocent little Jackie!" he murmured. "I tell her she is beautiful—the most beautiful woman in the world—and she pretends not to understand!"

She freed herself and sprang to her feet.

"Louis, why—why are you saying all this to me? Are you mad?"

He rose.

"Why does any man tell any woman she is beautiful? You're old enough and sophisticated enough to know, my dear."

For some moments she stood gazing at him intently, as if trying to confirm the impression of that first concentrated look at him. Then:

"Louis," she said, "do you mean that you love me?"

Creet grew uneasy beneath her steady gaze. He turned and fingered the figure of the dancing girl.

"Would that surprise you?" he laughed. "Perhaps you don't realize how easily any man could fall in love with you. You and I could be very happy together, Jackie."

"You mean that you want me to marry you?"

"Supposing I did mean that, what would you say?"

The girl shook her head.

"Sorry, Louis, but I couldn't."

"Because?"

She shrugged.

"Larry Deans?"

"Perhaps—yes, I suppose Larry has something to do with it."

Her eyes grew suddenly bright, and she stepped eagerly forward and laid a hand on his arm.

"Louis," she said, "tell me—frankly—what you think. Shall we ever hear of Larry again? When did you last have news of him?"

"Rather more than six months ago," he replied.

"And you've heard nothing—from anyone—about him since then?"

"I could hardly hear from anyone but Larry himself, or from Storman and Elliott, who are with him, and I've heard from none of them,"

She nodded.

"You don't believe we shall ever hear of them again, do you?"

"My dear Jacqueline," said Louis, "you must realize that searching for a goldfield in the unexplored regions of Africa is a very risky business. Larry and the others are not the first who have been tempted by the prospect of immense wealth to risk their lives in looking for it. The legend of this particular goldfield is an old one, and the list of men who have set out to find it and have never returned is a long one. I'm afraid we must face the fact that Larry's name has been added to the list."

Jacqueline was silent for some moments.

"I see," she said at length. "Thanks, Louis. I suppose I've known that all the time, really, but I've shirked admitting it."

She stood for a while gazing down into the fire, and then she raised her head again.

"You knew all that when you sent Larry, didn't you," she stated rather than asked.

"'Sent' is hardly the word," said Creet. "You know very well the state Larry was in when he went—up to his ears in debt, bankruptcy proceedings pending, and neither a penny in the world nor the inclination to do an honest day's work—"

He saw the look in her eyes and paused.

"I'm sorry, Jackie," he went on. "I liked Larry.

But I couldn't close my eyes to the fact that he was an incurable waster—"

"I won't listen," she interrupted. "I've known Larry ever since I can remember, and he's the finest, cleanest, whitest man—"

Louis cut her short.

"Very well, my dear," he said, smiling indulgently. "But Larry's spotlessness doesn't affect the case. He came to me and told me that he wanted to have a try at finding the goldfield, and as he hadn't a penny in the world he suggested that I should finance the expedition. I liked Larry and was sorry for him, and I was fool enough to put up the money. I have probably lost several thousands over it."

Jacqueline made a gesture of impatience.

"And Larry and Tubby Storman and Mark Elliott have probably lost their lives. Take me home, Louis, will you?"

She turned to go towards the door, but Creet's hand on her arm detained her.

"I asked you a question just now, Jacqueline, and you haven't answered."

The girl faced him.

"You mean—about marrying you?"

He shrugged.

"It was you who mentioned marriage, not I."

He lighted a cigarette with a careless air, but Jacqueline noticed that his hand was shaking.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "I'm not in a position to ask you to marry me. I'm already married."

"Louis!" she gasped. "I had no idea—"

"Few people have," said Creet. "It's not a fact I'm particularly proud of, and I'm trusting you to respect my confidence. I'm only telling you because I want to play the game with you."

"Then—then you're not asking me to marry you?"

Again he shrugged.

"There's such a thing as divorce," he said, "and there'd be no difficulty about that—a little later. But I was under the impression that with you modern young people marriage was too terribly old-fashioned to be considered—one of the things which simply isn't done nowadays."

The girl's hand clenched, but she managed to control herself.

"That was a bad mistake to make, Louis," she said quietly. "Why should you think that—of me?"

"Except that you're more than usually beautiful, Jacqueline, I've no reason to believe you different from other women. Nine out of ten of them nowadays—"

"Louis—you're foul!"

He smiled.

"The outraged-innocence role is played out, my dear," he said. "You don't really think me foul. You wouldn't have thought it foul if Larry had asked you what I'm asking you—"

With a sudden jerk she wrenched her arm free, her hand struck him full on the mouth, and she turned and went quickly towards the door. But Creet was there before her, standing with his back against it, smiling.

"Now that the play-acting is over, Jacqueline, perhaps we can get down to serious business."

"I won't hear another word," she flamed and made a grab at the door handle, but Louis caught her wrist and held it.

"Don't be too hasty, Jacqueline," he said. "After all, you're hardly in a position to ride the high horse, and I'm making you a very generous proposition. A thousand pounds is a lot of money—even for a beautiful woman."

She stared at him with incredulous eyes.

"You mean that—that if—"

"You will hear no more from Monty Carr," said Louis. "I can promise you that. Take my advice, my dear, and don't be too absurdly old-fashioned. I know I'm not a Larry Deans, but Larry is definitely out of the running, and you might find a worse substitute than Louis Creet."

He loosed her wrist and waited, watching her as she stood before him, her arms hanging limply at her sides, her gaze on the carpet.

"You know my answer, don't you?"

"I'm waiting to hear it."

"I've nothing to give you, Louis—even for ten thousand pounds."

His hands gripped her shoulders.

"Nothing to give me, eh? That's like all you modern girls: you'll take, take, take as long as a man will go on paying, and when he asks you for something in return he discovers you're nothing but mean, unsporting little shirkers. You're all the same—cheap little twisters! You play the game as long as you win, and refuse to pay when you lose. But you won't get away with that this time, Jackie—not with me."

She struggled to free herself, but he held her fast and drew her closer.

"If you won't pay, my dear, you've got to be made to pay."

She was helpless in his grasp. His arms slipped round her, crushed her to him, and his lips pressed fiercely against hers, forcing them against her teeth. Suddenly he released her, and stood watching as she sprang towards the door, flung it open and faced him.

"Louis—what a swine you are!" she flamed; and then, with a sigh: "I wish to God Larry were here!"

"He's not—and anyway, what use would Larry be?"

"He'd kill you," she said quietly.

"As it is," sneered the other, "the honour of killing me is reserved for someone else. If I'm such a swine, why don't you take it on yourself, Jackie?"

She glanced up and met his gaze.

"I could, Louis—gladly," she said, with quiet vehemence, and turning abruptly slammed the door behind her.

CHAPTER III

The portable gramophone, balanced precariously on a pile of worn field baggage in the middle of the tent, struggled gallantly on. It was a dilapidated instrument. Eighteen months of African swamp and forest had left their marks on it no less than on the three men who shared the tent with it. Its covering was scarred and torn at the corners; its tarnished arm was clumsily mended with a piece of wire; its winding handle was broken, and only by the use of the pair of pliers which lay beside it could it be screwed up to concert pitch.

The record on the swaying turntable—sole survivor of the original two dozen purchased eighteen months ago in Cape Town—had not come through unscathed; but, despite its deep scratches and the two cracks which ran from centre to circumference, the song was still recognizable:

"How can I (click) live without (click) you? How (click) can I (click) let you (click) let you (click)—let you (click)—let you (click)—"

The rusty needle gave a jerk, skidded, rasping, across the pitted surface of the record, and began scraping at the centre; but none of the three men in the tent took any notice.

In the case of Tubby Storman this was an unprecedented display of indifference. Tubby was inclined to sentimentality as well as to plumpness, and this one surviving record, wrapped in the remnants of a khaki shirt, had travelled with him for the best part of eighteen months through Portuguese West Africa, his most treasured possession—with the exception of the photograph in the shabby leather wallet which he always carried in the pocket of his shirt, approximately over his heart.

Every night for eighteen months Tubby, stretched on a camp bed in some God- forsaken spot where their camp was pitched, would set his gramophone playing this particular record, and lie, gazing sadly at the instrument, his face a picture of beautiful melancholy, until the song was finished, when he would sigh, stop the machine, close his eyes, and with a seraphic smile on his chubby face proceed to snore.

On this occasion, however, he did not appear to be listening. With hands thrust deep into the pockets of what had originally been a pair of riding breeches, he was staring down with wide-open eyes at a box which stood on the ground at his feet. The box was lid-less, and in it was a shovelful of loose soil; but it seemed to fascinate Tubby, and the scraping of his last remaining gramophone needle failed to attract his attention.

Larry Deans, seated on a box by the tent opening, intent on cleaning a rifle, turned his head and glanced from Tubby to the gramophone with a glint of amusement in his blue-grey eyes.

"Tell me again you love me. Tubby," he said. "Kiss me on lips and brow. Beautiful, isn't it? But you might stop the damned thing scratching itself."

Tubby, apparently, had not heard, but remained staring at the box, with the same rapt expression on his face. The lines round Larry's mouth formed themselves into a smile, and he rose, crossed to the gramophone, stopped it, and picked up the record. As he did so, there came another click, and the disk was divided into two.

Larry turned to Tubby with a grin and displayed the pieces.

"Parted—for good, Tubby," he laughed.

"Thank heaven for that!" The voice came from Mark Elliott, sprawling, half asleep, on a mattress. "But break the news to him gently, Larry, and if he needs a handkerchief he can use my shirt. Portuguese West Africa is now almost a beautiful place. He's got no more records, has he?"

Larry dug an elbow into Tubby's ribs.

"Any more records, fat boy?"

Just for a second Tubby turned his head and glanced at the broken record; and then his gaze returned to the box at his feet.

"Good Lord, Larry!" he exclaimed in an awed voice. "It doesn't seem possible, does it?"

Larry tossed the broken record away and returned to his box.

"Take a good deep breath, old boy," he advised, "and tell yourself it's true."

Tubby shook his head.

"I don't know how it strikes you fellows," he said, "but it seems to me—well, sort of absurd. What I mean is, here's a box of dirt, the sort of thing you'd use for growing mustard and cress or tulips—"

"0r forget-me-nots," suggested Mark.

Tubby withered him with a look.

"There are better uses," laughed Larry, "for the soil of an alluvial goldfield than growing mustard and cress. Keep on staring at it, Tubby, and telling yourself that you're a rich man."

Tubby nodded.

"I'm doing it," he said, "but it doesn't seem to percolate. Seriously, Larry, what do you reckon, roughly, our goldfield's worth?"

"For the fiftieth time in the last two hours. Tubby, I haven't a notion. Millions, probably. Maybe hundreds of millions."

Tubby considered this for a moment, then his face lighted up.

"I tell you what it is, you fellows," he said, with the air of one who has made a great discovery: "If what Larry says is true, it's—it's romantic, that's what it is."

"Oh, Lord!" sighed Mark.

"It's a bit frightening if you ask me," said Larry. "And there are no ifs or buts about it. Tubby. Within two or three months you'll need a special staff of secretaries to deal with begging letters."

Tubby smiled.

"I wonder what Bunty will say—and the kids." he mused.

"'Daddy's a millionaire, darling—isn't he clever?'" laughed Larry. "What will you do with your money, Tubby?"

"If he says he'll buy a new gramophone, Larry, shoot him now," urged Mark.

"I'm going to buy a place in the country—a big place," announced Tubby. "I might have a pied-à-terrein town as well—"

"A what?"

"A flat in London is what he means, Mark," explained Larry. "What's the programme for the country, Tubby—growing bigger and better chickens?"

"Oh, a few hunters and a couple of cars and a dog or two, and that sort of thing. Try to remember, you fellows, if you chance to meet me, that it's usual to touch your hat to the squire. 'Morning, Squire!' 'Good-morning, farmer. How are the pigs?' 'Why, Squire, them sure do be foine, and all they sows got litters.'"

Mark groaned.

"The horrible thing is," he said, with a sad shake of the head, "that that's exactly what is going to happen. I'm going to race—have about a dozen horses in training and buy a house at Newmarket."

"That's sheer waste of money, old boy," reproved Tubby.

Mark shrugged.

"There'll be plenty to play about with—eh, Larry?"

"Enough for Tubby to play the squire with distinction," laughed Larry. "Can't you see him going round the village at Christmas time, distributing blankets to poor old women when they'd much rather have a bottle of gin?"

"Oh, well, a quarter share in the goldfield is worth a tidy lot of money, anyway," said Tubby contentedly, "and I daresay I'll throw in a bottle of gin as well. If you ask me, the luckiest man in this outfit is Louis Creet. We've

had to work for our quarter share—eighteen months of swamp and forest and beastly mosquitoes and tsetse fly, and—"
"Fleas," said Larry; "natives of Africa. Don't forget them. Tubby."
"Not to mention 'Parted,'" sighed Mark.
"And all old Louis has had to do for his quarter share," continued Tubby, "is to stay at home and swallow pastilles and generally take care of his precious health."
"A quarter share each was the arrangement. Tubby," said Larry. "What are you grousing about?"
"I'm not. All I'm saying is that Louis should be feeling pretty average grateful to us."
"He should go down on his knees," said Mark, "and lick our boots in gratitude. But before he did that he'd want the boot polish analyzed, to be sure it wouldn't upset his delicate stomach. I never knew a bloke so windy about his health. What's wrong with him, Larry?"
Larry frowned.
"Physically?" He gave a shrug. "But I can't see Louis on his knees in gratitude to any of us over this business. He'll probably think we should go on our knees to him for financing the expedition. It's rough on you, Tubby: your boots deserve a lick from Louis, anyway. Do you realize, Mark, that we might have gone back with failure written in large letters across our pants if Tubby hadn't had the intelligence to fall into that swamp?"
"'Fall in' isn't quite correct, old boy," said Tubby. "I was simply looking for a solid foothold for my fourteen stone—"
"If Tubby hadn't fallen in," continued Larry, "we shouldn't have had to fish him out; and it was through fishing him out that we found the only causeway that could get us to Chumbaziri. Mark and I are grateful to you, anyway, Tubby."
"Oh, well, I'm glad I have my uses," sighed Tubby. "What's the next move, Larry?"
"To get out of this bug-ridden spot and secure our concession for the goldfield as quickly as we can. God knows how long it will take us. The next thing will be to communicate with Louis, because without him we can't get a move on. I've sent a boy off today to the coast with a cable to Louis, telling him we've located the mine and asking him to come out as soon as possible. If the boy gets through all right he should reach the court in about six weeks, and if Louis starts at once he should reach Lobito Bay almost as soon as we do. By the way, there's only one bathroom in the Da Silva Hotel, Tubby, and it's already booked in my name for the first two hours after we arrive there."
"Soap—and hot water!" sighed Mark. "I'm next after Larry in the bathroom, Tubby."
Tubby smiled.

"You fellows are forgetting the most important thing," he said. "Mind you, I'm all for cleanliness and washing behind your ears and that sort of thing, but in my case the soap and water will have to wait. There'll be letters—from England."

Larry rose, laid aside his rifle, and stood gazing out through the opening of the tent.

"You'd forgotten the letters, eh, Larry?"

"No, I hadn't," said the other quietly.

"Do you realize, Larry, that it's months since any of us had a single blessed line from home?"

Larry did not answer.

"For nearly six months I've heard nothing from Bunty and the kids, and you've heard nothing from Jacqueline—"

Larry turned abruptly and flung himself on his mattress.

"Oh, shut up, Tubby!" he exclaimed irritably. "Go to bed."

Tubby glanced at the gramophone, sighed, and stretched himself on his battered camp bed.

"Good-night, my brother millionaires," he said and closed his eyes.

A few moments later the stillness of the African night was broken by the sound of a man's voice singing:

"How can I live without you?
How can I let you go?
I that you loved so well, dear..."

The "dear" was sustained for several bars, a long, unsteady, rapidly failing note, and, as it finally expired:

"Larry!" came Mark's voice.

"Hullo!"

"What did you do with that record?"

"It's broken. I slung it away."

Mark uttered a groan.

"For God's sake, Larry, see if you can find it and stick it together again."

CHAPTER IV

Jacqueline walked home from Creet's flat. It took her the best part of an hour, but she felt that to sit still in a taxi was more than she could endure. She must keep moving. She did not want to think, and walking made thinking less compulsory. And she hoped that by walking she would arrive too late for the usual goodnight gossip with her father and mother. She could not face that half- hour of commonplace chatter tonight. She wanted to be alone—to slip upstairs unobserved and lock her door and cry. Above all else she wanted to have a bath. She felt mentally and physically soiled; and though tears might wash the dark thoughts from her mind, she was obsessed with the idea that only soap and water could cleanse her from the touch of Louis Creet.

But It was not to be. As she noiselessly opened the front door, Dr. Thurston came into the hall; a white-haired man with genial blue eyes, tall, with a pair of massive shoulders and hands as gentle as a woman's.

"Hullo, Jackie, you little devil!" he greeted her. "Do you know it's nearly half-past twelve?"

"Sorry, Father. I've been out with Louis."

Dr. Thurston nodded.

"Had a good time?"

She wrinkled up her nose.

"A bit Creetish."

"Creetish?"

"Stodgy," she explained. "Louis can be dreadfully middle-aged."

Thurston smiled.

"Louis is a good chap," he said. "Good-night, my dear."

He kissed her, and she was turning away when he caught her by the arm and gazed anxiously into her face.

"Nothing wrong, Jackie?"

"No, Father. Why?"

"You looked fagged out—almost middle-aged yourself instead of twenty-two."

"Blame Louis," she laughed. "Perhaps middle age is catching. Good-night, Father."

She was halfway up the stairs when her father called to her.

"By the way, Jackie," he said, "you can tell Louis when you see him that if he makes any more appointments and doesn't keep them I shall charge

them up to him. He was supposed to be here at three o'clock for me to examine him, but as usual he didn't put in an appearance."

"All right, I'll tell him," laughed Jacqueline, and hesitated. "Father, what really is wrong with Louis?" she asked. "Anything?"

"I haven't examined him, so I can't say, Jackie. He's always imagining he's ill, but if you want my real opinion he's a bit of an old woman who fusses over his health when all he's really suffering from is a swollen bank balance and enlarged leisure."

"I see," said Jacqueline. "Then there's not really any chance that he'll suddenly drop dead?"

He shook his head.

"People don't drop dead from those troubles, Jackie. Why?"

"I wondered," sighed the girl. "Good-night, Father."

When she had bathed, Jacqueline felt better, and when she had locked the door of her bedroom she did not cry. Instead, she seated herself in an armchair before the glowing gas fire, lighted a cigarette, and tried to take a calm look at the situation.

She had, of course, been a perfect little fool, but it was no use wasting time in reviling herself, and Louis Creet was not even worth reviling. Somehow she must find a way out of the tangle in which she had become involved. Useless as it was, she could not help wishing that Larry were there. If Larry had been there, she would never have played the idiot as she had done during the last few months. Even if he had written, all this could never have happened. But when, six months ago, his letters had suddenly ceased, nothing had seemed to matter; and because thinking of Larry had hurt her so unbearably, anything had been welcome that had helped her to forget.

For some time her thoughts clung to Larry, and a smile hovered round her lips. And then she suddenly remembered that she would never see him again, and once more nothing seemed to matter. Monty must do what he liked; if he told her father she couldn't help it; she could not be bothered with Monty now. She could not be bothered with anything. She just wanted to sit where she was in front of the fire. She was dreadfully tired.

A soft tap on her door roused her, and she rose, crossed to the door, and opened it. It was Mrs. Thurston, in dressing gown and bedroom slippers.

"Not asleep, darling?"

She seated herself on the edge of the bed and scrutinized the girl keenly.

"Anything wrong, Jacqueline?"

"No, Mother. Why?"

"Your father said you seemed rather upset, dear, and I thought I'd run along and see if anything had happened."

Jacqueline kissed her and returned to her armchair.

"You and Father are a couple of old fusspots," she laughed. "What could happen?"

"Louis hasn't—asked you anything?"

The girl glanced round sharply.

"Louis? What on earth should Louis ask me?"

"Well, my dear, I've been hoping... He has been paying you very marked attentions... no girl could want a better match."

Jacqueline smiled.

"Have you got out of bed at half-past one in the morning to come and discover if Louis has asked me to marry him? Well, he hasn't, and I don't suppose he ever will."

Mrs. Thurston sighed again.

"I don't agree with you, Jacqueline," she said. "Louis would make a splendid husband, and I'm surprised he hasn't asked you before this. I'm sure I've invited him to dinner and left you alone together often enough. I suppose I must persevere, and I do hope, my dear, you will back me up."

"The next time Louis comes to dinner, Mother, I promise you I'll squeeze his hand under the table."

"And when he does ask you, I hope, dear, you won't refuse him without thinking very carefully about it. I do feel that if you and he could make a match of It

"All right. Mother," interrupted the girl. "If Louis should ever ask me to marry him, I promise you I'll think about it. Marriage isn't much in my line, though."

Mrs. Thurston glanced at her, then rose, stood behind her chair, and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Tell me, Jackie," she said gently, "you're not still fretting over Larry, are you?"

The girl's hand found her mother's and pressed it.

"We won't talk about Larry, please, Mother."

Mrs. Thurston stood for a time gazing thoughtfully at the fire, while her fingers fondled Jacqueline's hair. Then she stooped, and her lips touched the girl's cheek.

"Poor Jackie!" she whispered.

She returned to the bed and sat down.

"I want you to remember, dear," she said, "when Louis does ask, that your father and I both think very highly of him. He has been very good to your father."

Jacqueline's eyebrows were raised.

"Louis—good to Father? How?"

Mrs. Thurston nodded.

"Your father said I was on no account to tell you, Jacqueline, but it's only right that you should know.

If it hadn't been for Louis, Father would still have been curing colds and bringing babies into the world in that poky little village. Of course, somebody has got to bring babies into the world, and I'm sure he did it very well, but he was always fretting to be in Harley Street, and it was Louis who made it possible. It seems to cost a dreadful lot of money to be a Harley Street specialist. I wonder how any of them afford it. It needed more than your father got for his country practice even to make a start."

"And Louis supplied it?"

The older woman nodded.

"A very handsome check, dear," she confided. "And of course it's a dreadfully slow business getting known in Harley Street, and you can't hope to make enough to live on for the first few years, and if it weren't for Louis's generosity I'm sure I don't know where we should be."

Jacqueline's eyes were troubled.

"You mean, Mother, that Louis is still giving Father money?"

"Well, dear, not exactly giving it," said Mrs. Thurston. "He did it very tactfully, I must say. He said he had always been accustomed to pay his medical adviser a fixed sum every year to look after his health—he's very nervous about his health, you know, although your father says there's nothing at all the matter with him—and as his former doctor had just gone abroad he'd be very grateful if your father would look after him instead. Five hundred a year isn't a fortune, but as things are now it's a godsend. If it weren't for Louis's five hundred a year your father would have been obliged to give up Harley Street long ago, and that would break his heart now—just when he's beginning to get a footing."

"I see," said Jacqueline thoughtfully. "Then it comes to this. Mother, that to all intents and purposes we're living on Louis's money?"

Mrs. Thurston nodded.

"Your father would be very angry if he knew I'd told you, Jacqueline, but I thought it right that you should know. And now I must get back to bed, dear, or he will have rolled the bedclothes all round him and gone to sleep, and I shall shiver all night. He always does if I don't cling to them. Good-night, my dear."

As Mrs. Thurston closed the door behind her, Jacqueline rose and stood for a time motionless, frowning. And then she suddenly flung her cigarette into the fireplace.

Living on Louis Creet's money! The web was woven more tightly than she had feared.

CHAPTER V

Jacqueline did not enjoy her breakfast the next morning. She knew, however, that any marked loss of appetite was bound to attract her father's attention, and that when the meal was over he would want to see her tongue, stare into her eyes, diagnose and prescribe. It was the inevitable result of failure to eat a hearty meal, to which she was quite accustomed; but this morning the searching scrutiny of her father's eyes was an ordeal she was anxious to avoid; correct diagnosis was the last thing she wanted, and the only prescription which could cure her trouble was one which her father could not possibly supply. So she valiantly swallowed her breakfast and tried to dismiss from her mind the thought—which assailed her with every mouthful—that it was Louis Creet's money that had paid for what she was eating.

As soon as Dr. Thurston had left for his consulting room in Harley Street, Jacqueline shut herself in his study and telephoned to Monty. Mr. Carr, she was informed, was not yet up, but would speak to her if she would hold the line; and a few moments later, Monty's voice, as expressionless as his face, reached her.

"Good-morning, Jacqueline. Don't you ever sleep." It's barely ten o'clock."

Jacqueline forced a laugh.

"I didn't sleep much last night, Monty."

"No?"

"I—I was too worried." i m sorry.

"About that bet last night," she explained. "It was idiotic of me to worry, really. You knew it was a joke, Monty, didn't you?"

"Joke?"

"Louis said you might not appreciate that sort of humour, so I've rung up to apologize. I'm frightfully sorry, Monty."

For some moments there was silence, while Jacqueline gazed anxiously at the telephone, as if trying to wrest from it some indication of the effect of her words on Monty's impassive face. And then came his voice again.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Jacqueline. I wasn't aware that you had played any joke."

Jacqueline forced a laugh, but there was no smile in her face.

"You didn't really believe the bet was anything else, Monty, did you?" She strove, not very successfully, to prevent her voice from betraying her anxiety. "You couldn't really have thought I should risk a thousand pounds—"

"On the hand you held, a thousand pounds was a moderate stake," interrupted Monty. "Yours was the third ace out, and the odds were tremendously against my turning up the fourth. As it happened, I did. If I hadn't, I should have owed you a thousand pounds. I shouldn't have thought it a joke, but I should have paid without squealing!"

Jacqueline drew in her breath sharply, and her fingers gripped the receiver more tightly. She was losing, and she knew it. Something in Monty's voice told her that the bluff had failed, that Monty recognized it as a bluff, that he knew she had made the bet seriously and was now trying to escape payment by the contemptible subterfuge of pretending it had only been a joke. Louis had thought the same. And of course it was true. Of course she had made the bet seriously, and of course it was contemptible to try to wriggle out of payment. She despised herself as much as Monty despised her. But a thousand pounds was an impossible sum....

"Are you there, Jacqueline?"

"Yes."

"Why not be frank? You never intended the bet as a joke."

For some moments Jacqueline hesitated, staring at the telephone, with panic in her eyes. Then:

"No, Monty," she said quietly, "I meant the bet quite seriously. I'm sorry. Monty, I—I can't pay. I knew when I made the bet that I couldn't pay if I lost, and I had no right to make the bet at all. I'm terribly ashamed of myself. I can't think how I came to do a thing like that. I suppose I was excited and lost my head—"

There came a click over the line, and she paused, frowning.

"Hullo! Are you there, Monty?"

There was no reply. Monty had hung up.

The colour rushed to her cheeks. So that was his answer! He could not have told her more plainly what he thought of her: he despised her as much as Louis did—and with better reason. But at that moment neither of them despised her as much as she despised herself.

She tried to persuade herself that Monty had not hung up his receiver. The exchange, perhaps, had cut her off. Another call to Mount Lodge, however, dispelled that hope. Mr. Carr, she was told, was engaged and could not come to the telephone; and although she tried again three times during the morning, Mr. Carr on each occasion remained obstinately inaccessible. After the third attempt she gave it up. After all, it did not matter very much what Monty Carr thought of her, as long as he realized that she could not possibly pay. Louis had said that he would certainly expect payment, but she did not

allow that fact to worry her. Louis had had very special reasons for wishing her to think so; that threat had been just a thong in the whip which he had cracked at her. She suspected that the whip, if she were obstinate, would prove to have other thongs, and she wondered what they would be.

She was soon to discover. In accordance with her plan of patient perseverance, Mrs. Thurston had invited Louis to dinner that evening, and by means of the transparent manoeuvres which passed with her for tact, contrived to leave him alone with Jacqueline in the drawing room.

Louis seated himself at the piano and ran his fingers over the keys.

"What tune shall I play for you, Jacqueline?" Jacqueline, staring into the fire, shrugged. "Whatever tune you play, I'm not going to dance to it."

Louis strolled to the fireplace and stood smiling down at her.

"It doesn't do to be too sure, darling," he said. "The music might be so—compelling that you couldn't help dancing."

Jacqueline sprang to her feet and faced him with angry eyes.

"Louis, how dare you come here tonight! After last night, if you'd had any decent feelings at all you would at least have kept away from me."

"I came because your mother invited me," said Louis. "Of course, if the proposal I made to you yesterday is really as repugnant as you pretended—"

"I was not pretending."

"Very well," agreed Louis. "Then we will say that if you feel you can afford to refuse it, I shall have no choice but to stay away in the future."

"I've already refused it."

Louis sighed.

"I suppose, Jacqueline," he said, "it is too much to ask you to believe that I am really very much in love with you? But it happens to be true."

"Love?" She laughed. "I should leave love out of it, Louis, if I were you. You don't want me to believe, do you, that because I won't be bought for a thousand pounds you're going to rush away in despair and shoot lions?" She shook her head. "But we won't talk about it." She nodded towards the piano. "Play something, Louis."

Creet did not move.

"I shan't go and shoot lions," he said, "but I shall certainly go abroad. You could hardly expect me, caring for you as I do, to stay here in London, coming to your house, meeting you—"

She cut him short with a gesture.

"I shall go abroad," he repeated. "For many reasons I shall be sorry to go. I shall be sorry, for instance, to lose your father—both as a friend and as a medical adviser; and I feel sure your father will miss me—both as a friend and as a patient."

He paused and shot her a questioning glance. Jacqueline was frowning.

"I see," she said. "So that's the other thong, is it?"

"Thong?"

"Oh, never mind," she sighed. "I understand, and there was no need for you to beat about the bush. You mean that unless I agree to your beastly proposal, Father will lose the five hundred a year you pay him as your medical attendant."

Louis shrugged.

"That would naturally be so," he said, "though it hadn't occurred to me. But I don't imagine my paltry five hundred a year is of much consequence to your father."

"It is—and you know it is," interrupted Jacqueline. "For heaven's sake, Louis, if you can't be decent, be frank. First you threaten me with having to pay a thousand pounds to Monty, and now, when you find that hasn't done the trick, you threaten to cut ofF the five hundred a year from my father because you know that he can't afford to lose it, that to all intents and purposes we're living on it, and that if he lost it he'd have to give up everything and be a little G.P. in the country again, just when he's starting to do the work he has always longed to do. And you're counting on my caring too much for him—and for Mother—to let it happen. Isn't that the truth?"

Before Louis could answer, Mrs. Thurston, having tactfully rattled the handle of the door, came in and glanced eagerly at Jacqueline; and the girl, reading the question in her eyes, turned her head away.

"You're just in time, Mother," she said. "Louis is going to play us a tune."

Louis went to the piano.

"And Jacqueline is going to dance," he laughed, and began to play.

CHAPTER VI

The note which Jacqueline received the following day was brief and to the point. It ran thus:

Dear Jacqueline:

"If I do not receive your check during the day I shall consider myself free to take whatever steps I think fit.

Sincerely yours, M.C.

She opened it at breakfast, and, as a consequence, when the meal was over, had to submit to her father's examination, diagnosis, and prescription of a good strong tonic and not less than eight hours' sleep a night.

After breakfast she shut herself in his study and read the note again. But the second reading only strengthened the impression created by the first and made Monty's threat stand out more clearly. Monty meant to have his money, and if she did not pay him there was only one step which he could take with any hope of obtaining it: he would tell her father. That he must never do.

Jacqueline tore the note into tiny fragments, tossed them into the fire, lifted the receiver of the telephone, and asked for Monty's number. Mr. Carr, of course, was out. She had expected that. Monty did not intend to argue about it. Perhaps, if she could manage to raise some part of it...

She went out—without knowing exactly why. She had a vague idea that she might somewhere find someone who could help her. There must be plenty of people in London who could lend her £1,000 and not even miss it. It was hopelessly unfair. She saw cars which had cost more than she needed to get her out of her trouble, and felt that she hated their occupants. If every person she passed in the street would give her a shilling...

She pulled herself up sharply and made an effort to be practical. She knew plenty of people, but there were few among the bright young set whom she knew well enough to ask for £1,000, and she doubted if among those few there was one who had it to lend.

She called on several. "Sorry, Jackie; I'm broke," was the invariable answer. It was humiliating as well as hopeless, and at length she gave it up and called at Mount Lodge with a vague idea of appealing to Monty Carr's chivalry. But Monty, as she had known he would be, was still "not at home" when she gave her name.

After that Jacqueline had no clear recollection of where she went or what she did. She was very near panic. She had a dim impression of interviewing a Mr. Jacobs, who politely asked her impertinent questions from behind a massive mahogany desk, spoke of securities and guarantors and promissory

notes, and seemed deeply grieved that she should have so misunderstood his advertisement in the newspaper as to imagine that he was really prepared to lend from £50 to £50,000 on a note of hand alone, without either security or delay or vexatious enquiries. He then proceeded to call her "my dear" and hinted that if she would care to dine with him that evening at a certain quiet little restaurant it might be possible to come to some arrangement. Mr. Jacobs reminded her of Louis. She was glad to get away from him.

After that episode Jacqueline hurried home, pleaded a headache as an excuse, and shut herself in her bedroom until dinner time.

Dr. Thurston was unusually grave during dinner, so absorbed in thought that even when Jacqueline left her soup untasted and did no more than dissect her fish, he made no comment; and her mother was so obviously indulging in tactful cheerfulness that Jacqueline, glancing anxiously from one to the other, wondered. Bid they already know?

When the meal was over. Dr. Thurston signed to her to follow him and led the way into his study.

"I want a word with you, Jackie," he said, seated himself in his armchair, and seemed to forget her. Jacqueline, her heart thumping, waited.

"Anything—anything wrong. Father?"

Dr. Thurston roused himself.

"Sit down, Jackie," he said. "I've something to say to you. Not very pleasant, I'm afraid. It's about your mother."

Jacqueline suddenly felt that breathing had become less difficult, but her eyes were anxious as she glanced at her father's grave face.

"Mother?"

Dr. Thurston nodded.

"I've said nothing to you before, Jackie, because—well, there was no need to until I was certain, but now—"

There came a tap on the door, and the maid came in.

"There's a gentleman asking to see you, sir," she announced. "I've shown him into the drawing room. Carr is the name."

Jacqueline could not restrain a start.

"Carr?" repeated Dr. Thurston. "I don't know anyone—"

"It's for me. Father, I expect," said Jacqueline casually. "Monty Carr, probably. I've met him at all sorts of places—with Louis. I'll go and see."

She hurried from the study and went to the drawing room.

Monty, tall, slim, and faultlessly groomed, was standing by the fire, and as she entered he so far lost control of his mask-like face as just perceptibly to raise his eyebrows.

"Good-evening, Jacqueline. I asked to see your father—"

She cut him short.

"I know why you've come," she said. "I half expected you to come—after your letter. But be a sportsman, Monty, won't you?"

"Have you been?"

"Oh, no, I know I haven't," admitted Jacqueline. "It wasn't sporting to make a bet which I knew I couldn't pay, and it wasn't sporting to try to wriggle out of paying by pretending it was a joke. I admit all that, Monty, and I've apologized for it. I can't do any more."

"So I understand," said Monty. "And that, Jacqueline, is precisely why it is essential for your father to do something on your behalf. Since you have incurred a debt which you can't pay, your father would not, I am sure, wish the debt to remain unpaid."

"But, Monty, if you gave me time—I might be able—"

"Time, unfortunately, is an important factor," he interrupted. "I am more than sorry, Jacqueline, if I am importunate, but I have obligations of my own to meet which cannot wait. From what you have said I imagine there isn't the slightest chance of your ever being able to find a sum anywhere approaching a thousand pounds. If you could give me your word that in a week's time, say, you would be in a position to pay me, I might manage to wait till then, but I don't imagine that you can."

She shook her head.

"Then in justice to me you have no right to object to my explaining the position to your father."

"Monty, you can't!" exclaimed Jacqueline. "You don't understand. Father can't possibly pay you a thousand pounds any more than I can. It wouldn't be the least use telling him."

Monty smiled faintly.

"For a gentleman, Jacqueline, there are always means of finding the money to pay a debt of honour."

She shook her head.

"Father couldn't do it," she insisted. "He hasn't got a thousand pounds. Besides, there are other reasons. I daresay they'd strike you as silly,

sentimental reasons, but they count a good deal with me. I simply couldn't bear—"

She caught the sound of the study door being opened and paused; then, as she heard her father's footsteps in the hall, she grasped Monty's arm eagerly.

"Monty—please—promise me not to tell him," she begged. "I'll pay you somehow. If you'll just say nothing, and give me a chance—"

Monty was shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, Jacqueline, but I can't afford to make any such promise. Your father must be told."

She dropped her hand and stood for a moment irresolute; then, as her father neared the door, she darted to it and grasped the handle.

"Monty—quick—promise me!" she said. "If you insist that Father must be told—"

"I do."

"Then promise me to say nothing, and I'll tell him myself. I give you my word, Monty; I'll tell him tonight."

Monty eyed her keenly and nodded.

"Very well, Jacqueline," he said. "We'll leave it at that."

With a sigh of relief Jacqueline heard her father pass the door and go upstairs. She went with Monty to the front door, bade him good-bye, and returned to the study. There was no help for it now; she must tell her father. It would be a humiliating confession, but she was becoming accustomed to humiliation. Far harder to tolerate would be the results which she knew must follow. Her father, she knew, would insist that the debt must be paid; it was all he could do even now to keep his head above water, and this extra weight hung around his neck must inevitably drag him under. But since he had to be told, she preferred to tell him herself. It would hurt him less that way than if he learnt of it from Monty Carr or Louis. She would tell him at once—as soon as he came back—and get it over.

But when Dr. Thurston returned she hesitated. It was only a few seconds' hesitation as he crossed to his chair and sat down, but during those few seconds her chance of speaking vanished.

"Got rid of your visitor, Jackie?" said Dr. Thurston. "Good! I was just going to tell you about your mother. I've been anxious about her for some time now, but there was no sense in worrying you before it was necessary. This afternoon I gave her a very thorough overhaul, and I'm afraid there's no doubt about it."

"She's—ill?" asked Jacqueline anxiously.

"Not exactly ill—yet, Jackie," replied her father. "But Stanford has overhauled her, too, and he agrees with me that we must take prompt measures if she's to escape a very serious illness. There's only one way of staving it off—absolute rest and a long sea voyage; and somehow it's got to be managed. That's where you come in, Jackie."

"Anything I can do, Father—"

"I know, my dear," interrupted Dr. Thurston. "I've been counting on you to help make it possible. The fact is, Jackie, things have been pretty difficult since I sold my practice—financially, I mean—and if I hadn't been fortunate enough to have a generous friend or two I should have had to pack up long ago."

"You mean, Father, that you can't afford—"

"It has got to be afforded somehow, Jackie," Dr. Thurston interrupted. "I've had an idea for some time that something like this was almost due, and I've managed to lay aside a couple of hundred pounds. That will just about see the business through, I fancy, if you and I go a bit steady at our end. I'm afraid there'll have to be a few less frocks and hats and things, my dear, until matters right themselves, but I know you won't mind that."

"If only I'd known. Father—"

"I know—you'd have had no frocks or hats at all," laughed Dr. Thurston. "But I'm going to ask you to do your share now, Jackie. It's a bit humiliating at my time of life to have to ask you, but I think—just until better times come along—you ought to find something to do. You could do typing or shorthand or something, couldn't you?"

Jacqueline stooped and touched his forehead with her lips.

"Don't worry, Father," she said tenderly. "I'll do my bit."

Dr. Thurston rose, smiling.

"You've never let me down yet, my dear," he said, patting her shoulder, "and I knew I could count on you. And remember—not a word to your mother. She mustn't be worried, and if she thought we were going short of anything she'd refuse to go. I've told her I've a thousand in the bank and the trip is a flea bite. It's a beautiful He, Jackie, but we mustn't let her spot it."

Jacqueline did her best to blink away her tears and smiled.

"Trust me. Father," she said. 'Til keep it up. It's such a very beautiful lie."

Upstairs in her bedroom Jacqueline sat for a long time in her chair by the gas fire; and then she rose, went to her writing desk, and wrote a note to Monty. It ran as follows:

"Dear Monty:

"After all, I can't possibly tell Father, hut if you will wait just a few days I give you my word that you shall he paid in full. You'll do that, wont you?

And then, with set lips, she wrote another note:

"Dear Louis:

"I accept your offer. When?

"J.T."

She stamped them and went out to the pillar box at the corner. There, just for a moment, she hesitated, and then, with a shrug, she slipped the letters into the box.

All that night she lay awake, telling herself that there was nothing else to be done, and that it didn't matter, anyway. She would never see Larry again, and nothing mattered.

It was almost daylight when at last she fell asleep, and it was not until eleven o'clock, when the maid entered her room, that she woke and sat upright.

"Mr. Creet is on the telephone, Miss Jacqueline," said the maid. "I told him you weren't up yet, so he said would I give you a message."

Jacqueline bit her lip. Last night, after that talk with her father, it had seemed possible—the only possible thing to do; but this morning, with Louis waiting on the telephone...

"Mr. Creet says. Miss Jacqueline, he thanks you for your note and he'd be glad if you'd go and have dinner with him at seven o'clock this evening, and he'd hold the line while I came and asked you."

"Tonight?" There was panic in her voice. "But I can't—tell him I didn't mean—" She paused abruptly and forced herself to smile. "Righto! Tell Mr. Creet I'll be there at seven," she said; and as the maid closed the door she buried her face in the pillow, and her teeth bit hard into her lip.

CHAPTER VII

Louis Creet's dressing table would have delighted any woman's heart. In selecting it Louis had obviously been influenced by considerations which had more than counterbalanced his prejudice against dust and germs; for it was a highly decorative piece of furniture with a multitude of drawers. It had soft, cunningly hidden lights, and its long, handsome mirrors were adjustable to give a full-length view of the figure from every angle from which a woman could wish to see herself. Its appurtenances were in keeping. There were comb, brushes, and hand mirror in tortoise shell and gold; an array of exquisite little boxes containing three shades of face powder, rouge, cream; several dainty cut-glass bottles of perfume.

Jacqueline stared at them, frowning. She picked up a gold lipstick case and pulled off the cap. The lipstick was worn to half its full length. She tossed it aside with a wry smile. She wondered what sum the others had received.

She raised her head and stared long and searchingly at her reflection in the mirror. She could detect no difference in herself. She felt mildly surprised at that. She had always had an idea that when a girl had experienced what she had just experienced there was some subtle change in her expression. According to her mother her eyes should have lost their look of innocence, and guilt and shame should be impressed on her face. But her eyes looked exactly the same as usual, as far as she could see, and she was not conscious of any feeling of guilt or shame. She felt disgust when she remembered...

But she was not going to remember. Once away from Louis's flat, she would blot this evening from her memory.

She turned, went, without a glance to right or left, from the room, and hurried along the corridor towards the front door of the flat. Halfway along it she hesitated, retraced her steps along the corridor. The door of the dining room was ajar and she pushed it open. Louis was lolling on the couch in front of the fire.

"Louis, I'm going home. You'd better take me."

Louis rose, took her arm, and drew her into the room. What's the hurry, darling?" I want to go home—at once."

Louis raised his eyebrows.

"Is that wise? It's barely eleven o'clock, and you're supposed to have gone to a dance with me. If you return so early from a dance your people will wonder, darling—"

"Oh, for God's sake don't keep calling me 'darling,' Louis," she exclaimed impatiently. "The farce is over."

"Farce? You've no idea how you hurt me, Jackie, when you talk like that. I'm very, very fond of you. I wish you'd try to believe that. When I call you 'darling' I mean it." He drew her to the couch and sat beside her. "You've been very sweet to me this evening, Jackie. I had no idea that anyone could ever be so wonderful, so—"

"Appetizing?" suggested Jacqueline. "Listen, Louis, I don't want you to run away with any wrong impressions. What I've done this evening I've done because I couldn't help myself. Monty insisted on having his money. He actually came to the house to see Father yesterday, and the only way out of the mess in which I'd landed myself was to accept your beastly proposal. I suppose in the end I should have had to accept it in any case, because I could never have raised the money in any other way, and you'd have told Father if Monty hadn't. You'd have played your compelling tune on that theme, and sooner or later I should have had to dance to it. But every moment of this evening, Louis, I've been thinking what a septic sort of swine you are, and if you can get any satisfaction out of that sort of sweetness you're welcome to it."

Louis listened placidly, with a faint smile. He was not without experience of these subsequent displays of nerves. He suggested a cup of coffee.

Jacqueline glanced at her watch and frowned. Louis was right; it was too early to go home yet.

"Thanks, Louis. I'd like a cup of coffee."

Louis rose.

"Stimson is out," he said. "I thought it more discreet that he should be, so I gave him permission to go to the pictures after dinner. I'll make the coffee myself."

Remembering the lipstick, Jacqueline reflected that Stimson, after several years in Louis Creet's service, must by now be a connoisseur of the pictures, but she made no comment. She nodded, and Louis went from the room.

Jacqueline rose, noticed the figure of the dancing girl on the mantelpiece, stood for some moments gazing at it, and turned abruptly away. She understood now why, when she had first seen it, she had so emphatically disliked it. It symbolized love as Louis understood it. Louis, when he looked at her, saw her as that figure on the mantelpiece.

She began restlessly pacing the room, chafing at the hour which must somehow be got through before she could go home. She must not arrive too soon. Her father would not go to bed much before midnight, and she shrank from meeting him tonight. Despite the assurance of Louis's mirror there might be some subtle difference in her which his keen eyes would detect.

She wondered whether Larry would have been able to detect a difference. She felt sure that he would, that, even had it been possible to do so, she could never have looked into Larry's eyes now. If there had been the least chance of her ever again looking into Larry's eyes, if Larry had even been alive and there had been no possibility of their ever again meeting, she could never have done what she had done tonight. As it was, it hadn't mattered—very much.

She took a cigarette from her case and glanced round in search of matches. An automatic lighter stood on the writing desk, and she crossed the room, seated herself in the swivel chair, and stretched out her hand for the lighter. Something touched her elbow, and she turned to see several sheets of paper from a pile on the desk go fluttering to the floor.

She lighted her cigarette, rose, and began to collect the scattered sheets. As she retrieved the third of them, she paused, frowning, glanced at it again, and then, as the colour drained from her cheeks, straightened herself and stood staring at it with fear and bewilderment in her eyes. It was a cable, she realized—addressed to Louis. The message ran as follows:

LOCATED FIELD AMAZINGLY RICH MEET US CAPE TOWN EARLIEST POSSIBLE MOMENT. WIRE DA SILVA'S HOTEL LOBITO BAY. LARRY.

CHAPTER VIII

For several minutes Jacqueline stood motionless, staring at the cable, conscious of nothing but the "Larry" at the end of the message. And then, as the significance of the word burned its way through and touched her understanding, her hands suddenly gripped the paper more tightly, and she slowly raised her head and glanced towards the door. As she did so, Louis came in, carrying the coffee tray.

"Sorry I've been so long, darling," he began in his smooth voice, "but Stimson's patent percolator was inclined to be obstinate—"

"Louis!"

Her voice had a keen, cutting edge to it. Louis glanced at her quickly, saw her standing rigid, staring at him, turned his head abruptly, and set the tray on the table. He hoped she was not going to become hysterical. He picked up the coffee pot and turned to her with a smile.

"Black or white, darling?"

"Louis, I wish to God I could kill you!"

Louis, meeting her glance, recognized something more than the not unusual nervous reaction which would eventually find relief in an outburst of tears. He realized that in this instance comforting words and coffee would be unavailing.

"What's wrong, Jackie?" he inquired solicitously.

She strode forward.

"That," she said, tossed the cable on the table, and stood gazing at him with a fixity which he found vaguely disconcerting.

He shifted his gaze, picked up the cable and read it. Then, with raised eyebrows, he glanced up again.

"Well?"

"That cable was despatched from Benguella ten days ago.

He nodded.

"Quite true, Jackie. But I only received it—"

"Then you knew," exclaimed Jacqueline in sudden fury. "It makes no difference when you received it—today, yesterday, a week ago. You knew—tonight—when I came here—that Larry was alive. You knew, and you—you didn't tell me."

"I didn't tell you, Jackie, because—"

"Do you think I don't know why?" she interrupted. "Two days ago I asked you if you had heard anything of Larry, and you said you'd had no news of him for six months. You did your best to make me believe that there would never be any news of him again. I did believe it. I'd been half believing it for months, and what you said convinced me that it was useless hoping any longer. And all the time you'd had that cable, you knew you were lying to me—"

"My dear Jackie, please try to control yourself. I admit that I hesitated to raise false hopes—"

"You knew," she repeated passionately. "You knew, at any rate, that Larry was alive, and you didn't tell me two days ago for the same reason that you didn't tell me tonight. You knew that if I'd had any idea that Larry was living, that there was the least chance of my ever seeing him again, I'd never have come here tonight, never have done what I have done, never have accepted your beastly proposal. So you didn't tell me. You wanted me and you meant to have me, and you didn't care how much you lied and cheated to get what you wanted."

She paused, breathless and trembling. Louis smiled indulgently.

"And so you want to kill me, eh, Jackie?" He shook his head. "You're overlooking one or two facts, my dear, and you've said a good many things which I'm sure you'll regret when you're a little calmer. Naturally the news that Larry is still alive has been a shock to you. It was a shock to me—a very pleasant shock. As you know, I was very fond of Larry—"

"Can't you ever stop lying? You hate Larry. You've always hated him."

"And to show the violence of my hatred of him I supplied him with two thousand pounds for his expedition, knowing all the time that I was throwing away my money—"

"You hated him," she repeated. "I'm beginning to understand things now—beginning to understand you. It wouldn't be you, Louis, to risk two thousand pounds if you couldn't see the chance of a good return for your money, and it wasn't friendship for Larry that prompted you to finance the expedition. You did it because you hated him, and you hated him because he was in your way."

Louis smiled indulgently—a smile which suggested that the idea of Larry Deans being an obstacle which could seriously inconvenience Louis Creet was too absurd to require contradiction.

"You wanted him out of your way, didn't you?" continued Jacqueline. "You knew that so long as Larry was in England you could never hope to get from me what you'd set your heart on getting. Too risky for one thing, eh, Louis?"

Larry would have been a nasty sort of customer to deal with if he had discovered what you were up to, wouldn't he? Besides, you knew that, with Larry here, I'd never have agreed—"

"You seem to imagine, Jacqueline, that I forced Larry to go to Africa. He went of his own free will. It was his suggestion that I should provide the necessary capital—"

"And two thousand pounds to get him out of the country—with pretty long odds against his ever coming back—struck you as a good investment. I'm just saying that it wasn't from friendship for Larry that you did it; it was just a matter of business with you, Louis. And when that cable came and you found that Larry hadn't died on the trip as you hoped he would, that he was still alive and might still be in your way, you lied and cheated, didn't tell me and tricked me into—"

"Really, Jacqueline," interrupted Creet, "you must try to be reasonable. You're being terribly unjust and hurting me very much. Caring for you as I do—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Louis, stop posing!"

He shrugged.

"I admit that—for various reasons—I didn't tell you that I had received the cable, but my reasons were not the ones you so ungenerously impute to me. And even if I had told you about the cable, I can't see how it would have altered the situation. You would still have owed Monty Can a thousand pounds, and it would still have been just as impossible for you to pay it—"

"Larry would have helped."

"Larry?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Why not?" demanded Jacqueline. "You may find it hard to believe, Louis, but there are a few men in the world whom a girl could ask for a thousand pounds and not be afraid of what they'd ask in return. Larry happens to be one of them. If I'd cabled to him—"

"Larry, I'm sure, would have gallantly emptied his pockets for you," said Creet. "But you know as well as I do, Jackie, that Larry's pockets have never contained much more than unpaid bills, and you've no reason for supposing that he's any more able to write a check for a thousand now than he ever has been."

"But if they've found the goldfield, and if it's as rich as Larry says—"

"'If they've found it and, if it's as rich as Larry says'," interrupted Creet. "I wouldn't build too much on that if I were you. In this sort of business it doesn't do to count on anything until the most careful examinations and

tests have been made. It was because I didn't want you to jump to the conclusion that Larry has suddenly become a millionaire that I intended saying nothing about the cable until I had made further enquiries."

Jacqueline turned away from him with a contemptuous smile.

"I see," she said, seating herself on the settee.

"That was terribly considerate of you, Louis. So you think that Larry, after all, may still be as hard up as ever?"

"It remains to be seen," said Louis, with a shrug. "But if you're counting on Larry coming back a rich man—in a position to marry you—"

"I'm not," said Jacqueline. "I'm not counting on anything—now."

She sat for some time gazing into the fire. She felt crushed, oppressed with a sense of utter futility. Even her resentment against Louis had petered out. Louis did not seem to matter; nothing seemed to matter; and she herself did not seem of the slightest consequence. She felt that nothing could ever matter to her again. When Louis seated himself beside her and took her hand in his, she gave no sign that she was aware of the action, and without consciously listening to him she heard all that he said and felt that it was all utterly unimportant. He was very fond of her, and later, of course, he would get his divorce and they would be married, and she would have a wonderful time. There was nothing he would not do for her, and she should never have cause to regret this evening. He was sure that they were going to be wonderfully happy together. And somehow it did not seem worth while to tell him that, once she had left his flat, she intended never to set eyes on him again.

Suddenly she withdrew her hand and stood up.

"I'm going, Louis."

She went to the door and paused, hesitating. There was something she must say to Louis, she remembered, and the necessity of saying it repelled her. She searched for a phrase which would not sound too crude, some tactful expression which would not too shamelessly lay bare the sordidness of the transaction. She felt suddenly a fierce resentment against Louis for having left it to her to refer to the matter. He could hardly have forgotten that there was his side of the bargain still to be fulfilled, and he might at least have had the decency to spare her this final humiliation of having to remind him.

"Louis," she said, "about—about Monty Carr. I promised him—"

Creet nodded, smiling.

"You needn't worry about Monty, Jackie," he said. "I'll see to that in the morning." He rose and went to her and placed an arm round her shoulders.

"You won't have to worry any more about anything, darling. I'm going to look after you now. We must manage to see more of each other than we have in the past, but that won't be difficult. I'll telephone you tomorrow and fix something, shall I?"

She gazed at him with eyes that seemed frozen. It was not worth while to disillusion him. All that mattered was that she should go. His arm tightened round her shoulders, and he smiled.

"Sweethearts, eh, Jackie?"

As he drew her towards him she suddenly freed herself, flung open the door, and hurried along the corridor and out of the flat.

CHAPTER IX

That night, with the door locked, Jacqueline lay in bed and tried to regard the events of the day from the point of view of the sophisticated modern young woman she considered herself to be; and as a sophisticated modem young woman she told herself again and again that there was nothing to get upset about. It had just been a business arrangement which she had made with her eyes wide open, and it was nobody^s concern but hers. It was really all quite trivial and unimportant, and a girl nowadays simply did not make a fuss over that sort of thing and feel compelled to hide her face for shame. And then her thoughts turned to Larry, and she suddenly hid her burning cheeks in the pillow.

She heard the knock on her door and her mother's voice quietly calling her name, but she lay very still and made no answer. She felt that she could not face her mother tonight. Besides, her eyes were red, and a sophisticated modern young woman simply does not cry.

It was not until lunchtime the next day that Jacqueline unlocked her door. Though her mother, during the morning, knocked several times, her knocks remained unanswered. In the sanctuary of her bedroom she felt somehow detached from the rest of the world, beyond the reach of the problems and perplexities which, when she opened the door, would rush at her and demand to be dealt with. She wished she could lie there forever with a locked door between her and the unhappiness that awaited her outside.

She awoke late, with a vague consciousness that something of tremendous moment had happened, something which made today altogether different from any other day in her life. And as she opened her eyes there came a swift rush of recollection which brought a smile to her lips. Larry was alive. For a time that stupendous fact overwhelmed all other thoughts, and she lay still, bright- eyed and smiling, basking in the sunshine of that knowledge. And then gradually, like little chilling gusts of wind, other thoughts thrust themselves on her attention—thoughts of Monty Carr, of Louis Creet, of last night, of the future—gathering force as they joined together and assailed her, until the storm was raging again in all its fury, tossing her hither and thither, battering her, deafening her. Yet in the midst of the turmoil, persistent as the hum note of a bell, was the thought that Larry was alive. She told herself that nothing else was really of the least importance. But she wished she were dead.

Downstairs she found her father and mother in the library.

"And I suppose, John," said Mrs. Thurston, as she entered, "I shall have to have a sun helmet, shan't I?"

Dr. Thurston glanced at Jacqueline and smiled.

"Hullo, Jackie! Been sleeping it off?"

Jacqueline gave a shrug.

"Where's Mother off to with a sun helmet?"

"My dear, such wonderful news," began her mother excitedly. "It really does seem too good to be true—just when everything was so dreadfully difficult. I can hardly realize it yet."

"What can't you realize, Mother?" asked Jacqueline patiently, seating herself on the arm of her chair.

Mrs. Thurston glanced at her husband and smiled.

"It's about Larry and the others, dear," she said. "Louis has heard from him—a cable. They're all quite safe, and they've found the goldfield—"

Jacqueline nodded.

"Louis told me—last night. Mother."

"Such an anxious time," mused Mrs. Thurston. "They're all three such dear boys, and I'm sure they've deserved their success. But of course we mustn't imagine that they've all suddenly become millionaires. Louis warned us about that this morning. He says you never know how a goldfield will turn out—"

"Louis has been here—this morning?"

"He came to tell us the news—as soon as ever he heard," said Mrs. Thurston. "He was very disappointed not to see you, Jackie, and to tell you about the trip.

"Louis is off to Africa by the first available boat," explained Dr. Thurston. "He's a bit skeptical about the goldfield, but he's going out to meet Larry and the others and investigate for himself."

Jacqueline breathed a sigh of relief. With Louis Creet in Africa, separated from her by some thousands of miles, her chief problem would disappear. She would not, at any rate, have to cope with it until he returned, and during that few months' grace anything might happen.

"And what do you think, my dear?" continued her mother eagerly. "We are going with him."

"We?" Jacqueline's eyes sought her father's anxiously.

"Creet's an extraordinarily good fellow," said Dr. Thurston. "I was telling him about your mother having to go for a sea trip, Jacqueline, and saying I didn't quite know where the money was to come from, and he promptly suggested that we should make the trip to Africa with him as his guests."

"And you accepted. Father?"

"My dear, of course," said Mrs. Thurston. "Such a wonderful chance just when I'm being so tiresome and expensive. And it will do your father a world of good. He has been killing himself lately keeping other people alive who aren't nearly so worth keeping alive as he is, and I'm sure he'll keep them alive much better if he isn't so nearly dead himself. I always have said that most Harley Street doctors are very poor advertisements for themselves. Half of them look as if they don't eat enough and the other half as if they eat too much."

Jacqueline smiled.

"And you're really going—both of you?"

"All three of us, Jackie," said Dr. Thurston. "The invitation includes you."

"Such a surprise for you, dear," said Mrs. Thurston, "and a wonderful chance for any unmarried girl. From all I hear, a liner seems to afford such splendid opportunities. I believe it's actually difficult for a girl to escape getting engaged on a long sea trip even if she knows nobody to begin with, and I'm sure that with Louis travelling with us you won't be many days at sea without something very exciting happening. I've been telling your father that you must have plenty of pretty frocks...."

Jacqueline did not interrupt. She waited, frowning, while her mother discoursed at length on the matrimonial possibilities of a voyage to South Africa. The great advantage of a liner, she gathered, was its profusion of sequestered corners which offered unequalled opportunities for sentiment in a romantic setting, and Louis, who had travelled a good deal, was sure to know all about them. Jacqueline did not doubt that. But it was only when her mother concluded with a thinly veiled hint that, if Louis seemed inclined to act as her guide to the liner's more romantic spots, she should not refuse to go exploring with him, that she made any comment.

"In other words. Mother," she said, "you think that Louis has invited me to make the trip with the idea of asking me to marry him? Sorry, darling, if you'll be dreadfully disappointed, but I'm afraid that won't come off, because I'm not going with you."

"But, Jacqueline," began Mrs. Thurston, "you don't mean—such a wonderful chance—I'm sure Louis is counting on you—"

Jacqueline cut her short.

"We'd better get this straight. Mother, once and for all," she said. "I'm not going with you. You seem to think that Louis has invited us all to make the trip so that somewhere between here and Cape Town he can sit on a coil of rope in the moonlight and ask me to marry him. I fancy you're wrong,

because if Louis wanted to ask me he has had plenty of chances already, and he hasn't done so."

"But, Jacqueline, I'm sure he's very fond—"

"In any case," interrupted Jacqueline, "if there's any chance of that sort of thing happening, I'd rather stay in England. I don't want to marry Louis, and I don't intend to be forced into doing so."

Mrs. Thurston's face was a study in pained surprise, and she glanced down at her husband as if imploring his help in dealing with a situation which was beyond her.

"Nobody wants to force you, Jackie," said Dr. Thurston. "Creet's a good chap, and I fancy he's fond of you; but if he's not your choice, that settles it. Still there's no reason why you shouldn't make the trip, and I daresay Larry won't be sorry to see you again."

He gave her an understanding smile, but Jacqueline shook her head.

"I'd rather not. Father."

"But Louis will be dreadfully disappointed," said Mrs. Thurston. "I told him you'd love to go, and backing out now will look very strange and ungrateful, and I'm sure I don't know how I can tell him ^"

"I'll tell him myself, Mother; don't worry."

Mrs. Thurston sighed.

"How can I help worrying, Jacqueline? Such a splendid chance, and such a pity to miss it, and I don't see what any girl could possibly have against Louis—"

Jacqueline shrugged.

"Having nothing against him, Mother, isn't much of a reason for marrying him."

"Certainly not," agreed the doctor.

Mrs. Thurston rose and retreated towards the door. And there she halted and fired her last shot.

"Don't forget, Jacqueline," she said, "before you do anything rash, that Louis is a very wealthy man—"

"That, my dear," snapped the doctor, "has nothing to do with the case."

As the door closed behind Mrs. Thurston he went to Jacqueline, laid a hand on each of her shoulders, and searched her eyes with his. Jacqueline forced a smile.

"What is it? Want to see my tongue?" she laughed. "But there's nothing wrong with me. Father—truly."

"Tell me, Jackie " said Dr. Thurston. "It's Larry, isn't it?"

She avoided his gaze. Dr. Thurston smiled.

"I think I'm right," he said, "and I want to tell you something, Jackie."

She raised her head.

"I want to tell you, Jackie," he said, "that in my humble opinion there isn't a man living as near to being worthy of you as Larry Deans."

And because a sophisticated modern young woman simply does not cry or openly display her emotions, Jacqueline gave his arm a grateful squeeze and bit her lip as she turned away.

Louis Creet was to dine with the Thurstons that evening to discuss arrangements, and it was understood that after dinner the doctor should at last carry out the examination which had so often been postponed.

African air being densely populated with strange, unfriendly germs, Creet declared himself anxious to be sure of his ability to resist their onslaughts before venturing to breathe it into his system.

But Jacqueline did not wait until the evening. The idea of a trip lasting several months with Louis constantly at her elbow was a disturbing one, and she felt that she could not rest until all chance of it had been definitely ruled out. She had a vague fear that unless she acted promptly her mother might unearth some ingeniously sentimental argument to use against her to which she would weakly succumb. Already, without definitely saying so, her mother had made her feel that she was behaving shabbily and being not a little selfish. She had been pathetically disappointed at her definite refusal to marry Louis, and Jacqueline knew from experience that when her mother became pathetic it was a foregone conclusion that she would get her own way as far as her daughter was concerned. But this time there must be no weakening.

After lunch she telephoned to Louis.

"About this trip, Louis."

"Yes, darling?"

"Mother says you've invited all three of us. It's really quite marvellous of you, Louis, but I want you to cut me out."

Creet's voice had lost something of its usual smoothness w^hen he answered.

"I'm afraid, Jackie, I can't do that."

"But if I don't want to go."

"I think it would be discreet, my dear, at least to pretend that you do. In the circumstances you could hardly expect me to go without you, and as I have to go, I'm counting on your being reasonable. Don't be foolish, darling. You'll have a wonderful time. I shall make it my business to see that you do, and as long as you'll be just a little kind to me sometimes—"

"Louis, I'm not going. That's definite."

For some moments he did not answer. Then:

"Are you there, Jackie?"

"Yes."

"I saw Monty Carr this morning. Everything will be all right in that quarter now."

"You—you paid him?"

"He has promised that you shan't be troubled by him any more so long as you are reasonable."

Jacqueline's eyes became anxious.

"But you promised me, Louis, that Monty should have his thousand—"

"Not exactly, Jackie," interrupted Creet. "What I said was that I would see that Monty Carr worried you no more about the thousand pounds, and I've done that. Monty will worry you no more—as long as you are reasonable."

"As long as I'm reasonable? That's what you said before, and I don't understand. What exactly does 'reasonable' mean? Going with you on the trip to Africa? Please don't hedge, Louis. I want a straight answer."

"Very well," said Louis; "then I put it this way, Jackie, that, caring for you as I do, I don't think it's reasonable of you to ask me to leave you behind and not even see you for several months. Just think it over, darling, and I'm sure you'll see my point."

"I see it now," said Jacqueline. "It's what they call double-crossing, isn't it? Larry was right about you, Louis; he always said you were a nasty bit of work, and I was fool enough not to believe him. I've kept my side of the bargain, and now you're backing out of yours—"

"You've begun to keep your side of the bargain," corrected Louis, "and as long as you continue to keep it I shall keep mine too. But don't let us quarrel about it, Jackie. Think it over, my dear, and tell me your decision this evening."

"I can tell you now: I'm not going to be bullied and threatened and cheated any longer. I'm not going on the trip."

"Before doing anything rash, Jackie—"

"I'm not going," she repeated, and slammed the receiver onto its hook.

But she knew in her heart that she certainly would go.

CHAPTER X

Courtesy had to be stretched to extreme limits before one could confer on Da Silva's establishment in Lobito Bay the dignified title of "hotel." Since, however, it had to be called something it was so designated.

A low, squat, once-white structure, it consisted of three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a dining-drawing-smoking-writing room, the French windows opening from which led onto a relatively cool and shady veranda. This was quite the most attractive part of the building, overlooking as it did the calm blue waters of the bay. Stretched in a canopied deck chair, a pipe in his mouth, a long, cool drink on the wicker table by his side, a man might without difficulty forget that for hundreds of miles behind him lay trackless forests and swamps, perilous enough in themselves, but doubly so by reason of the marauding animals which peopled them and the innumerable "bugs" of known and unknown viciousness which constituted an almost inescapable series of dangers to the explorer.

The bedrooms were primitive and, save to a wearied traveller, uninviting. The bathroom was entitled to be so called since it held a dingy tin bath in which, by doubling back one's legs and bending well forward, one could just contrive to sit. Since, however, in such a cramped posture adequate ablutions were impossible, one usually ended, after one had learned its limitations by contortional experience, by standing up in the bath and doing as well as possible with a sponge.

Somewhere in the nether regions of the establishment was the kitchen. Into this no traveller ventured, which was as well for his peace of mind; for culinary processes were conducted along primitive lines, and, since the place was alive with cockroaches, there seemed to the native cook no particular point in being overscrupulous about personal cleanliness; and anyway, dirt doesn't show on a black man. Moreover, the staple diet of the place appeared to be eggs, and the shell of an egg is non-porous.

Piled up in a corner of the general-purposes room was an immense quantity of baggage, as dilapidated and dirty as only baggage can be which has accompanied its owners for eighteen months through the West African hinterland. Bedding, haversacks, water bottles, rifles, surveying instruments, wireless set, gramophone lay in a careless jumble, and, viewing it, one could almost hear the deep sighs of relief with which its owners had shed a burden which must have become well-nigh intolerable.

It was eloquent testimony to the durability of the portable gramophone that it was still intact and that, with the aid of a pair of pliers and a lot of ingenuity, the turntable could still be persuaded to revolve.

The three men who sat around the table at breakfast looked supremely happy. It was the first glimpse of civilized comfort that had been theirs for a year and a half, and they were enjoying it to the full. For two hours after their arrival early that morning the hotel boilers had been made to work overtime, and the hotel bathroom had been not so much a bathroom as a dream vision of paradise where one crouched or stood and wallowed in the ecstasies conferred by hot water and steam and soap upon those who have been denied such comforts for a long period.

Their breakfast menu had been very minutely thought out and discussed during the last ten miles of their journey to the coast. The relative merits of breakfast cereals had formed material for argument throughout at least a mile and a half. Porridge, thought Tubby Storman, was filling without being satisfying—and who wanted to be filled before reaching the pièce de résistance of the meal, a thick, juicy steak? They were all agreed about this steak: it was to be tender, of the exact epicurean tinge of redness, and, most important of all, at least an inch thick; it was to be completely surrounded by potatoes fried a delicate golden brown; and while it was being consumed the hotel kitchen must be given up to the preparation of a second steak of exactly similar calibre.

Toast and marmalade and coffee would of course round off the meal, after which, all agreed, they would begin to feel that civilization really did exist—a fact which they might have been forgiven for doubting during the past eighteen months.

The agreed menu had been ordered with a wealth of detail, and now they were breakfasting heartily on boiled egg, which, it had transpired, was the only food available. Even this circumstance, however, had failed to damp their exuberance.

"All we want now," said Tubby, pushing back his chair, "is a tune on the old gramophone. Why the dickens you had to bust the one and only remaining record, Larry—"

"Sorry, Tubby," laughed Larry. "Sanity before Art. Besides, there were the animals to be considered. The bearers told me that the last time you played 'Parted' they found three lions and their families all sobbing their hearts out."

"Still," said Tubby, "I daresay I can get another in Lobito Bay."

"Which otherwise," added Mark, "is quite a pleasant sort of town. By Jove!" he went on, glancing round the room with obvious satisfaction, "this may not be the Savoy Grill, but it strikes me as a fairish imitation of heaven. The springboard of civilization! Have a good mail, fat boy?"

Tubby's chubby pink face was wreathed in smiles.

"Absolutely!" he beamed. Thrusting a hand into his pocket, he produced a bulky envelope. "Sixteen pages of the best, old boy. Do you know, Bunty writes the most marvellous letters. Listen to this: 'The dog killed three of the bantams last week, so I hung one of them round his neck and he hasn't killed a chicken since.'"

"I wonder if that got into the papers?" broke in Larry.

But Tubby hardly noticed the interruption and went on reading:

"'There has been quite an epidemic of German measles round here, but I'm thankful to say that neither Alan nor Jill has caught it, though two children in the same class are down with it.'"

"It makes you think, doesn't it?" said Mark gravely.

"Well, after all, you know," replied Tubby, his face serious, "they might easily have got it."

"Ghastly thought!" commented Larry. "Is that all the really important news?"

"No; there's another bit somewhere. Now where was it?" Tubby glanced hastily through the next two pages. "Oh, yes, here we are: 'Mother has been poorly, but she's better now.'"

"Thank God for that!" said Larry fervently. "Go on. Tubby, read us that bit."

The other had become absorbed in the letter, which he was reading with a rapt expression, a smile, and a waggling head.

"Don't come between husband and wife, old man," put in Mark.

"I've often wondered," said Larry, "what wives really do write to their husbands in their looser moments. Something about chickens, I suppose."

For answer the stout young man folded the letter carefully, kissed it solemnly, replaced it in its envelope, and put it into his pocket.

"Does anyone know when the next boat sails for home?" he asked.

"Not so fast. Tubby, my lad," laughed Larry. "The next boat mightn't be at all convenient. For one thing, Creet's not here yet. You didn't get a wire from him, did you, Mark?"

Mark Elliott shook his head.

"No. I rather expected to find him on the station platform, waving a flag. And a brass band wouldn't have been out of place."

"I know," agreed Larry. "I wonder why he didn't turn up. Perhaps he hasn't arrived."

"The Cape boat came in three days ago," said the other.

Larry Deans's eyes suddenly lighted up.

"Did it?" he asked eagerly. "Got a passenger list?"

Mark shook his head and looked at the other curiously as Larry's eyes lost their brightness.

"Are the Thurstons really coming up to this Godforsaken place?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Larry shortly. "You fellows know as much about it as I do. Louis said if we could give him the approximate day he'd be here. Well, we gave him the approximate day and he's not here."

"That's rather surprising, don't you think?" said Tubby. "Louis Creet's such a reliable, on-the-tick sort of bloke as a rule."

"H'm!" Larry's grunt was noncommittal.

"I wonder," said Mark, "what brought Dr. Thurston out to Cape Town. It's a long way from Harley Street—and pretty expensive, isn't it? Not that that would worry Louis, of course: he's a generous old devil."

"Isn't he!" replied Larry with a cynical smile. "I don't know any man who gives away a two-bob cigar with greater gusto. But if you'd ever tried to borrow a hundred from him—without security—you might change your opinions."

"Oh, rot!" exclaimed Tubby. "Louis is one of the best fellows in the world. You're a cynical old devil, Larry."

"Maybe," the older man agreed. "But cynicism is the most valuable product of experience, my boy, as you will discover. And by the way, talking of discoveries, I don't want Louis to know about that brilliant piece of exploration of yours which resulted in our finding the causeway."

The other two men glanced at him in surprise.

"Good Lord—why not?" asked Mark.

Larry's voice was quiet and dispassionate, but emphatic.

"We'll give Louis a plan of the field, of course, but I suggest that we keep that little causeway to ourselves."

"But, my dear old chap," exploded Tubby, "we can't do that sort of thing. After all, we must play the game. I mean, we are gentlemen."

Larry smiled rather grimly.

"You and Mark are. Tubby, and so perhaps am I, but most certainly Louis isn't."

Mark Elliott's forehead was puckered in a frown.

"All the same, Larry," he protested, "I must say I agree with Tubby. I think we should tell Louis all there is to know. He has as much right to know about the causeway as we have. He's a partner in the firm."

Larry shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your own way," he said. "I'll tell you something you don't know. This is the third attempt I've made at finding this goldfield. The first time I broke myself; the second time I broke most of my relations. The third time I don't want anybody to break me."

"It's rather extraordinary," mused Mark, "that nobody ever found the place before."

"Oh, I don't know, you know." Tubby grinned complacently. "After all, this is the first time I've been out here. These other fellows may have been all right, but when it comes to finding a causeway—well, you see what I mean, don't you?"

"Sock him one, Mark—you're nearer," urged Larry. "Just because his fat tummy overbalanced him and he fell into a swamp.... No, there have been all sorts of stories about these diggings, but most of the clever people thought they were moonshine. Well, we've found them! My God! I can't let myself think about it! Eighteen months, eh? A lifetime! Remember the night we left this filthy hotel to go to the railhead?"

"Yes," supplemented Mark, "and how cocksure everybody was that the field was in Katanga and not in Angola at all."

"I'm going to rename my house Angola," announced Tubby.

"What do you call it now?" asked Mark.

"'Mon Repos,' for a quid," laughed Larry.

"I'll take you, Larry," said Mark. "'The Acacias.'"

"Absolutely wrong, old boy," said Tubby. "It's called 'The Cedars.'"

For a few minutes they sat in silence, each absorbed with his own thoughts, his own visions of the future, his plans, his hopes—and, in the case of Larry Deans, his fears.

"All the same, I wish we had a contract." He spoke half to himself.

Tubby, young and impetuous, could not restrain his impatience.

"For God's sake, Larry, what's biting you? I wouldn't have your suspicious mind for anything. What on earth do you want a contract for? A fellow's word is his bond, and Louis isn't the kind of man who would dream of breaking it. Besides, we practically did make a contract. That letter he wrote to me—"

"Was full of pious hopes," interrupted Larry.

Tubby half rose from his chair and thumped the table with his fist.

"But, damn it, man! I got it stamped at Somerset House."

The other smiled.

"My dear young and very innocent child, if you took a prescription for a Seidlitz powder to Somerset House they'd stamp it and be glad to take your money."

Mark Elliott, who had been sitting, one hand on his chin, a puzzled frown on his forehead, now broke in:

"Larry, old man, you're putting all sorts of ungentlemanly thoughts into my head. You don't really mean—"

"Of course Larry doesn't mean anything. If he does he's an ass. Personally, I like old Louis. Mind you, he's not the sort of fellow, if I were going away, that I'd ask to look after my wife."

The cynical smile reappeared on Larry's face.

"I'd say not—or even your chickens!"

"It's queer how women run after him," said Mark. "You wouldn't call him good- looking."

"Good Lord, Mark!" laughed Larry. "You've a lot to learn about women. Good looks don't mean a thing to them; their instinct is a great deal more subtle than that. No, you don't have to be good-looking if you're a man. And anyhow, if a woman had to wait till an Adonis came along she'd starve. And women don't make a habit of starving. A woman knows just what it is that attracts her in a man—but she won't admit it."

"'Soured by the Jungle,'" murmured Tubby, who had an occasional provoking habit of thinking in subtitles.

There came a knock on the door, and a native servant appeared, carrying a telegram, which he handed to Larry. He tore open the envelope and read the contents.

"0h, damn! We passed the station—they are at Benguella. 'Sorry, missed you by five minutes. Have taken commandant's house here. Coming over by car to bring you back.'"

"Who is it from?" asked Tubby.

"Mrs. Thurston."

"So she's here!" said Mark. "Good. The doctor's with her, of course. Have they brought Jacqueline?"

"I've read you the telegram," Larry answered laconically.

"Well, we'll be seeing old Louis very soon now. I suppose he's with them—she'd have said so if he wasn't." A worried expression flitted across Tubby's face as he turned to Larry Deans. "You know, old man, it's an awful pity you feel the way you do about Louis. I happen to know he's got a terribly high opinion about you.

Larry grinned.

"If this were America I should probably say, 'Aw, shucks!' And if I wanted to be coarse I'd say his opinion of me is so high that it stinks."

Tubby, intent on peacemaking, continued:

"Anyway, he has. And Jacqueline thinks the world of him."

A deep frown gathered on Larry's face.

"Jacqueline is very young and therefore very stupid and very impressionable," he declared irritably. "And Louis Creet is the kind of man that any young, impressionable, and foolish girl would think the world of. You yourself said just now you wouldn't care to leave your wife in his charge."

Tubby hesitated, momentarily at a loss.

"Never mind," Larry went on. "Your wife is neither young nor foolish nor impressionable. She's got terrible taste in the matter of husbands, but otherwise she's an intelligent woman."

"But Jacqueline is only a kid," protested Tubby.

"Cleopatra was fourteen when she had her first love affair," Larry remarked drily.

"Climate, old boy," said Tubby. "I remember reading about that. They get old much younger in that climate, if you see what I mean. All I know is that if I were engaged to a lovely young girl like Jacqueline—"

Larry made a quick gesture of impatience.

"I'm not engaged to her," he explained. "I am merely engaged to be engaged to her, which is not quite the same thing. Louis may be as generous as you say, but I wish his generosity would take another form. However, don't let's talk about it any more. Where are the cigarettes?"

Tubby heaved a deep sigh and produced his case.

"As usual, I've got 'em. It's an astonishing thing that throughout this trip all the incidental expenditure seems to have devolved upon me. 'Financial Director, Percy H. Storman,' as it were."

Larry took a cigarette from the case, lit it, and gazed in apparent awe at the speaker.

"Good God!" he gasped. "Percy—and I never knew it!"

Evading the wrathful Tubby's grabbing movement, he strolled out through the French windows onto the veranda and sank into a deck chair.

Mark turned to Tubby, and his tone was serious.

"Look here, old man, don't get funny with Larry about Jacqueline. I happen to know that it's a sore point."

"But it's so darn silly," expostulated the other. "And I can't believe that Larry's right about Louis. Good Lord! Why, I've known him for years and he's one of the best—"

"As a matter of fact," murmured Mark, "I'm just beginning to wonder myself—"

"Oh, forget it!" Tubby burst out. "Why spoil a beautiful day? Here we are home—or practically home—after a perfectly ghastly time, with our health and strength and with money to burn. 'Fighting the Forest for Fortune.'"

Mark Elliott was looking very thoughtful.

"I hope SO," he said at last. "Tubby, do you know anything about the mining laws of Portuguese West Africa?"

"No. What have the laws to do with it?"

"A lot, probably. I was talking to Larry in the train. He says the concession we've got is to find the field, not to work it. There won't, of course, be any difficulty about getting the other concession, though we'll have to pay a percentage to the government, but first of all we shall have to prove proprietorial rights."

"Sounds a bit long," said Tubby, "but we'll do that all right, won't we?"

Mark was silent for a long time. Larry's hints about Louis Creet's real character had been germinating in his naturally acute mind, and he was beginning to feel distinctly uneasy about the whole position. Gentlemen's agreements were all very well—between gentlemen. But supposing Larry were right? And even gentlemanly instincts had been known to suffer repression when an immense fortune was at stake. He too was beginning to wish that they had insisted upon a contract defining their exact rights in whatever discovery they made.

"Won't we?" repeated Tubby.

"I suppose we can," said Mark half-heartedly. "But you understand what I mean, don't you?" He turned to face the other squarely and spoke with

meaningful deliberation. "If Louis can prove that we were working for him on a salary, simply as his employees, we shouldn't have a shadow of a claim to any share in the goldfield. Try to get that into your nut. Tubby."

Tubby made an obvious effort. He furrowed his forehead with a heavy frown, scratched his head vigorously, and assumed an expression of intense concentration. And then his face cleared.

"But he couldn't prove it, Mark, old man," he said. "That's where Larry keeps slipping up all the time. He absolutely couldn't prove anything of the sort."

"Couldn't he?" Larry, strolling in from the veranda, gave Tubby a pitying smile. "You've a beautifully trustful nature, Tubby, and I hate to soil it with suspicion of your brother man; but if Louis wanted to he wouldn't find it particularly difficult to make out a case that we were engaged on a monthly salary. It's in your precious contract, anyway—stamped at Somerset House and all."

"But he explained that," protested Tubby. "He said he'd arranged things that way to protect us—"

"You can take it from me," interrupted Larry, "that he arranged things that way because what he doesn't know about the laws of this God-forsaken country isn't worth knowing. Louis was protecting himself, not us. It seems to me that if Louis feels like doing it he can sail off with all the plunder comfortably close to the wind, and all we can do is to stand on the seashore and gnash our teeth."

"But he wouldn't feel like it, old boy," said Tubby doggedly. "That's my point all the time, and it seems pretty rotten to me to keep talking about old Louis as if he lay awake at nights scheming how he can swindle us. Old Louis has been very decent to me one way and another. Last Christmas, for instance, he sent the kids about twenty quids' worth of toys, and invited Bunty to go up and stay at his place in town, and if you ask me there isn't much wrong with a bloke who does that sort of thing."

Larry smiled.

"I wonder, Mark," he said, "whether our fat boy is a damned fool or just has a beautiful mind. Did Bunty accept the invitation, Tubby?"

"As a matter of fact, she didn't," said Tubby. "It was the time of the measles scare, and she couldn't."

"Congratulations!" said Larry. "I don't suppose it has ever occurred to you, Tubby, but every night of your life you should, when you say your prayers, say, 'Thank God for measles!'"

Tubby flushed.

"Seems to me, Larry," said Mark, "that two or three tabloids of quinine wouldn't do you any harm."

"Absolutely," agreed Tubby. "Get it out of your system, old boy."

Larry gave a shrug.

"It's not fever," he said; "it's just bad temper. I shall be much more lovable when I've seen Louis and discovered what I'm up against."

He took the telegram from his pocket and reread it.

"This was handed in three hours ago," he said irritably, "and if they're coming by car they should be here now. All this hanging about—"

"Puncture," suggested Mark. "I've heard a rumour that the only car that ever got here without a puncture is now preserved in a museum."

"If you ask me, it's ignition trouble," grinned Tubby. "While the chauffeur was admiring the scenery of his native country, Louis Creet, the notorious pickpocket, nipped out of the car and pinched a sparking plug—"

Larry strode impatiently onto the veranda and, leaning his elbows on the rail, stood gazing along the road.

Mark turned to Tubby.

"If the governor is at Benguella, Tubby, we ought to see him tomorrow," he said. "This thing's getting on Larry's nerves, and the sooner we fix it the better."

Tubby nodded.

"'Noble Character Warped by Suspicion,'" he said. "All that about Jacqueline! Tommy-rot if you ask me."

"Is it?" Mark shrugged. "I had a mail, too, Tubby, and I'm not so sure. Listen to this."

He pulled a crumpled letter from his pocket and smoothed it out.

"'Saw Jacqueline Thurston at the Café de Paris last night,'" he read. "'She was with your friend Creet. I've seen them together half a dozen times in the last fortnight. Terribly friendly, my dear. I wonder! People are wondering, too'."

Larry came striding in from the balcony.

"There's a car coming now," he announced and disappeared through the door.

CHAPTER XI

Dr. Thurston found the sixty-mile car drive from Benguella to Lobito Bay something of an ordeal. An air of depression seemed to have descended on the other members of the party as soon as they had set out, and after a few fruitless efforts to entice into conversation first his wife, then Jacqueline, then Louis Creet, and finally the native chauffeur, who spoke no English, he abandoned his efforts at sociability, lighted a cigar, and fell to wondering what had bitten everyone this morning.

Creet, resplendent in a semitropical suit which was beyond criticism, was frowning heavily beneath his sun helmet. Throughout the voyage he had been inclined to be irritable, and since they had landed he had been definitely moody and bad-tempered. Jackie's fault, the doctor reflected. She had led him a fine dance, the young devil, one way and another during the trip—her shameless flirtation with the chief engineer had been conducted entirely, he was sure, for the edification of Louis—and if Louis had counted on pulling it off with Jackie before reaching Africa he was probably feeling decidedly sore.

Just as well, perhaps, that he hadn't pulled it off. Too old, really, for Jackie. Well preserved, but he couldn't be less than forty-eight or fifty. Queer sort of chap in some ways. All that fussing about his health. He had a supply of quinine in his luggage large enough to purge the whole African continent of malaria, and every night he took his temperature and entered it on a chart. He was a common enough type of hypochondriac, of course—convinced that he was the victim of some disease, yet funking an examination which might confirm his fears. It had not been entirely disinterested generosity that had prompted him to bring them all on this trip. Louis, where Jacqueline was concerned, obviously was not disinterested; and among the plagues and pestilences of West Africa he would doubtless feel less uneasy with a qualified medical man constantly at hand....

"Such an adventure!" exclaimed Mrs. Thurston suddenly. "Actually in Africa! It hardly seems possible, does it?"

"No, Mother," agreed Jacqueline dutifully.

And Mrs. Thurston, having for the fourth time in the last two hours made exactly the same remark and thus contributed her share to the gaiety of the occasion, returned to her thoughts.

They were not cheerful ones. The voyage, of course, had done her a lot of good—she was quite herself again now, thank goodness—but it had been a great disappointment to her. In spite of Jacqueline's emphatic rejection of Louis as a possible husband, she had been hoping that, with all the amenities of a liner at his disposal, Louis might persuade her to change her

mind before they reached Africa. After all, she had been just as emphatic in her refusal to go on the voyage at all, and Louis had persuaded her over that without much difficulty.

But nothing had happened, and it was all very disappointing, and it was no use counting on the voyage home, because Jacqueline would have met Larry again before then. Of course, she had nothing against Larry. He was a dear boy, and if he really had found a gold-field and was going to be a millionaire and able to pay off all those dreadful debts of his...

She glanced at Jacqueline and sighed. It was always difficult to know what Jacqueline was thinking. She was dreadfully baffling.

Jacqueline at the moment would have baffled a far keener observer than her mother. She sat in the corner of the car with an air of complete detachment from her surroundings, a slight pucker between her eyebrows. She did not in the least suggest to Mrs. Thurston a girl just about to meet a long-lost lover who had found a goldfield and was, perhaps, a millionaire.

Jacqueline, however, was thinking of Larry. During the voyage she had thought a good deal about him, alone in one or other of the liner's sequestered corners which Mrs. Thurston had hoped she would use to better advantage. Larry, she had decided, must not be allowed to get an inkling of the truth. That was definite; and, that being so, she must make him realize that she was not prepared to reinstate him on the intimate footing on which he had been with her before he had left England. Somehow she must erect barriers and keep Larry outside them. He must, she felt, either know everything or know nothing; and she could never tell him everything.

With the meeting with Larry still several weeks ahead she had persuaded herself without much difficulty that by the time she reached Africa she would have so steeled herself that she would be able to face the occasion with a casual self-assurance which would at any rate pass muster; but this morning, when she was actually on her way to Lobito Bay and there was nothing to distract her mind from the realization that every minute was bringing the moment of their meeting nearer, she was less confident of her ability to carry it off with an air of casual self-assurance. She was not sure that she would be able, after all, to meet Larry's glance without flinching, and so to cloak her feelings that Larry's keen scrutiny would not lay them bare. She had an uneasy feeling that, no matter what barriers she might erect between Larry and their old intimacy, Larry would come crashing through them. It would be very difficult to make her eyes lie to him.

As the car stopped outside Da Silva's Hotel she saw Larry come striding towards her, and the next moment her hand was in his and she was smiling

at him as he lolled against the car, meeting his glance without wavering. At the moment her sole thought was that it was marvellous to be with Larry again, to see the little lines round his eyes and mouth crease into the familiar smile, to feel him playing with her little finger—which was a trick of his—while he spoke to her. The wonder of being with him again excluded all other thoughts and feelings; her eyes held only gladness, and there was no need to censor the message which they gave him.

She scarcely noticed the others. She was aware that Mark Elliott and Tubby Storman were there, that Mark had a beard which made him look like a newspaper caricature of a Bolshevik, that everyone was talking at once, including her mother, whose "Such an adventure!" regularly punctuated the conversation; but it was all indistinct and unreal to her. Only Larry^ bending and straightening her little finger, was real.

He helped her from the car and stood a few paces away from her, regarding her appraisingly, smiling.

"I've kept a mental picture of you all these months, Jackie," he explained. "I'm just checking the details and testing its accuracy."

"Have I changed, Larry?"

He nodded.

"There are one or two points where it differs from the original."

Creet grasped her elbow and urged her towards the hotel.

"Come along in, my dear," he said. "You mustn't stand about out here in the sun."

She was about to move away when she caught the look of amusement in Larry's eyes and paused.

"All right, Louis," she said, releasing her arm. "I'll be along in a few minutes. I want to talk to Larry."

"You can talk to Larry just as well inside, my dear," said Creet, "and I should much prefer, as you have no sun helmet—"

"I've a sun-proof lining to my hat, Louis. Please don't fuss. Larry and I haven't seen each other for over a year."

"That is no reason why he should allow you to run the risk of sunstroke," said Creet, with a touch of impatience. "I shall feel much happier about you—"

"Jackie has travelled sixty miles in an open car, Louis—presumably hired by you—and come to no harm," said Larry, "so there's no need to be over-anxious about an extra five minutes."

Louis hesitated, frowning; and then, with a shrug, he turned and strode after the others into the hotel. Larry smiled.

"A little late to remember the risk of sunstroke," he said. "He should have thought of something better than that."

Jacqueline shrugged.

"Louis is terribly fussy," she said, "but he means well, and it's no use getting irritated. He's been most frightfully kind—to Father and Mother. Giving them this trip, I mean. It must be costing him a small fortune."

"The mystery deepens, Jackie."

"Mystery?"

He nodded.

"Louis doesn't give; he invests. I'd be interested to know what return he's expecting on this trip."

"That doesn't sound very generous, Larry," said Jacqueline. "Mother had to have a sea voyage, and Father was at his wit's end to find the money, and Louis was an absolute godsend."

Larry smiled.

"Perhaps Heaven was hard up for messengers, Jackie," he laughed. "Still, I'm glad he was kind—to your mother. I suppose there must be some good in a man if he's kind to somebody's mother."

Jacqueline frowned.

"What exactly have you got against Louis?"

"Exactly? Nothing—at present."

"Then it's hardly fair to keep on making rather cheap insinuations about him, is it? After all, he's been very generous to you. He told me that he provided two thousand pounds to make it possible for you to undertake the expedition—"

"And in return for this two thousand, Jackie, he's got a quarter share in a goldfield which is probably worth millions. Not much generosity there."

"But he didn't know you'd find the goldfield. You told me yourself before you left England that the odds were all against your finding it, and Louis knew that, too. You say that he only invests his money when he sees the prospect of a good return for it, yet he risked two thousand pounds on a hundred-to-one chance of your finding a goldfield—"

Larry was shaking his head.

"You don't believe that, Jackie, any more than I do, and you're making a poorish show at pretending you do. You never were much good as a liar. I know why Louis put up the two thousand, and so do you."

"Is this another rather cheap insinuation, Larry?"

He did not answer that directly.

"Tell me something, will you?" he said. "Has Louis asked you to marry him?"

She smiled.

"Does Louis strike you as a marrying sort?"

"Then he hasn't?"

She shook her head.

"Damn!" said Larry.

She glanced at him quickly, surprised.

"You hoped he would ask me, Larry?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I was afraid he hadn't," he said. "Let's get inside."

He grasped her elbow and led her into the hotel.

They found the others grouped around the table, at which stood Tubby, with a box of earth in front of him, delivering something in the nature of a lecture to the tinny accompaniment of the gramophone.

"All I'm saying, Louis, old boy," he was declaring, "is that it makes you think. You see what I mean, Mrs. Thurston, don't you?"

"So romantic," exclaimed Mrs. Thurston.

"Exactly what I'm getting at," said Tubby. "The very word, Mrs. Thurston; it's romantic. Here's this box filled, as far as you can see, with nothing but the stuff you scrape off your boots before stepping on the carpet, yet concealed in this common or garden substance, lurking, so to speak, in the loam, undiscerned

by the naked eye Hullo, Jackie! Now you're here

I'll begin again, shall I?"

"All about the gold, Tubby?"

"He's just coming to the gold," said Mark. "But it would probably be quicker to fetch some from the gold-field. To cut Tubby's long story short, Louis, the field is amazingly rich."

Louis nodded, smiling.

"I can't quite grasp it yet," he said. "I suppose it is true?"

"Absolutely beyond all doubt, old man," Tubby assured him. "We've got maps and plans and what not to show you."

"One patch we prospected," added Mark, "has thirty per cent, of gold. Thirty per cent.! You couldn't take a shovelful out of the ground—it was too heavy."

"Incredible!" exclaimed Louis.

"As one geologist to another, old boy," said Tubby, "I don't mind telling you it's more than incredible. It's absolutely—absolutely unbelievable."

"Quite sure it is gold. Tubby?" laughed Dr. Thurston.

"It's gold right enough," said Mark. "I had the dubious advantage of a scientific education. Doctor, and I know just about enough of metallurgy to distinguish gold from iron filings."

"Absolutely genuine twenty-two carat hallmarked gold," said Tubby. "We've brought back a hundred pounds of it, and we could have brought a ton."

"A hundred pounds?" Dr. Thurston wrinkled his forehead, calculating. "That's about eight thousand pounds' worth. Tubby—"

"I say, is it?" said Tubby in an awed voice. "As a matter of fact, we didn't work it out down to the shillings and pence."

"Eight thousand pounds is about right," said Louis.

"In other words, Louis," remarked Larry, "we've brought back about four times as much gold as the expedition cost."

A faint smile appeared on Louis's lips.

"And rather more than ten times as much gold as you're allowed to bring back without a license," he said.

"Is that the law?" asked Mark.

Louis nodded.

"You may prospect without a license," he said, "but you may not mine. Eight thousand pounds' worth of gold is mining. If you take my advice you'll keep that bit of information to yourselves. We'll get the gold to Benguella, and I'll take it down to Cape Town with me."

Larry caught Mark's eye and smiled.

"Pretty well up in the law, Louis, aren't you?" he said.

"Pretty well up in it," said Creet suavely. "I've read it up. I never guess, you know. I didn't make my money by guessing; I made it on my knowledge of facts and how to use them." He glanced at Larry with amused eyes. "Guessing gets you nowhere, Larry," he said; "you've got to be dead sure."

Tubby grinned.

"From Lift-boy to Millionaire,'" he said. "'Dramatic Rise to Fame and Fortune.' 'Guessing's no good,' says Louis Creet. As one director of a goldfield to another, Louis, I don't mind admitting that when it comes to legal matters I don't know an 'aforesaid' from a 'notwithstanding.'"

"And talking of directors," said Larry, "the sooner we four have a business talk and get things straight, the better. Anything wrong with now?"

"My dear chap!" protested Louis. "There's no immediate hurry. We can talk business tomorrow. We've only just arrived from a very tiring journey."

"Oh, sorry," said Larry. "Mark and Tubby and I have been sleeping on beds of roses, and I was forgetting the hardships of a stateroom."

"Such a beautiful bungalow," said Mrs. Thurston. "It's the commandant's, you know, and we've rented it for our stay in Benguella, and you're all coming back to stay with us, so you can have a regular business meeting in the morning."

"And before we go," said Dr. Thurston, "what about lunch? I suppose Lobito Bay can produce something fit to eat, can't it ^—"

"Absolutely, Doctor," said Tubby. "Eggs!"

During the drive back to Benguella, Jacqueline was no less baffling than she had been on the outward journey, and though her mother several times brought Larry's name into the conversation, in what she flattered herself was a very tactful way, she elicited neither word nor look that gave her the information she wanted. Jacqueline, since her five minutes' chat with Larry that morning, had avoided being alone with him. He had asked her to let him drive her back to Benguella in the car which he had hired for the trip, and she had excused herself on the plea that she must be with her mother. Larry had smiled at that—that amused smile of his which told her as clearly as possible that he saw through her lame excuse. But she felt that a three hours' journey with Larry probing as he had probed this morning was more than she could face. The probing, of course, would have to be faced sooner or later, but she was thankful for every hour of delay.

That evening, after dinner, she was grateful to Louis when he seated himself at the piano and suggested that she should sing. She sang, song after song, with an anxious eye on her watch, only eager to prolong the singing until she could reasonably excuse herself and go to bed. And all the time she was singing, Larry sat watching her with that faint smile of amusement which gave her an uneasy feeling that he had seen through her pitiful little subterfuge.

And then, as she finished a song—it was "Parted," by special request of Tubby—Larry rose and crossed to the piano.

"Someone else's turn, Jackie," he said. "You've done more than your share."

"But Larry, I'm not a bit tired—"

"Louis is," said Larry. "He has just finished a very tiring journey. Come and see the commandant's garden."

He slipped a hand under her arm and led her out through the French windows. It was a night of moonlight and magic, and as they rounded the corner of the bungalow she paused with a little gasp of wonder.

"Larry!" she exclaimed. "Can you think of anything more marvellous?"

"Yes, Jackie," he said; "Piccadilly Circus with the electric signs all working. But we won't argue about it. Tell me what's wrong with you."

"Wrong?"

He nodded.

"You're not yourself."

Jacqueline sighed. If only, just for a little time, she could be somebody else!

"I've a bit of a headache, Larry; that's all."

He shook his head.

"Rotten, darling," he said. "Headaches have been overdone and are almost as suspicious as dead grandmothers on Derby day. Try again."

"But, Larry, I really have a headache—"

"Shall I fetch you an aspirin?"

She shook her head quickly.

"Worse and worse, darling," said Larry. "You wouldn't shake your head like that if you really had a headache. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Larry. Don't be Creetish."

"God forbid!"

"You're fussing and imagining there's something wrong with me when there isn't—just like Louis."

"Then if there's nothing wrong, Jackie, why the splendid isolation? All this keep-your-distance stuff. It isn't like you. You've been sort of—skulking ever since we met this morning. Why?"

Jacqueline shrugged.

"Hasn't it struck you, Larry, that meeting you again—after not seeing you for a year—I might feel—well, a bit awkward?"

"A year?" said Larry. "Is that all? It seems much more than a year. But it's not just awkwardness or shyness, Jackie. There's something else. You're—different." He regarded her thoughtfully. "It's difficult to explain, but you're somehow giving me the feeling that we haven't been properly introduced."

"Well, it's all rather—rather strange, Larry. After all this time—"

"You don't seem strange to me, Jackie," said Larry. "Queer—damned queer; but not strange. Perhaps I expected too much. I've been rather looking forward to today, you know, and somehow the tremendous occasion has gone a bit flat. You haven't, for instance, kissed me, and I haven't asked you to, because you've somehow made me feel that you don't want me to. Something seems to have come unstuck somewhere—"

He paused, and the troubled look in his eyes hurt her. She glanced quickly away.

"Don't be silly, Larry," she laughed. "And for heaven's sake let's stop trying to psycho-analyze me. Did you have a tremendously interesting time?"

Larry gave that amused, rather cynical smile of his.

"I see," he said. "Let's be formal, by all means. Quite an interesting time, thank you, Miss Thurston. And how have you been progressing with your singing?"

"Don't be an ass, Larry! But since you've enquired, the singing has been going splendidly. Caballero says I've a really good voice—"

"Caballero? Oh, damn!"

"Why damn that, Larry?"

"Just childish petulance," he shrugged. "I'd been planning that when I came back gorged with gold I'd send you to Caballero. Isn't he terribly expensive?"

"Yes, I believe—I really don't know. Louis gave me the lessons with Caballero—as a birthday present."

Larry frowned.

"Any objections, Larry?"

"To Caballero? Good Lord, no!"

She sighed.

"If we're going to quarrel," she said, "we'd better do it and get it over. What's next?"

"Well," said Larry, "since you've asked me, you'll forgive me, won't you, for remarking that you seem rather expensively arrayed? Has the doctor been making a lot of money?"

"Really, Larry " she began, and paused. "You must have frocks for a trip like this," she went on. "You can't travel first class on a liner with a tweed skirt and a couple of jumpers. Father of course had to buy me some."

"And the others, Jackie? You've only had one birthday since I left, you know."

He half turned from her and stood silent for some moments, passing a hand across his forehead as if trying to wipe away the thoughts that troubled him.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed suddenly, turning to her. "You and I—talking to each other like this—it's perfectly damned awful, isn't it? You haven't been messing about on the Stock Exchange and losing money again, have you? That isn't the trouble?"

"Larry, do try to get it out of your head that there's any trouble."

"Your letters," said Larry. "There were several waiting for me when I got back. It was funny reading them. Each month they got more and more suitable to be read out at a mothers' meeting."

"What sort of letters did you expect, Larry?"

Larry gave a rather wry smile.

"I don't know. What does a fellow expect from a girl he's—well, not engaged to, but fond of? A girl he believes is fond of him, too. Ever write to Louis, Jackie?"

"0f course I've written notes to Louis—lots of times."

"In the same mothers'-meeting style?"

"About dinners and things."

"Took you around a good deal, eh—dinners and parties and that sort of thing?"

"Quite a lot, Larry—yes. Louis has been tremendously kind to all of us. Bringing us on this trip, for instance—"

"Was being tremendously kind to himself as well," said Larry. "Much too long to go without seeing you."

"Why must you talk like this?" said Jacqueline. "Louis -"

"Oh, curse Louis!" exclaimed Larry. "For heaven's sake, forget him!"

"Then it is Louis that's making you treat me so—so differently?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?" He shook his head. "Of course you don't. Has Louis ever kissed you?"

She was very near to tears. The probing was more painful than she had expected. Suddenly it became more painful than she could bear.

"Really, Larry," she exclaimed angrily, "I don't see why I should stand here and be catechized and cross-examined. You have absolutely no right—"

"No, of course not. Sorry," said Larry.

"You're just being very stupid and unreasonable."

"Unreasonable? Listen, Jackie. All these months I've been thinking a good deal about you. We didn't have dances and parties in the forest to pass the time away. It wasn't terribly bad, but it wasn't terribly good, and one naturally did a good deal of thinking. I had some fever, and that didn't improve matters—I'm not angling for sympathy, Jackie, so don't look at me as though I were a poor brave thing. I just want you to realize that when a man has been thinking like that about a girl, and she's—well, tremendously important, it's naturally rather upsetting—"

"But what has upset you, Larry?"

She waited, her eyes smarting, for his answer. She did not want to hear it, but she felt that she had to know. Larry found her different. Was there, after all, some subtle difference in her which her mirror had failed to reveal but which was obvious to her mother, obvious to Larry? Did Larry know—everything?

He laid a hand on each of her shoulders and gazed gravely down into her eyes.

"I don't like your eyes, darling," he said.

She forced herself to meet his gaze.

"What does that mean, Larry?"

"Just that: I don't like your eyes." He turned from her suddenly. "God Almighty!" he exclaimed. "Does your father know?"

"Does he know what? You're so mysterious and so—tragic, and I've no idea what you're driving at—"

"Haven't you?" he interrupted bitterly. "So he's made you a liar too, has he?"

"Larry!" she exclaimed angrily. "You've no right—"

She turned abruptly, but he grasped her arm roughly.

"Listen," he said savagely. "If you will have it, I'll tell you. There are two kinds of eyes in women: the eyes that know and the eyes that don't know."

"Well?"

"Yours know," he said.

Suddenly she wrenched her arm free, turned from him, and hurried into the bungalow.

Larry did not follow her. It was not until half an hour later that he went slowly into the bungalow. Dr. Thurston was alone, sprawling in an armchair, smoking.

"They've all turned in, Larry," he said.

Larry nodded.

"Bed for me, too," he said. "Good-night, Doctor."

The doctor's glance followed him as he sauntered towards the door.

"Larry!"

The other paused.

"Anything wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"Between you and Jackie?"

Larry frowned.

"Have you any reason for supposing there's anything wrong?"

"She seemed rather strange just now when she came in, that's all. Don't think I want to butt in, but as an interested spectator—"

"And as an interested spectator. Doctor, did it strike you that she was bubbling over with delight at seeing me again?"

Dr. Thurston rose and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You mustn't be impatient, Larry," he said kindly. "She's at a queer age, and you've got to make all sorts of allowances—"

"I've made all of them."

"You've got to remember," added the doctor, "that girls are different nowadays—less emotional, less demonstrative, much freer—"

"Yes, of course—much freer," said Larry. "Goodnight, Doctor."

CHAPTER XII

Louis Creet did not appear at breakfast the next morning. According to Tubby, he was lying in bed so gorged with thoughts of gold that he was incapable of movement; and from that point Tubby proceeded to tell them all about cobras at the Zoo who gorged themselves to such an extent that they could not move for a week.

"Very remarkable," said Mrs. Thurston. "But Louis isn't in the least like a cobra. I've never really seen a cobra—I've heard it's so terribly hot in the Reptile House—but I don't think I've ever known anyone less like a cobra than Louis. He's terribly particular about his food."

Mark's suggestion was that Louis, having drunk his early-morning tea with his thermometer in his mouth, was staying in bed until his temperature went down.

"What's your theory, Larry?" he laughed.

"I haven't one," said Larry. "You don't theorize over a thing when you know all about it."

He felt that he did know all about Louis Creet—enough, at any rate, to warrant his uneasy feeling that a gentlemen's agreement was not the sort of agreement to carry the least weight with him. Neither Tubby nor Mark agreed with him, but they didn't know Creet as he did, and Tubby could never believe that a man who sent presents to his kids at Christmas could be anything but an honest and upright gentleman. Well, he hoped Mark and Tubby were right. He would never in his life have been so willing to admit that he was wrong as he would be if Louis kept his word. He only wished he could believe that he would be called on to admit it. If he had any theory at all as to why Louis was not yet up, it was that he was anxious to postpone as long as possible his business talk with them. But if Louis hoped to avoid him by lying in bed, he would have to lie in bed all day.

After breakfast he beckoned Mark and Tubby to the veranda.

"Hang around, won't you?" he said. "This business needs settling at once, and when Louis shows up I'm going to grab his tail and hold on till it is settled. And if he tries any tricks—"

"Good Lord, why should he?" said Tubby. "You've absolutely no reason for supposing he won't play straight with us."

Larry smiled. "When you were a kid. Tubby, I suppose you never pinched a jam tart from the larder, or a conker off somebody else's tree, did you?"

Tubby shook his head. "Talking of conkers," he said, "I once had a two-hundred-and-twenty-sixer—"

"If only you'd done a few dishonest things yourself," said Larry, "you wouldn't find it so impossible to imagine dishonesty in other people. Anyway, take my word for it that if we're to get a square deal Louis will need watching all the time. He may need other things before we're through with him, but he'll certainly need watching. That's why I particularly don't want him to know about the causeway until everything is cut and dried and we're safe."

"He knows about it already," said Mark.

"You told him?"

"As a matter of fact, I told him," said Tubby. "I was talking to him last night about finding the mine. I just happened to mention the causeway, and Louis was very interested—"

"He would be."

"Louis has every right to know about it," said Mark. "He's as much a partner in this outfit as any of us, and if we expect him to play straight with us, we've got to play straight with him."

Larry shrugged. "When you're dealing with a chap like Louis Creet," he said, "it's as well to keep a shot in reserve. Still, the damage is done now. I don't wish you any harm, Tubby, but I'd like to slit your tongue."

Creet appeared in due course. They found him half an hour later in the dining room, breakfasting. He greeted them with a faint smile as they came into the room from the veranda.

"Well, you boys," he began amiably, and suddenly sprang to his feet, seized a paper-covered novel that lay in an armchair, and brought it down with a crash on the table.

"For heaven's sake, shut those windows!" he exclaimed. "Why the devil don't they have fly screens in this benighted hole? All these foul insects—" He waved a hand towards the novel on the table. "That brute was on my arm a second ago."

Larry picked up the book and glanced at the crushed insect beneath.

"Narrow squeak, Louis," he said. "Do you know what that is?"

Louis glanced at it nervously.

"According to the highest medical opinion," said Larry, "that insect causes more deaths every year that passes than smallpox, measles, whooping cough, or booze."

"Feeding as it does on all sorts of things that neither you nor I nor any nice insect would dream of eating, Louis," grinned Tubby, "and laying its eggs, so to speak, all over the shop—"

"What the devil is it?" snapped Creet.

"Common house fly," said Larry. "You must have come across them in England."

Louis was obviously relieved. "It's all very well for you fellows to laugh," he said, "but you never know in this God-forsaken country, and I have to take care of myself." He seated himself again at the table. "By the way, I hope none of you has brought back any infection with you. Have you seen a doctor? If not, you'd better get Thurston to have a look at you."

"We've all been bathed, deloused, and disinfected, Louis," Mark assured him. "You'll catch nothing off us."

"Not infection, anyway," said Larry drily. "And now, Louis, what about a business talk?"

"My dear chap," protested Louis, "there's no need to rush things. I'm just eating my breakfast—"

"I'll talk while you eat," said Larry. "The sooner we get this fixed up the better." He took a notebook from his pocket, extracted a folded slip of paper, and tossed it across the table to Louis. "That's just a rough account of what we've spent; I'll give you a detailed account later. There's about three hundred pounds in the bank here which we haven't drawn."

Louis nodded, took a gold pencil from his pocket, and ran it casually down the column of figures.

"That's all right," he said. "As a matter of fact, I had a note from my bank every month."

"There are one or two formalities to be observed," said Larry.

Creet nodded. "Certain papers to be filed with the governor. I understand all that."

"Louis understands all that," said Larry. "In fact, he has a very thorough knowledge of mining law—haven't you, Louis?"

Louis smiled complacently. "I'm not likely to trip up in that direction, Larry."

"He knows, for instance," continued Larry, "just how much gold you can take away from a field under a prospecting concession, and he knows to a nicety the difference between mining and prospecting—don't you, Louis?"

Tubby wrinkled his forehead. "Hanged if I see what you're getting at, Larry," he said.

"You soon will," Larry told him. "Let's go on talking about the formalities, shall we, Louis? The subject interests all of us. There's a slight formality I'm going to suggest myself in a moment."

Tubby's eyes were troubled. Nothing had been said in the exchange of remarks between Larry and Creet, nothing, at any rate, he could put his finger on, which suggested any antagonism between them, but he could sense that the antagonism was there, and it made him feel very uncomfortable. He hoped there wasn't going to be any unpleasantness. This sort of thing was bad enough in any case without getting unpleasant about it. He hated "talking money." There was something not quite decent about it, and he would gladly, had it been possible, have left all this "haggling business" to Mark and Larry.

Creet cleared his throat nervously. "Well, there's one thing you three can be absolutely certain of," he said: "that I intend to treat you handsomely for the part you've played in this business. You've done remarkably well—far better than I ever dared to hope—and I—I'm very proud of you. Still, I expect you want something rather more tangible than honour and glory, and you're certainly entitled to it. Hard cash, eh. Tubby—pounds, shillings, and pence?"

"Never mind the shillings and pence, Louis," said Larry. "Let's talk about the pounds."

Tubby winced. He wished Larry wouldn't say that sort of thing; it made a fellow want to sink through the floor. He hastened to put the conversation on a more friendly footing.

"I'll tell you what I thought of doing, Louis," he said. "I've got my eye on Ferrington Park. Do you know it? About two hundred acres and a marvellous house—just the other side of Horsham."

"Ferrington Park?" said Louis. "Yes, I know it. I shouldn't advise you to take that kind of place. It would cost you a lot to keep it up and be a terrible speculation. But of course that's your business. What's the document, Larry?"

Larry had taken a typewritten document from his pocket and was scanning it carefully.

"This is my little formality," he said, handing the paper to Louis. "Read it."

Louis took the paper and began to read. He had not read far when his bushy eyebrows contracted into a frown, and when he glanced across at Larry the friendly look had left his eyes.

"What's this supposed to be?" he demanded.

"You can see what it is," said Larry. "It's the contract we didn't sign before we left England. We've reached the point now where gentlemen's agreements, having served their turn, can be properly legalized. I had this

document prepared as soon as I got here. It's in English and Portuguese, as you see, and I think you'll find it quite in order."

Louis glanced at the document again and tossed it onto the table.

"Do you fellows really expect me to sign an agreement like that?"

"What is it, Larry?" asked Mark.

"It's just a contract setting out in very plain terms in English and Portuguese that we four are equal partners in the Chumbaziri goldfield," said Larry. "It places us under an obligation to repay to Louis all the money he put up for the expedition, but as we've already more than enough gold in our possession, that's easily done."

"That was the original agreement," said Tubby. "But what else is in the contract, Larry?"

"Nothing else."

Tubby frowned. " But Louis said he wouldn't sign it." Larry smiled grimly. "That's how it sounded to me, too. Tubby."

Louis Creet's nervous fingers had been beating a noiseless tattoo on the table. His head was bent slightly downwards and sideways, a characteristic pose of his when he wished to convey the impression that, as far as he was concerned, the conversation was not of the slightest interest.

"Hang it, Louis, where's the hitch?" demanded Tubby. "If there's nothing in this contract except what we all agreed to, I don't understand—"

"You had all better understand at once," Creet interrupted, deigning at last to betray some interest, "that I certainly shall not sign that document or any other document. It seems to me that you all have quite a wrong idea of my intentions."

"They have," said Larry, "but I haven't." "I made it all perfectly plain," said Creet irritably. "If you'll refer to the letter I wrote to Storman, you'll see exactly what I agreed to do. When you brought the scheme to me and told me you'd already made two attempts to locate the field, and had failed, I agreed to advance the money for another expedition and to remunerate the members of the party by regular monthly payments."

"It sounds like a hire-purchase agreement," was Larry's comment.

"You had your chance of finding the goldfield on your own account." continued Creet, "and it was obviously a pretty bad risk for me. There never was the least question of dividing the property if you found it. I defy you to produce any letter I have written agreeing to such a division."

For some moments there was silence. Louis, maintaining his pose of unconcern, was studying his finger nails minutely, striving to appear

unconscious of the scowling face of Mark Elliott, the bewildered, incredulous stare of Tubby Storman, and the supercilious smile twisting the lips of Larry Deans.

"Good God!" exclaimed Tubby; and suddenly Creet sat up in his chair and faced them.

"You all seem very surprised," he said, "but I can't see why you should be. I risked some thousands of pounds on this expedition. What did you fellows risk? Absolutely nothing!"

"Absolutely nothing," said Larry, "being the market price of our lives prevailing at the moment."

"Rubbish!" snapped Louis. "I'm not pretending I gave you a holiday, but I certainly provided you with a very interesting experience, and now I'm quite ready to treat you fairly. I'll tell you exactly what I'm prepared to do. If you prove the mine, I don't object to your keeping the gold you've brought away. It's not strictly legal, but I'm willing to make you that concession. That gives you over two thousand pounds apiece."

Mark, who had been sitting, his eyes fixed on Creet's face, rose from his chair.

"Are you serious, Louis?" he demanded.

"Of course I'm serious," replied Creet testily. "What's the matter with you all? This is the first mention I've heard that you expected what you call a share. You're making things very unpleasant—"

Tubby sprang to his feet, his face crimson, his fists clenched, his eyes dangerous.

"My God, Louis!" he exclaimed. "And to think I've been sticking up for you! Eighteen months of hell and now you want to cheat us. Righto—cheat us! Cheat us —back out of your agreement—swindle us out of our share, and by God! I'll settle you, you swine!"

"Steady, Tubby, old man!" said Larry. "Let me talk to Louis. He and I speak the same language."

He turned and faced Creet, who shifted uneasily in his chair. He had screwed up his courage to the point of this interview with an effort which it was becoming hard to sustain. Larry Deans was a dangerous devil, and he didn't mean to start an argument with him. With as convincing an air of nonchalance as he could assume he rose from his chair and stretched out his hand for his helmet, which lay on the settee.

"If you imagine," he began in an unsteady voice, "that I'm going to stay here to be insulted—"

Larry took two strides towards him, grasped him by the shoulders, and thrust him violently back into his chair. Creet's face became livid, but he did not move.

"Now listen to me, Louis," said Larry quietly. "You're going to stay here—to be insulted by me; and if you make any attempt to leave this room until I give you permission, I shall shoot you. Is that clear?"

Louis, struggling to regain both his breath and his self-possession, made no reply. Larry pushed the typewritten document towards him across the table.

"Put your signature to that, Louis," he said. "It gives you a quarter share in our mine, which is all you're entitled to—"

"Your mine?" sneered Creet. "That remains to be seen. And if you really think I'm fool enough to risk thousands of pounds on a ten-thousand-to-one chance only to give away my winnings—don't be a damned fool, Larry!"

Larry stood for some moments staring at him in silence.

"Would you care to know, Louis," he asked, "what's coming to you if you don't sign that agreement?"

Creet started. "If that's intended to be a threat, Larry—"

"It is a threat. I'm telling you bluntly that if you wish to enjoy the few years that remain to you, you must sign that contract."

Creet's face turned an unhealthy grey, and his eyes shifted restlessly from one to another. He rose, walked unsteadily to the sideboard, splashed some whisky into a glass, and gulped it down. The spirit gave him new courage.

"My dear Larry," he said, "you can't get away with that sort of thing. Even in a God-forsaken place like this there's some sort of law, you know. It's disappointing for you, but even in Africa, I believe, there's a certain penalty attaching to murder."

"I'd risk the penalty," declared Larry, "and murder in cold blood any man who did what you're trying to do.

There's the document. It's in Portuguese and English and you can sign it in duplicate."

Louis shook his head.

"I've been threatened before, Larry—many times—by better men than you, and I'm not easily frightened. The goldfield is mine—mine, do you hear?" he repeated harshly. "If you think you've any sort of claim, then start an action—here—in St. Paul de Loanda—Lisbon—London—anywhere! Do anything you like. I've no more to say, and you can go to hell—the whole lot of you!

Tubby could restrain himself no longer.

"My God, Creet," he exclaimed, "I'm not standing for this—"

His arm was whipped back and then flashed forward, hurling his clenched fist straight at Louis Creet's chin. But before the blow could land Larry's hand gripped his arm and held it.

"For God's sake, Larry, let me—"

Larry shook his head.

"We'll find a better way than that. Tubby," he said. "Let him go now."

And Louis Creet, trying not to hurry, went from the room.

CHAPTER XIII

It was Tubby who first found his voice.

"Damn it all!" he exclaimed. "He can't do it."

Larry smiled.

"Can't he? That's just your beautiful nature again, Tubby, that won't let you admit what swine men can be."

"But he wouldn't do it," persisted Tubby. "You got him pretty badly rattled just now, and he didn't really mean half he said."

"I'm beginning to agree with Larry," said Mark. "Louis probably didn't say half of what he really meant. But we don't take this lying down, Larry, do we?"

"I've done all that can be done," said Larry. "I filed a pro forma claim first thing this morning at the Office of Mines. Louis doesn't know that. But if he takes it into court or opposes it when he does hear of it, we shan't have a dog's chance."

Larry strolled to the window, lighted a cigarette, and for some moments stood gazing thoughtfully into the garden.

"There's only one chance that I can see for us to get our share in the Chumbaziri goldfield," he said, "and that is for the Lord to send a visitation unto our brother, Louis Creet, severe enough to remove him from this mortal coil. In other words, for Louis to peg out. It would all be plain enough sailing then. We found the mine, we registered it, and no question of our being employed on salary would arise. But blackguards like Louis are notoriously long- lived, and it's no use talking rot, anyway. We can take it for granted that he won't peg out just to suit our book."

Tubby rose and began pacing the room.

"It's we who'll do the pegging out," he exclaimed violently, "while that swine's spending the money and grinning to himself to think what mugs we were. Like a fool I've wired the news to Bunty, and if I have to send another wire telling her it's all a washout—I haven't the heart to do it, Larry, and that's flat."

"The trouble is. Tubby, we were born too late," said Mark. "In the good old days we'd just have rung up Messrs. Borgia & Co. and said, 'Send us along a couple of pints of your best henbane or a good reliable assassin,' and then have dismissed Louis from our minds. Any grounds for optimism, Larry, in the fact that he's always grousing about his health?"

Larry shook his head.

"Louis will live to be ninety, Mark, and be buried under a monument as big as the Albert Memorial—if he can't pinch anyone else's. But we're talking rot."

"Are we?" exclaimed Tubby. "I don't mind telling you, Larry, that if he does double-cross us there's mighty little I'd stick at. I threw up everything for this trip—you don't suppose Bunty's been living on the bit of money I got from Louis, do you? I mortgaged the house, pawned every damn thing I'd got, and if I had got to go back with absolutely nothing and start all over again just because Louis can't play a straight game with us, I—I—I wouldn't answer for what I'd do."

Larry nodded.

"Nor I, Tubby," he said. "But let's try to keep calm over it. You chaps think I'm a bit to blame, don't you?"

"Dear old ass, absolutely not," said Tubby.

"Oh, yes, you do. Tubby. You've an idea everything would have been all right if I hadn't gone for Louis and upset him. But you're wrong; all this would have happened in any case. I've had an uneasy feeling all along that I knew Mr. Louis Creet, and when you think the worst of people you're usually right."

"If he'd offered us ten per cent.," said Mark, "five per cent.—something, anyway—"

"Look here," interrupted Tubby suddenly. "I'll tell you what. I can't believe old Louis is really as bad as we've been imagining. I mean, he knows our circumstances, and I feel pretty certain that if I have a talk with him in a friendly sort of way—I'll see what I can do, shall I?"

He went to the door.

"After all," he said, "sending those toys to my kids at Christmas—see what I mean?"

"Try it," said Larry, and Tubby went out.

Larry smiled. "Personally, Mark, old man," he said, "I think I shall try to get gloriously drunk. It'll be just about as useful."

It was a trying day for Mrs. Thurston. It began badly by Jacqueline remaining in bed for the greater part of the morning and denying, in her most baffling way, that there was any reason for her doing so beyond the disappointingly obvious one that she felt like staying in bed; and when she had got up she had been so moody and silent and disinclined to have anything to do w^th anybody that her mother was soon wishing that she

had left her undisturbed in her bedroom. Something was bothering Jacqueline, and it worried Mrs. Thurston that she did not know what it was.

Something, of course, was worrying everybody today. Even Louis, usually so good-tempered and affable, had shown unmistakable signs of frayed nerves, and Tubby and Mark and Larry, all equally glum, had spent the day lounging about the place with scarcely a civil word for anyone and smoking far more cigarettes than could possibly be good for them.

Breakfast had been a gloomy affair, lunch a gloomier; and dinner had been eaten in an atmosphere which, though she could not define it, had made her feel very uncomfortable. And now this evening Dr. Thurston had put the finishing touch to a day of discomfort by losing his stethoscope and insisting on ransacking every bit of luggage and scattering things all over the bedroom in search of it.

"It's got to be found, my dear," he explained, as, kneeling on the bedroom floor, he rummaged in her cabin trunk. "It's Louis. I've promised to run the rule over him this evening—"

"Again?" sighed Mrs. Thurston. "Such a lot of trouble all for nothing, John, because he's sure to back out at the last moment."

"He probably will," agreed the doctor, "but as his medical attendant at five hundred a year, my dear, it's as well to have a stethoscope in case he doesn't. What's wrong with Jackie?"

"I'm sure I don't know, John," sighed Mrs. Thurston. "She's behaving very strangely, but she never confides in me. And it isn't only Jackie. What's wrong with everybody .f^ They all seem terribly depressed and upset, and it can't be the heat, because Larry and Mark and Tubby must have got quite used to the heat. I've never seen such a change since yesterday. If finding a gold mine upsets people like that, it's a pity they ever went to look for it."

The doctor gave a shrug.

"I haven't enquired—it's not my business," he said, "but I fancy they've had some sort of a dust-up with Louis. Over the mine. I don't think it has panned out quite as they expected."

"But it's a terribly rich mine, John, isn't it?"

"I believe so, my dear, and I should have thought there was more than enough for all of them. But there's some trouble over it."

"It seems a great pity," sighed Mrs. Thurston, "if people can't find a gold mine without squabbling over it and—that's my new silk jumper, John, that you're rumpling about. You'd much better let me look—"

The doctor waved her aside.

"Here it is—inside one of your bedroom slippers," he said, producing the stethoscope. "And now we'll go and cheer up Mark and Tubby, my dear. They're glaring at the furniture in the drawing room."

They went to the drawing room. Mark, in a low cane chair, was blowing smoke towards the ceiling, and the expression on his face suggested that he had a grievance against the ceiling and that every pufF of smoke directed at it was a deliberate insult. Tubby, astride the music stool, was picking at the piano with a single finger, staring at the keys as though they had done him a grievous injury.

Dr. Thurston surveyed them with an amused smile.

"The effect of sudden riches on the middle classes, my dear," he laughed, with a gesture towards Mark and Tubby. "They look as if they'd lost a fortune instead of having found one. We should be thankful we haven't discovered a gold mine."

Tubby smiled rather sheepishly.

"The fact is, Mrs. Thurston," he said, "things aren't quite as bright as we thought they'd be. You see—"

"What's troubling both of us," interrupted Mark, with a warning glance at Tubby, "is that now we've got the money we can't decide what to do with it. Tubby's going grey with worry as to whether he ought to build a hospital or buy a house in Park Lane. In either case he's afraid they'll try to give him a knighthood. Do you know what's become of Larry, Doctor?"

"Larry went out—about half an hour ago," said Mrs. Thurston. "I'm sure I don't know what was the matter with him, but he suddenly jumped up and went striding out of the room, muttering all sorts of strange foreign words, which I took to be some native language he'd picked up in the forest."

Mark shook his head.

"Some mistake there, Mrs. Thurston," he said. "Larry only speaks English."

"Well, I prefer to believe that he was not speaking English, Mark," said Mrs. Thurston. "If he was speaking English I'm very much surprised that Larry should ever know the words he used. He asked me where Jacqueline was, and when I told him he suddenly started muttering in some native dialect—"

"By the way, where is Jacqueline?" asked Tubby. "She promised to sing to us this evening."

"She's out," said Mrs. Thurston.

"Not alone, I hope," said the doctor. "It's not safe, you know. A couple of desperadoes have escaped from the local gaol, and as they're armed a police officer came along to warn us. Where's she gone?"

"She's gone to the dance—with Louis, so I'm sure there's no need to worry."

The doctor raised his eyebrows.

"A dance—in this place?"

"A native dance," explained Mrs. Thurston. "I really didn't listen very carefully, John. It's one of the big native festivals, I believe, and Louis offered to take her to see it."

Tubby grinned.

"Free hop, by the sound of it," he said.

Dr. Thurston was frowning.

"Did you gather, my dear, what sort of dance?"

"Really, John, I didn't enquire," said Mrs. Thurston wearily. "It goes on all night, I fancy, but I told Louis to bring her back not later than eleven o'clock. I think he said it was a dance in honour of some ju-ju—is that the word, Mark?"

Mark nodded, frowning.

"It's called—let me see if I can remember," Mrs. Thurston continued. "Would it be something like M'bugulu?"

"What!"

Mark sat suddenly upright, his eyes incredulous.

"I'm sure it was something like that, Mark."

"M'bugulu? And Louis has taken Jacqueline to see it?"

"Any reason," demanded the doctor, "why Louis shouldn't take Jacqueline to see it?"

"Good Lord, Doctor—absolutely—I should jolly well say there is!" said Tubby. "Taking Jackie to a thing like that—hang it. Doctor, it's poisonous—foul—and nobody but a downright swine would dream of taking a girl

"But I had no idea " began Mrs. Thurston helplessly.

The doctor cut her short.

"We can only assume that Louis didn't know that there was anything wrong," he said. "But if it's as bad as you say. Tubby—"

"It couldn't be worse. Doctor," said Mark. "You can take it from me."

"In that case," said Dr. Thurston, "there's only one thing to do: I must fetch her back—at once."

He strode across the room, Mark and Tubby following; but as he reached the door it was flung open, and Larry, grasping Jacqueline by the arm, strode

in, shut the door behind him, and released her. As he did so she turned and faced him, her eyes furious, her cheeks unnaturally pale.

"Larry—how dare you!" she exclaimed.

Larry shrugged.

"Quite right, Jacqueline," he said; "I behaved like a hooligan. But the occasion didn't call for drawing-room manners."

"You had absolutely no right—"

"Oh, yes, I had, Jackie—so much right that if you'd made any more fuss I'd have tucked you under my arm and carried you away."

"What's the trouble, Jackie?" inquired Dr. Thurston.

"I'm the trouble. Doctor," said Larry. "I don't blame Jackie for resenting it, but there was really no other way. She wouldn't leave when I asked her to—"

"So you grabbed me in front of everybody," interrupted Jacqueline, "and dragged me away by force as if—as if you owned me and I had no say in the matter, brought me home like a naughty schoolgirl—"

"I'm sure, darling," began Mrs. Thurston, "Larry wouldn't do a thing like that without some very good reason—"

"Oh, please, Mother, don't interfere," interrupted the girl. "You weren't there and you don't realize what happened. Larry was so insulting to Louis in front of all those Portuguese officers, and after all his kindness to us—"

"All his kindness to us!" exclaimed Tubby. "Good Lord!"

"Shut up. Tubby!" snapped Mark.

"Steady, Jackie!" said Dr. Thurston. "You've got to be fair, you know. Larry was only acting for the best—"

"Larry had no right to interfere in any way," said Jacqueline. "A native dance—there was nothing in it—it hadn't even started—"

"Which is why there was nothing in it," said Larry. He glanced at Mark and Tubby. "The M'bugulu," he said.

Mark nodded.

"Not quite the entertainment for a Sunday-school treat, Jackie," he said. "Of course, you don't realize

"I realize when I'm being made a fool of, Mark. If you expect me to like being grabbed by the arm and dragged out in front of everyone—"

"I asked you to come, Jackie," said Larry, "and you wouldn't,"

"Why should I? Louis was there."

"And that was another good reason."

Mrs. Thurston glanced at him with surprise and disapproval in her eyes.

"Really, Larry," she said, "you shouldn't say that sort of thing, you know. Louis, I'm sure, had no idea that the dance was—was—"

"What is the dance, Larry?" asked the doctor. "Anatomical?"

"Biological," said Larry.

The doctor nodded, frowning.

"In that case, Jackie, I don't think you should be angry with Larry—"

"Whatever the dance is," interrupted Mrs. Thurston, "I'm quite sure that Louis wouldn't have dreamed of taking Jacqueline—or even going himself—if he'd had any idea that it was—was what Larry says it is. He's far too much of a gentleman—"

Tubby could restrain himself no longer.

"Gentleman! Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

Larry glared.

"Shut up. Tubby, and behave yourself," he ordered.

But Tubby had reached the limits of his restraint.

"Gentleman!" he exploded. "You call Louis Creet a gentleman!"

"Tubby!" warned Larry. "If you don't shut up I'll give you such a sock—"

But Tubby paid no heed.

"You think he's a gentleman, eh, Mrs. Thurston? You too, eh, Jackie? You can't believe he'd be swine enough to take you to a poisonous show like that if he'd known what it was, can you? But you're shinning up the wrong tree about Louis Creet—all of you. So was I until today, but I know better now, and you can take it from me that a man who's swine enough to break his word and swindle his partners who've done all the dirty work—"

Jacqueline turned suddenly to Larry.

"Larry, is—is that true? Is Louis breaking his word and swindling you?"

Larry shrugged.

"In the good old days, Jackie, Tubby would have had his tongue cut out. He's a regular old woman for gossip."

"You haven't answered my question, Larry. Is it true?"

"Yes, it is true," said Tubby. "Larry's too much of a gentleman to speak about it, but I'm not. It makes me sick to see Louis posing as a sort of public benefactor and you all thinking what a nice, kind, generous bloke he is,

when all the time he's nothing but a low-down swindler. We came out here as partners in this mine and we end up as employees. Eighteen months' work—eighteen months' living like pigs—and we don't even get the pigs' rations. That's Louis!"

Dr. Thurston glanced at Larry.

"Then it is true, eh, Larry?"

Larry nodded.

"Since Tubby has blown the gaff," he said, "it's no use denying it. Louis promised us each a quarter share in the mine with him. Now that we've found it, he's backed out of his promise, and we're to get exactly nothing."

"It's hard to believe it of Louis," said Dr. Thurston. "I can't imagine him doing a thing like that."

"But surely, Larry," said Jacqueline, "you had a contract—"

Her anger had all faded, and there was genuine distress in her eyes.

He shook his head.

"A gentlemen's agreement, Jackie," he said. "You know what that is if they don't both happen to be gentlemen: an arrangement for a fool to make and a rogue to break."

"But if the mine is as rich as you say, Larry," said the doctor, "there should be plenty for all of you—"

"There's plenty for twenty of us," declared Tubby—"for a hundred of us. But Louis doesn't think that way. He wants the lot, and he means to take the lot, and the rest of us can go to blazes."

"It's all very distressing," began Dr. Thurston in evident embarrassment.

"There's no reason to distress yourself, Doctor," said Larry. "I'm dreadfully sorry we let you know anything about it, but Tubby never can control himself."

"It's terribly bad luck on you fellows."

"We're not beaten yet," said Larry. "By the way, Doctor, there's no need for you and Jackie and Mrs. Thurston to be dragged into this, and it has just struck me that it'll be rather embarrassing for you having us here. If you'd rather we shifted to the hotel—"

"Don't be a confounded fool, Larry," snapped the doctor. "If you go to the hotel, so do we."

"And not a word to Louis, please. Doctor."

The doctor shrugged.

"As you wish," he said. "I'd dearly love to tell him what I think of him, all the same." He turned to his wife. "Bed, my dear," he said. "Come along, Jackie. You've caused enough trouble for one evening, and Larry will be glad to see the back of you. Good-night, everybody."

He followed Mrs. Thurston from the room. Jackie hesitated, her eyes troubled; then she crossed to the door and paused.

"Good-night, Tubby. Good-night, Mark."

"Good-night, Jackie."

Mark flung himself into the low chair and resumed his provocative attitude towards the ceiling, and Tubby, returning to the piano, began once more picking at the keys. Jacqueline laid a hand on Larry's sleeve.

"Larry," she said, "please believe I'm sorry."

He smiled.

"We're not dead yet, Jackie. I'll wring something out of old Louis somehow."

"I didn't mean—sorry—about that, Larry," said the girl and hurried out.

Mark, as the door closed, withdrew his gaze from the ceiling.

"And where's the little gentleman with the hairy heel, Larry?" he asked.

"I left him fuming and foaming in the village," said Larry with a shrug. "He was threatening to have me arrested, so he has probably gone to the police station."

"Did you hit him?"

Larry shook his head.

"I was quite a gentlemanly little hooligan."

"H'm! Pity."

"If I'd hit him I'd probably have killed him."

"Quite," said Mark.

"I'm for sleep," announced Tubby suddenly.

Mark rose.

"I'm for bed, anyway," he said. "Cheerio, Larry!"

Larry nodded and seated himself at the piano.

"Keep your ears open. Tubby," he said. "I'm going to have a shot at playing 'Parted.'—"

Tubby glared.

"Appropriate music, Tubby."

"Appropriate!" snorted Tubby.

"Well, isn't it?" said Larry. "You know what they say, don't you? 'A fool and his money are soon parted.' It seems to fit the occasion."

CHAPTER XIV

Before Mark and Tubby had reached the door, it opened and Louis came in. He halted abruptly as he saw them, and for some moments stood glaring from one to the other, his hands clenched, his lips working, the veins in his forehead swollen; and then, as Larry, concealed from view behind the music rest, thumped out the first few notes of his rendering of "Parted," he thrust his way past Mark and Tubby and strode to the piano. Larry, intent on his fingers, did not glance up.

"Two to one so far. Tubby," he said.

"Eh?"

"The proportion of right notes to wrong notes," said Larry. "It might help if you'd whistle the first bit—"

"Larry!" exclaimed Louis furiously.

Larry glanced up.

"Hullo, Louis! Stay to see the end? Ingenious, isn't it?"

Louis, obviously, made a great effort to control himself.

"I can only say, Larry, that you behaved like an insufferable cad."

Larry smiled.

"And Jacqueline agrees with me."

"Agreed," corrected Larry. "You'll be sorry to hear, Louis, that she has altered her opinion. I'm not sure that she hasn't transferred the title to you. She's waiting to find out, I fancy, whether you didn't know what the M'bugulu is or whether you were just indulging your taste. Which was it, Louis? Tell us."

"That's my affair," snapped Louis. "I don't have to account to you for w^hat I do, and I don't intend to be interfered with by you or by any other conceited fool. I do as I please."

Larry shrugged.

"As long as it pleased you," he said. "But I should have thought the M'bugulu was a bit thick even for you. It's not the sort of show to take Jackie to, anyway."

"Absolutely not," agreed Tubby. "Of course, you didn't know, Louis, old man, but I've seen the dance, and you can take it from me that it's an absolutely beastly exhibition—"

Louis swung round and faced him.

"When I want your opinion I'll ask for it," he snarled. "I'm not talking to you; I'm talking to Larry, and I'm telling you, Larry, that I've stood enough of your insolence. Ever since I arrived you've gone out of your way to be deliberately insulting, and I'll stand no more of you and your cheap little sarcasms. Your high-and-mighty ways may be all right in the forest, but they get you nowhere with me. This finishes everything."

He swung round again and faced the other two. All restraint had gone now. He was white to the lips, and his hands were shaking.

"This finishes everything," he repeated thickly.

"Understand that. I was going to treat you fairly—even Larry, who's done nothing but accuse me of being a cheat and a swindler. But after this I'll see you all damned first. Any concessions I was going to make are definitely off. There'll be no concessions. Understand that. And if you don't like it you can thank Mr. Larry Deans for it."

Tubby suddenly clenched his right hand and took a step towards Louis, but as Larry quickly rose he checked himself.

"All right. Tubby," said Larry. "This is nothing new, so don't let it excite you. Louis never intended making any concessions, as he calls them; this is just a convenient way of excusing his dirty twisting and of salving what he probably believes to be his conscience. Personally, I want no concessions from him. I wouldn't accept any."

"Well, I'm not particularly squeamish over money," said Mark, "but I do bar charity from a swindler."

"But I want my rights," added Larry, "and whether you hand them voluntarily, Louis, or I have to wring them out of you by force, I intend to have them. So do Mark and Tubby."

"I see," said Louis. "Then listen to me, all of you. You've brought back eight thousand pounds' worth of gold with you, haven't you? Well, tomorrow morning you'll deposit that gold with the Office of Mines in my name. Understand—in my name—every ounce of it."

"I'll see you damned " began Tubby.

"And if you don't deposit it, or try to get it away," added Louis, "I'll have you arrested. If you thought you'd found a mug in me you'd better start thinking again. I'll soon show you that I'm the master of this outfit, not Larry Deans. That's all I have to say."

He turned away, seated himself in a low chair, lighted a cigar, and began glancing through a copy of Punch, Tubby strode across the room and stood towering over him.

"Look here, Louis," he began, in his most conciliatory tone, "we don't want to be unreasonable, you know, but you simply can't treat us like that. What I mean is, expecting us to hand over the gold and leave ourselves absolutely stranded without a bean in the world—"

"I'll pay you one month's salary and your passage back to England and not a farthing more," said Louis, without glancing up. "You can think yourselves lucky to get that. And if you're not satisfied you'd better take the case to court. It'll cost you a tidy penny, but if you think it's worth it that's your affair."

He rose, tossed the magazine into the chair, and sauntered towards the door. But Tubby was there first, standing with his back against it, his fists clenched, his eyes dangerous.

"Look here, Louis," he began in a thick, unnatural voice. "You're not getting away with this. You're not leaving this room until you've promised—"

Louis raised a protesting hand.

"Don't let's have any melodrama, please. Tubby," he said. "All this, I can assure you, is extremely unpleasant to me, and I admit that I have chiefly myself to blame. I've treated you fellows too generously from the start, and now, instead of being grateful for what I've done—"

"What you've done!" exclaimed Tubby. "What you've done! Good Lord!"

"I've been far too good to you—I see that now," continued Louis, "giving you money to spend like water, looking after your dependents as an act of charity—"

For the second time it was Larry who saved him. Tubby's fist suddenly swept towards Louis's face, but Larry's hand gripped his arm and held it.

"Steady, Tubby!" he said. "Get out, there's a good chap, and leave Louis to me."

"Charity!" fumed Tubby. "Good God, Larry, when I think of Bunty—and that swine talking of charity

"I know," soothed Larry. "But get out like a good chap now. Take him out, Mark, will you? I've a few words to say to Louis on my own account."

Mark opened the door.

"Come on. Tubby!"

With a shrug Tubby followed him from the room.

"Whatever you have to say, Larry," said Louis, "I've no wish to hear it. As far as I'm concerned the question is done with. I shall wire to St. Paul for a lawyer in the morning and get the whole matter settled and put on a legal

footing, and if you think you can establish a claim to a share in the Chumbaziri gold-field simply on the grounds that I provided you with two thousand pounds to finance the expedition—well, go ahead and establish it."

Larry smiled. Nothing irritated Creet so much as Larry's habit of smiling at the most unexpected moments. It always meant, he had discovered, that Larry was about to make some particularly offensive remark, and he had had more than enough offensive remarks today. It was a dangerous sort of smile—menacing, somehow. What in the name of fortune could the fellow see to grin at?

Larry's smile vanished.

"Let's get things clear, Louis," he said. "You provided two thousand pounds; I don't dispute that. All I dispute is your reason for providing it. I was amazed when you agreed to put up two thousand for an expedition which you believed hadn't a dog's chance of doing anything but lose your money for you. But I'm not amazed now."

Louis made a gesture of impatience.

"None of this interests me in the least, Larry—"

"You provided the money," continued Larry, "because you thought it worth two thousand to get me out of the country for a year—possibly forever. You never know your luck, eh, Louis? I wonder if you'd have worn a black tie for me!"

"I always wished you well, Larry—"

"Well out of the way," said the other. "But I'm one of those aggravating blokes who thrive on fever, and mosquitoes turn up their noses at me. Once bitten, twice shy, you know. I fancy I leave a nasty taste in their mouths. It's annoying for you, though."

"And what has all this to do with the Chumbaziri goldfield?"

"Never mind the goldfield," said Larry, "for the moment. All this has nothing to do with it. It has to do with Jacqueline Thurston."

Louis's glance met Larry's and wavered.

"If you expect me to discuss Jacqueline with you—"

"I don't," said Larry sharply. "I expect you to listen to what I have to say. You knew that she and I were engaged, didn't you?"

"I knew nothing whatever about your affairs."

"You knew that I was practically engaged to her. Everybody knew. What I want to know is, what has happened while I've been away?"

Louis smiled.

"The natural anxiety of an absent lover, eh? But why ask me?"

"Because you're the person best qualified to tell me," said Larry. "You've been taking her about here, there, and everywhere, haven't you? I want to know what has been the outcome of it all. All this 'Jackie, darling' stuff! How far has it gone? But I needn't ask you that. Very thorough, Louis, aren't you—especially in your villainies?"

Louis gave a shrug.

"There's nothing very villainous in taking a girl to a dance and a party or two—with her parents' consent," he said. "And in any case, Larry, I can't see that you have any right to object. Jacqueline herself didn't exactly welcome your interference this evening—"

Larry cut him short.

"I'm not arguing, Louis," he said. "I'm just telling you that you're going to cut Jackie right out of your scheme of things. Get that into your head."

"Because you're still hoping to marry her? My dear fellow, you always were an optimist."

"Not because I'm hoping to marry her," said Larry, "but because one day some fairly decent man may come along who's entitled to expect his wife to be less sophisticated than any girl who has much to do with you could hope to be."

Louis forced a laugh.

"My dear fellow, you're letting your jealousy run away with your imagination!"

"My memory's good, anyway," said Larry. "There was a girl once—quite a kid—rather younger than Jackie—as innocent as any girl can be who has been to a boarding school for the daughters of gentlemen—I needn't mention names, need I? You can hardly have forgotten the particular victim I'm referring to, though the affair didn't last long, poor kid!"

"I don't in the least understand—"

"You know what that kid was when you'd finished with her, don't you? No one would have dreamed that she had an eminent K.C. as a father, a beautiful home, the best education that money could buy. You didn't see her, Louis, once you'd choked her off, but I did. That was the first time in my life that I ever longed to kill a man."

Louis glanced at his watch.

"All most interesting," he said, going to the door, "but it's getting very late. I have to take care of myself, and if you've no more to say I think I'll go to bed."

"All I want to say," said Larry, "is that Jacqueline's education at your hands is to be cut off at the kindergarten stage."

"It's all Greek to me, Larry. I think the sun must have gone to your head."

"And if you don't cut it off," added Larry, "then I shall."

CHAPTER XV

Jacqueline that night smoked far more cigarettes than could possibly have been good for her, but she was not alone in her depravity. For fully two hours Dr. Thurston, seated on the edge of the bed, smoked cigarette after cigarette, and, unrebuked, dropped the ash on the counterpane, while Mrs. Thurston made valiant efforts to maintain an appearance of wakefulness and attention to what he was saying.

She had a vague impression that he was very angry with Louis Creet—and really, if Louis was trying to do the boys out of their gold mine he could hardly, she supposed, be quite such a gentleman as she had taken him to be—and that somehow something must be done to secure fair play for Larry and the others.

Every now and then he would say, "Are you awake, my dear?" and Mrs. Thurston would rouse herself with a start and say, "Of course, John, wide awake"; and then the doctor would light another cigarette and start again.

Louis Creet, having taken his temperature and found it normal, slept a peaceful, untroubled sleep; but Mark in his room was lying in bed flat on his back, once again engrossed in directing smoky insults at the ceiling; Tubby, in incredible pyjamas, sat on his bed with knees drawn up to his chin, lighting one cigarette from the stub of another, staring at his feet with puzzled eyes as if feet were a new and perplexing phenomenon; and Larry, when at length he went to his room, stood most of the night lolling against the frame of the window, gazing at the reflection of his cigarette in the glass. Far into the night five cigarettes were glowing simultaneously, but when all the others were extinct a spot of red still glowed, faded, and glowed again in the darkness of Jacqueline's room.

Jacqueline was seeing things clearly tonight and clearness of vision did not conduce to sleep. Reviewing the scene in the drawing room, she discovered details impressed on her memory which at the time she had not noticed—Mark, outwardly so calm, bending the coffee spoon until it had snapped; the look in Tubby's eyes—the pained, bewildered, reproachful look of a dog that cannot understand why anyone should have kicked it; the slight forward thrust of Larry's jaw which she knew so well—a kid setting his teeth, refusing to cry, pretending that he was not hurt. And they were all secretly hoping that Louis might still be induced to behave like an honourable man.

But none of them, not even Larry, knew Louis as she knew him. They were only just beginning to realize that in matters of honour Louis and they spoke different languages, and that he could no more understand theirs than they his. Eighteen months—living like pigs. Tubby had said—the mine found,

and then nothing. She knew just what that nothing meant to them—especially to Larry.

And suddenly she realized just what it meant to herself, how much she had, almost unconsciously, been counting on Larry. She discovered now that without the secret assurance that Larry would see her through, the last few weeks would have been unbearable. She had thought that Larry would be a rich man, that she would only have to tell him that she needed a thousand pounds and the money would be hers, Monty Carr paid, and Louis, deprived of his whip, excluded from her life. As it was, Louis's intrusion into her life, she supposed, would only end when he grew tired of trespassing.

She saw very clearly that it was all largely her fault. Jacqueline was in her most ruthlessly logical mood, and the fact that logic led inevitably to herself as the prime cause of all the trouble did not make her shirk it.

It was clear why Louis had backed out of his agreement. He did not want Larry to be a rich man. Larry as a rich man, back in England, would not suit Louis's book at all. Louis was no fool. He knew as well as she did that if Larry had a thousand pounds Monty Carr would receive his check and he would be deprived of the thumbscrew which he had used on her to such good purpose.

And it was entirely her fault for having exposed herself to the risk of thumbscrews. If she hadn't been a thoughtless fool—cheap, tawdry, shallow; she did not economize on adjectives—all this would never have happened. She had damaged them all, robbed them all by her thoughtless selfishness: Larry, Mark, Tubby and Bunty and the kiddies—it was appalling the way some trivial action could spread out in all directions and damage no end of people who had done nothing to deserve it. She wondered what Larry would think of her if he knew.

And then came other questions: what did Larry-know? How much had he guessed? If he had meant what he had said about her eyes, what was he thinking of her now? She had let Larry down—let everybody down—like the little shirker that she was. And it was a lot of use, wasn't it, telling herself she'd been a little fool and wishing she hadn't been? Why not do something to put matters right?

The next morning, after a breakfast eaten in an atmosphere which, despite all her tactful conversation and desperate cheerfulness, made Mrs. Thurston extremely uncomfortable, Jacqueline tucked a hand into Larry's arm and drew him towards the garden. Louis, catching her eye, frowned his disapproval, and the girl smiled. It was some slight consolation to discover that there were certain thumbscrews which she could apply to Louis. However much he might pretend to despise Larry, Louis could not conceal

his jealousy of him or his uneasy feeling that Larry might still prove a serious complication. It could do no real good, of course, but she would twist that thumbscrew for all she was worth.

When they were out of sight of the bungalow Jacqueline paused.

"Well—hooligan?" she laughed.

"Feeling better this morning, Jackie?" asked Larry. "You must be. That's the first really attractive smile you've produced since you've been here."

"The others were just hideous grins, eh, Larry?"

"The others," said Larry, "suggested the smile of a martyr when he feels the flames licking round his knees. Something pleasant happened—for a change?"

"I confessed all my sins last night, Larry, and that always makes you feel better, doesn't it?"

"I've never tried it, Jackie. I'd be exhausted before my sins were. It must be a consolation to Louis to know that when he does start confessing he'll have all eternity to do it in and he needn't hurry too much."

She smiled.

"One of the sins I confessed," she said, "was that I'd been a beast to you last night. But I'm not sorry, in one way. I suppose if there hadn't been all that fuss about the dance Tubby wouldn't have blurted out all about Louis and the goldfield, and I should never have heard a word about it. You're an obstinate sort of oyster, Larry, aren't you? I suppose you'd have kept it all to yourself and let me go on thinking what a nice little gentleman Louis was."

"Did you think so?"

She did not answer that,

"But even if you've no written agreement, Larry, you can prove your claim somehow, can't you?"

"I wish I knew how," he replied. "I feel pretty rotten about it. Mark and Tubby, though they pretend they aren't, are feeling rather sore with me over it. They think that if I'd handled Louis a bit more tactfully we might have got something out of him. I suppose they're right. But the idea of licking Louis's boots for the sake of getting him to give us a few thousand as an act of grace when we're entitled to equal shares with him—"

He shook his head. "Not Louis's boots, anyway."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"And you can't force him in any way? You said last night that you weren't beaten yet."

"Bluff, my dear," he interrupted. "Tubby's taking it pretty hard, and I haven't the heart to let him down with too much of a bump. But Louis has got us beaten all right. He's wiring for a lawyer today, so he says, and once a lawyer gets busy it's good-bye to Chumbaziri as far as anyone but Louis is concerned. I suppose it's good-bye to most things for all of us." He smiled. "Funny, Jackie, isn't it, the way things are dangled in front of us and just as we think we've got them they're jerked away? I wonder what the idea is—if there is one."

"Speculations of a hooligan!" laughed Jacqueline. "Buck up, Larry! You're not dead yet. Something will happen—"

"And several other platitudes," interrupted Larry; "such as 'Never say die'—'It's always darkest before the dawn'—'Every cloud has a silver lining'—'It's a long lane that has no turning.' Thanks, Jackie; you've cheered me no end. I think I shall go and get drunk now."

She gazed at him with troubled eyes, perplexed and hurt by his sudden bitterness.

"Larry, if only I could do something—"

"Why should you?"

She shrugged.

"Isn't it rather natural that I should want to?"

"Is it?" said Larry. "It hadn't struck me that way. But if you want to be really helpful, you might try a few platitudes on Louis. 'Honesty is the best policy'—'Be sure your sins will find you out,' and that sort of thing. It's a forlorn hope, but he might pay attention if you told him. You seem to have a lot of influence with him."

He suddenly turned, took her face between his hands and gazed earnestly into her eyes, and then, as suddenly, he thrust his hands into his pockets and stood staring at the ground.

"Funny, isn't it?" he said. "I'd have betted my last bob that you weren't."

"That I wasn't what?"

"A quitter," said Larry.

She glanced at him quickly, but he did not look at her, and with a sigh she turned away and went slowly back towards the house. What was the use of arguing about it? There was nothing to be done about anything. Besides, she was a quitter. She had loosed her grasp of everything that was really worth clinging to, and there seemed no prospect of her ever regaining anything worth having.

Louis, alone on the veranda, was still wearing his disapproving frown when she turned the corner of the bungalow; and as he saw her his frown deepened. She paused on the veranda, meeting his glance with coldly hostile eyes.

"What's the matter, Louis?" she asked. "You look as if the bottom of the Stock Exchange had fallen out."

"What have you been saying to Larry?" he asked, and there was no mistaking the nervousness in his manner.

Jacqueline smiled. So it wasn't only jealousy. He was nervous of Larry, too. Despite all his bluster, he was really afraid of him. Well, that was one more thumbscrew.

"Saying to Larry?" she repeated, wrinkling her forehead. "Let me think.... Oh, I believe I said wasn't the sunshine glorious, but of course it was terribly hot, wasn't it. Not very original, I'm afraid."

Louis made a gesture of impatience.

"What did you tell him about—us?"

"What should I be likely to tell him about us?"

"Well, there's no knowing," said Louis. "You and Larry have always been as thick as thieves, and I don't want any sort of trouble with him. He's the sort of fellow who'd make no end of a scene if he—suspected anything. Did he ask you anything?"

She nodded.

"He asked me if I was seasick on the voyage."

"Did he give you the impression that he—well—had any suspicions—that he was worried—"

"Oh, yes, Louis, I'm sure he's worried—about me."

He glanced at her anxiously.

"He thinks I'm different. He says my eyes are different."

"Huh! Well, I don't know what he means. Still, as long as he hasn't any proof it doesn't matter particularly what he thinks. All the same, Jackie, the less you have to do with Larry in the circumstances the better.

He's a bad-tempered devil, and he's awkward enough as it is. Did he say anything about me?"

"Nothing at all surprising."

"Then he did say something?"

"Only that you're swindling him and Mark and Tubby out of their share in the mine."

The blood rushed to Louis's face, and his hand gripped the arm of the chair. Then he gave a short, uneasy laugh.

"Oh, so he said that, did he?"

She nodded.

"Is it true?"

Louis, in the language of the cinema, registered pain.

"I'm surprised you should ask me that, Jackie," he said. "You've no idea how you hurt me—"

"Is it true, Louis?"

"Of course it's not true," he said irritably. "It's just the sort of insulting thing Larry Deans would say about me—the sort of thing he has been saying ever since I got out here. Because I don't choose to make him a present of a million pounds or so he calls me a cheat and a liar and tries to poison everyone's mind against me. If I have any more of it there'll be an action for slander—"

"How much is Larry getting out of the mine, Louis?"

"Larry will get what he's entitled to. So will the others. Don't try to interfere in this, Jacqueline. It doesn't concern you. It's between me and Larry and the others, and I'll manage it in my own way without any interference from anybody."

"Larry says they're each entitled to a quarter share."

"Then he's a liar. If it's a question of what they're entitled to, they're entitled to nothing at all."

"And that, roughly, is what they'll get?"

Louis gave a shrug.

"I refuse to discuss it with you, Jackie. You can trust me to pay Larry and the others whatever is due to them."

"Can I?"

"Certainly you can. Whatever people may say about me, no one can accuse me of breaking my word or of not paying what I owe."

"You didn't pay Monty Carr. After giving me your word that he should be paid—"

"My dear Jackie," interrupted Louis, "as I've al-already explained to you, you entirely misunderstood what I did promise. My promise was that Monty Carr should not press you for payment as long as—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Louis," exclaimed the girl angrily, "don't hedge and twist and try to wriggle out of it! You made a bargain with me, and when I'd fulfilled my part of it you broke your word and backed out of fulfilling your part, and I haven't the least doubt that you're doing the same sort of thing with Larry and Mark and Tubby. But you can't hope to get away with that sort of thing every time, and you're not going to get away with it this time."

"My dear girl, do try to control yourself—"

"It's you I'm going to control, Louis. I'm going to tell you what you're to do, and you're going to do it."

He stared at her in amazement.

"You're going to give me your word No, on second thoughts, I'll have something a bit more reliable than your word. You're going to have a proper agreement drawn up giving a quarter share each to Larry, Mark, Tubby, and yourself, and you're going to sign it today. And it's no use saying you won't sign it, because I'm going to force you to sign it."

Louis smiled, but it was an uneasy sort of smile which carried little conviction of genuine amusement.

"Force me, Jackie?"

She nodded.

"You will either do as I say, Louis, or I shall tell Larry—everything."

Louis's smile became more pronounced.

"You don't think I'd dare?"

He shrugged.

"Larry would hardly thank you for telling him—everything," he said drily. "He's a bit straitlaced, you know—not the sort of fellow to forgive—"

"I don't expect to be forgiven anything. I'm not thinking of myself now. You can't understand that, can you? I'm thinking of Larry. I don't care in the least what happens to me, or what anybody thinks of me, and I don't care much what I do or who gets hurt through my doing it. All I care about is making sure that Larry isn't swindled as I've been swindled, and either you do as I say or I shall tell him."

"And even supposing you could bring yourself to tell him, what do you imagine that Larry could do?"

"I know what you're afraid he'd do, Louis: you're afraid he'd kill you. But I'm afraid he wouldn't do that. He would hardly think you worth hanging for. The most I could hope for would be that he'd thrash you until you couldn't stand. But he'd do that for certain. I wish to God I could do it myself!"

Louis's eyes shifted restlessly.

"I don't doubt it, Jackie," he said. "I'm quite prepared to accept your word that Larry might behave like a blackguard and a hooligan, but I don't think he'll have the opportunity. You're naturally disappointed that Larry is not going to be the wealthy man you hoped he would be, because it has upset your plans as far as you and he are concerned. Your disappointment has made you reckless, and you've overlooked one or two points. Suppose, for instance, you do tell Larry everything, and suppose he does, as you hope, decide that I'm not worth hanging for and adopts the alternative course. What then? Larry will still be without his share in the mine, and your position will be exactly the same as it is now."

Jacqueline frowned.

"My position doesn't matter, Louis. I've told you that."

"We'll say your father's position, then. In a few days' time we shall be returning to England, and whatever you may have told Larry, you will still owe Monty Carr a thousand pounds, and it will still be a question either of paying him or of appealing to your father to pay it for you. But I gathered that your father must on no account be allowed to know. Of course, if you have no objection—"

She cut him short.

"I'm not going to argue, Louis," she said. "Will you or will you not keep your promise to Larry and the others and sign that agreement?"

For several moments Louis lolled back in his chair, frowning thoughtfully and drumming his knee with his fingers. And then he sat upright.

"Listen to me, Jackie," he said. "If Larry has been putting you up to all this—"

"Larry knows nothing about it."

"In any case," said Louis, "please understand that I'm not going to be threatened and bullied and coerced by you or Larry or anybody else. I'm not going to sign any agreement, and you can tell Larry what you like. If there's any trouble with Larry I fancy I can deal with him."

She shrugged.

"Is that final, Louis?"

"There's just this I want to say," he said. "I promised you that, so long as you were reasonable, Monty Carr should not press you for the thousand pounds you owe him. So long as you were reasonable, Jackie."

"Well?"

"Well, I just want to warn you, my dear, that I don't consider you are being reasonable. You accuse me of not keeping my side of our bargain, but you can't pretend that you've kept your side. All through the voyage you deliberately avoided me, and I don't think I've had five minutes alone with you since we left London. You mustn't treat me like that, Jackie. I'm very much in love with you—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Louis, don't be foul!"

Creet's mouth hardened.

"Very well," he said. "Since that's your attitude I'll keep my feelings to myself. But understand this. I didn't bring you on this trip so that you could make a fool of me, and you've got to be a damned sight more reasonable over things in the future than you have been in the past. You know what I mean. And if you don't choose to be reasonable—"

"Well?"

Louis rose from his chair, smiling.

"I fancy you will be—for your father's sake," he said and went into the bungalow.

CHAPTER XVI

Jacqueline took out her cigarette case, lighted a cigarette, and, with a rather wry smile, flung herself into the chair. So Louis had called her bluff. She had half expected that he would. Louis was no fool, particularly where a woman was concerned, and she had feared all along that he knew her well enough to be sure that she would suffer anything rather than tell Larry the truth; and of course it had been too much to hope that he would not realize that telling Larry the truth could not possibly do Larry or Mark or Tubby any good or make her own position any better. But it had been worth trying. Louis was a dreadful coward, and there had been just the bare chance that his fear of what Larry might do might induce him to come to some sort of terms over the mine. She had robbed Larry of so much, cheap little quitter that she was, and she had felt that if she could wring any sort of concession from Louis she would at least have made some slight amends. She had felt that she owed that debt to Larry. She still felt that.

But it had not come off. Louis had called her bluff, and the net result was that, without doing the least good to Larry, she had made things far more difficult for herself. Louis, as a hint of what she might expect if she chose to be obstinate, had given the thumbscrew a preliminary twist. She was to be more "reasonable."

That, of course, had been bound to come sooner or later. She had wondered how long Louis would allow her unreasonableness to continue without protest; and during the voyage she had been at pains to give him no opportunity of broaching the subject. She had no idea of what she must do if Louis should become insistent, and had been thankful for every day that passed without forcing her to face the problem and come to a decision.

But she must face the problem now. Louis had started cracking his whip, and she did not doubt that, if she proved obstinate, he would use it. She must find some way of escape. She saw very clearly now that reasonableness was out of the question. All the time during the voyage, when she had thought of it, she had told herself that, but always at the back of her mind had been the knowledge that, in the last resort, she might have to submit. "You've never let me down yet, Jackie," her father had said. And in any case, she had reflected, it did not much matter one way or the other.

But submission now was impossible. Louis, after all, was not particularly clever. He had not had the intelligence to realize that, if he wanted her to be reasonable and docile, it was hardly wise to bring her to Benguella—and Larry. He should have known that seeing Larry again would arouse old feelings, revive memories, renew thoughts which would make reasonableness unthinkable. Louis, she supposed, was unaware of the possibility of such subtle emotions. Or was it simply that he was confident

of playing so compelling a tune that, in spite of Larry, she could not choose but dance to it?

It did not matter, anyway. What mattered was to find some way out of it all, some sanctuary from Louis's demands; to put a gulf between herself and Louis so wide that his whip could not reach her. And on her side of the gulf must be her father, her mother, Larry, Tubby, and Mark....

For an hour she sat there, her forehead puckered, absorbed in her problem, scarcely moving except to toss away the stub of a cigarette and light another. And at the end of an hour, though her eyes were still grave, the hint of a smile—a cold, contemptuous smile—just touched her lips and vanished; and then she rose, with an air of sudden resolution, hurried to her bedroom, and began rummaging in her cabin trunk.

During lunch—another meal with an "atmosphere"—she was almost vivacious. There was a touch of colour in her cheeks; the pucker which for weeks had been a permanent fixture between her eyebrows had disappeared, and her eyes seemed somehow more alive. Her hands were restless—never still; and she kept up a flow of trivial nonsense throughout the meal, talking desperately, as if on no account must a lull be allowed in the conversation. Every now and then, as she glanced at Louis, that same contemptuous smile would touch her lips and vanish.

Mrs. Thurston decided that Jackie was quite herself again and wondered what had worked the change in her. Larry, perhaps, had asked her to marry him. If Larry intended asking her to marry him it was certainly time he did it; they had been here several days already.

Young people were so casual nowadays. She glanced at Larry and sighed. No; she didn't think it could be Larry. Larry didn't look at all like a young man who has just become engaged. There was a look in his eyes—yes, that was it—the dog which John had been obliged to have shot when they were in the country because it went mad or something. The dog's eyes had looked very much as Larry's eyes looked now. And really, when you spoke to him he snapped at you very much like a bad-tempered dog....

Dr. Thurston, noting Jacqueline's symptoms, frowned. Something was wrong with Jackie, he decided. A touch of the sun, perhaps; but he did not think so. Nervous—almost hysterical. He had seen women like that before an operation, but it was unlike Jackie to get worked up to that pitch over anything. She was usually so calm, matter-of-fact, casual. He'd have a look at her after lunch.

After lunch he drew her aside.

"Feeling all right, Jackie.f^"

Jacqueline had learned from experience that when her father suspected her of not feeling right it was useless to say that there was nothing wrong with her; and now, though she could not remember ever having felt quite so right, she thought it wiser to satisfy him with some trivial ailment and save further questioning.

"A bit of a head," she said.

He nodded.

"Tubby's got a car," he said, "and is going to take us around, but you'd be wiser to stay out of the sun. I'd He down for a bit if I were you."

"I think I will, Father."

She went to her room, sat in a chair, and lighted a cigarette; and half an hour later, watching from the window, she saw them go—Tubby and her mother in the front seat, Mark and her father behind. She smiled but did not move. A few minutes later, as she saw Larry go striding out of the gate, she rose, glanced in the mirror, touched her face with a powder pufF, and went to look for Louis.

She found him in the drawing room. As she entered and stood beside his chair, her hands thrust into the pockets of her white silk cardigan, he glanced up and gave her a friendly smile.

"Head better, my dear?"

"Quite, thanks."

His glance swept over her appreciatively.

"You're looking wonderful today, darling," he said; "quite your old self again. I like that jumper thing you're wearing."

"I like a garment with pockets," she smiled. "Father has often said that I should have been a boy; I suppose that's one of the signs."

He drew her left hand from her pocket and held it between his own.

"Forgiven me, Jackie? I'm afraid I was very short-tempered with you this morning, but you must try to make allowances. I've been very worried, and I'm afraid it has made me irritable."

"You weren't exactly—pleasant, Louis. I put it down to the heat."

"I've had nothing but trouble since I came here," he went on. "All this unpleasantness over the mine

But we shall soon be out of it all now, thank goodness. There's a boat next Wednesday, and we shall be able to leave by then. This is a God-forsaken country."

Jacqueline nodded.

"I was thinking last night," she said, "that God does seem to have forsaken it. Larry and Tubby and Mark must think so, too. I mean, if God hadn't forsaken it, you'd expect to find some sort of justice and fair play and decency, wouldn't you?"

He glanced at her sharply, dropping her hand.

"Larry must be sorry he ever came| to Africa," she added. "All those months, and then to go back to England with absolutely nothing. England will be a bit dreary for Larry, I should think."

Louis frowned.

"Larry won't go to England," he said sharply.

"But he was telling me yesterday—"

"Whatever he told you, you can take it from me that he daren't show his nose there. He's up to his ears in debt, and he'd be met with a swarm of writs. I've only kept his creditors quiet so far by kidding them that he'd soon be a rich man."

"When you knew that he wouldn't be?"

He gave a shrug.

"I just want you to realize that you mustn't count on Larry being in England." He took her hand again. "Listen, Jackie," he said. "I want you to try to be sensible. Larry is no good to you. I know you've always been a loyal friend to him, and I admire you immensely for your loyalty, but you must realize by this time that he isn't worth it. He has never done anything, and I'm afraid it's only too obvious that he never will. You'd be throwing yourself away on a fellow like Larry."

He paused, watching her face anxiously. But her face told him nothing.

"And I want you to believe, darling," he continued, "that I really am very fond of you. I've been thinking things over, and I've one or two plans for when we get back to England. I mean to give you a splendid time. I'll take a little flat for you—somewhere convenient—where you can do just as you like. A girl likes to have a place of her own, doesn't she? We'll go along somewhere and choose the furniture together. I expect you'd like a piano—for your singing—wouldn't you? A love nest, eh, Jackie, just for you and me?"

She wanted to smile. He was making what she had feared might be a difficult task much easier. She wanted to hit him, too. But she managed to suppress both longings.

"What about your wife, Louis?" she said.

He frowned.

"Fortunately, darling, we needn't discuss—"

"I'm afraid we must. You told me when we were in England that you would agree to a divorce. Do your plans include that?"

Louis's eyes avoided hers.

"That's a matter which doesn't rest with me," he said. "Naturally, I should much prefer my wife to give me my freedom, but I can't force her to divorce me."

"No, I suppose not," agreed Jacqueline. "But I'm sure you've done all in your power to induce her to."

He glanced at her sharply. What the dickens did she mean by that remark? Again her face told him nothing.

"I don't think you quite realize how difficult it all is, Jackie," he said. "My wife is a very religious woman, and her religion doesn't really allow her to petition for a divorce. That's the whole trouble. It's a matter of conscience with her. Naturally I hope that in the end she'll be sensible about it."

Jacqueline gave a little laugh.

"Sorry, Louis," she said. "I suppose it's nothing to laugh at, but you really are rather marvellous. The truth is that you're scared stiff in case your wife divorces you. Is there really any chance of it.f^"

"Of course there's a chance," replied Creet irritably. "And as soon as she does divorce me—"

"You'll find some really nice girl who's fond of you and marry her."

He nodded.

"I should marry you, Jackie."

"Some really nice girl who's fond of you, I said, Louis. I don't fill the bill. I'm not really at all a nice girl, and I've never pretended to be fond of you."

Louis made a gesture of impatience.

"I don't see why we're discussing all this now," he said. "It's no use talking of marriage until the divorce is an accomplished fact, and in the meantime—"

"In the meantime," she interrupted, "you're inviting me to carry on a cheap little secret intrigue, a nasty, furtive, sordid affair, all lies and hypocrisy and petty little deceptions—never daring to look my father in the face, always wondering if he suspects, feeling all the time that I'm being cheap and tawdry and—messy. But I suppose I shouldn't mind all that—as long as I've a piano!

Louis sighed.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, darling," he said reproachfully. "You hurt me very much when you're so bitter. I suppose it's seeing Larry again—he has been talking to you—"

"He has made me feel like something that crawls, Louis."

"You're so sensitive—far too sensitive. People don't make a fuss about that sort of thing nowadays, and you've no reason to feel like that about it. After all, darling, if you look at it in a practical way, I can look after you far better than Larry could ever hope to, and there's nothing I wouldn't do to make you happy and take care of you—"

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I mean it. You don't realize how I'm longing—"

"Well, you may have your chance."

He shot her a quick, nervous glance.

"There's nothing wrong, Jackie, is there; I mean, apart from Larry, you're not worried—"

"Yes—I am. You remember that night—on the way out to the Cape—at the fancy- dress dance? I began to wonder then, because I've never fainted before in my life. Daddy said it was the heat, and you thought it was the heat, and I let it go at that. I wasn't sure myself that it wasn't the heat—then."

There was consternation in Louis's eyes.

"On our way to the Cape? Five weeks ago! But you said nothing—I had no idea—why didn't you tell mer

She shrugged.

"Of all the poisonous luck!" exclaimed Louis. "I'd have given five thousand pounds for this not to have happened."

"That's a lot of money, Louis—more than you gave for me."

"That sort of remark doesn't help in the least," snapped Creet. "I'm worried out of my life. First of all, that trouble over the mine, and now this. Does your mother—do you think—"

Jacqueline shook her head.

"Nor Father. Nobody—yet."

Louis's face showed his relief.

"This is a dreadful shock to me," he said. "Just think what it means for me if a thing like this gets known—"

"It might possibly mean something for me, too. Perhaps that hasn't occurred to you."

"Yes—of course—I realize it's dreadful for you too, my dear. But you mustn't get in a panic about it. You can rely on me."

"I am relying on you."

"I won't let you down, Jackie. Whatever people may say about me, I've never let a woman down in my life. I'll think out something. Just leave it to me."

"There doesn't seem much to think out," said Jacqueline. "I should have thought it was quite obvious what's to be done. The usual thing in cases of this kind is for the man to marry the girl."

"My dear Jackie," began Louis impatiently, "you know very well—"

"That you can't marry me until you're divorced. Yes, I realize that. But that simply means that you must get the divorce at once, doesn't it?"

"Yes—of course. But I've explained the difficulties to you, and in any case it would be bound to take some time. In the meantime you must trust me." 1 can t.

"But, my dear Jackie—"

"I can't trust you," she repeated. "I don't intend to trust you. I trusted you once—over Monty Carr—and you let me down—backed out of your promise and set up in the blackmailing business—and I don't mean to give you the chance of letting me down again. You're going to get divorced at once. It can be managed somewhere. Reno, isn't it.f^ There's no difficulty, anyway, if you really want a divorce and have the money. Of course you don't want a divorce. It matters so dreadfully to you what people think of you, and I know that if you can possibly wriggle out of it and save your own face you'll do it and let me go hang."

"For goodness' sake, Jackie, try to control yourself," implored Creet. "Someone will hear you."

"But you're not going to wriggle out of this," continued Jacqueline. "You're going to behave like a gentleman for once. You're going to cable straight away to your solicitors and get them to start things moving over the divorce, and I'm going to see the cable sent."

"Really, Jackie, there's no need to make all this fuss—"

"I intend to make a fuss," said Jacqueline. "You've had everything your own way so far, but you're up against it this time. Either you'll do as I say or I'll make every kind of a fuss I can think of rather than let you sneak out of it and leave me to face the music. That was the programme, wasn't it? But the programme's cancelled. Will you send that cable—today?"

"For heaven's sake, be sensible," said Louis testily. "It's not the least use sending a cable. Until I get back to England and can see my wife and persuade her to file her petition, there's nothing to be done. Please don't make things more difficult than they are."

"You won't cable?"

"Certainly not."

"Very well," said Jacqueline. "Then you'll sit down now, Louis, and write a statement admitting that you're—"

"I'll write nothing," interrupted Creet furiously. "I'll admit nothing. In any case, I've only got your word for it, and if you expect me to make admissions on the mere word of an hysterical girl—"

"Then you do mean to let me down?"

"I've said no such thing, Jacqueline. I've promised to do everything in my power to look after you. But to ask me to give myself away in a written statement—you must be clean out of your senses."

"Perhaps," said Jacqueline. "It's not uncommon for a girl in my position to go clean out of her senses. Frankly, Louis, if you mean to let me down over this there's not much I'd stick at, and if I don't get some sort of a hold over you, you will let me down as sure as fate, and then—well, I just couldn't face it. So I've got to have that statement, and I mean to have it—now. Get a move on, please."

"I absolutely refuse " began Creet and paused abruptly, his gaze riveted on Jacqueline's right hand. She had withdrawn it from the pocket of her cardigan, and in it he had caught sight of the shining barrel of a revolver.

"Jackie—for God's sake—if that thing's loaded—"

"I'm not bluffing this time, Louis," she said. "It is loaded."

"Then for heaven's sake don't fool about with it."

"Father gave it to me," she said, "before we started on the trip. He said he'd feel happier if I had some means of protecting myself out here, and I laughed at him. But he was right. You're just about as dangerous a sort of beast as one could meet anywhere, Louis, and I'm going to protect myself."

He took a step towards her, but as she turned swiftly and faced him, he halted and stood gazing with terrified eyes at the small shining weapon in her hand.

"Jackie—listen! You haven't understood, you know. You've misjudged me terribly. I'm not going to let you down."

"Oh, don't get nervous, Louis," she interrupted, with a smile of contempt. "Don't get scared into telling all sorts of lies because you're afraid I shall shoot you if you don't calm me down. I'm not out of my senses by a very long way, and I'm not proposing to kill you. I don't think I've the pluck to face the consequences of killing you. If I'd had the pluck I'd have killed you long before this—that evening—in London—"

"Jackie, put that damned thing down."

She shook her head.

"I've every reason in the world for killing you," she said, "and I daresay, when I said why I'd killed you, I'd get away with it. But I'm not going to risk it; and in any case it wouldn't solve my problem for me, would it?" She smiled. "There's no need for you to repent yet, Louis, as far as I'm concerned."

Louis's eyes showed his relief, but he was still watching the revolver in her hand.

"In that case, Jackie, the sooner you stop this stupid fooling—"

"Oh, it's not that. I'm not thinking of shooting you, but if you don't write that statement you'll be in a nasty mess, all the same—much worse than just getting divorced. I've written a letter to Father telling him everything that has happened since that night when Monty Carr did that neat little card trick. I suppose you'd fixed that with him, hadn't you? But never mind. The point is that if you won't do as I ask you, I'm too much of a coward to face what's coming to me then, and I prefer—this."

She held up the revolver.

"Jackie!" gasped Creet. "You don't mean—"

"It's the easiest way," said Jacqueline, "if you decide to shirk, as I fancy you will. If you don't intend shirking, do as I ask you and give me the statement. If you refuse, then you do mean to shirk, and I know what to do. Father will have my letter—afterwards."

"Jackie—listen!" begged Creet, and there was a note of desperation in his voice. "It's no use talking like that. I'm not going to let you down. But you must give me time to think. Put that thing away and let me think."

Jacqueline smiled.

"Righto, Louis; think now," she said. "I'll wait—if you're not too long."

He began pacing the room, frowning heavily, and Jacqueline, seated on the arm of a chair, toyed with the revolver, watching his face. He paused by the window, lighted a cigarette with unsteady hands, and stood staring out into the garden. Every now and then, though he did not move his head, she saw

his eyes glance at the revolver. There was a look of amusement in her eyes and a faint smile on her lips, but her heart was pounding. She had the feeling that she was balanced on a thin, taut wire which might at any moment snap beneath her.

Creet turned towards her.

"Look here, Jackie," he said. "I think I understand what has turned you against me like this. It's Larry, isn't it?"

She gave a shrug.

"You're bitter against me about Larry," he went on. "You think I've treated you badly and treated him badly. Well, I admit I haven't quite played the game —from your point of view. I haven't played the game with him, and I haven't played it with you. You're still very fond of him, aren't you?"

Jacqueline made no reply, and Louis went on.

"This is the time to be sensible, my dear, and not to sulk. That gets us nowhere. As a matter of fact, I don't dislike Larry. He's a bad-tempered brute, but there's a lot about him that's likable. Half the trouble with him is jealousy, and I can quite understand it. I suppose he's as fond of you as any man could be. Why not—have a talk with him?"

"What about?"

He did not answer that. He began pacing the room again.

"I don't know exactly what Larry owes in England," he continued. "Six or seven thousand pounds, I believe. Say ten thousand. It's a lot of money, but I'm not the man to jib at the expense when it's a question of protecting you, my dear, and if he'll be reasonable I'm quite willing to fix up all those debts of his."

Jacqueline frowned.

"What does 'reasonable' mean in Larry's case?"

"You might at any rate sound him, Jackie, and see how he feels about it. He'll be more likely to listen to you than to me. After all, if the mine is half as rich or a tenth as rich as it's supposed to be, I needn't worry over ten thousand pounds. In any case, you've got to be protected."

"But what have Larry's debts to do with protecting me?"

He went to her and laid a hand on her arm.

"It's pretty hard for me, Jackie," he said. "I'm tremendously fond of you, and I've been looking forward—but never mind. This isn't the time to let sentiment stand in the way, and if I have to suffer I must try to put up with

it. It wouldn't be easy, my dear, to give you up—hand you over to some other man—"

"Oh, I see!" interrupted Jacqueline. "I wondered what all this had to do with protecting me. So you'll get me out of my trouble by finding me a husband and marrying me off! Quite mediaeval, isn't it?"

"If you're still fond of Larry, it seems the only possible way. I don't pretend it won't cut me up pretty badly, but there's you to be thought of and your father and mother—"

"Let's have it clear, Louis," said Jacqueline. "Your suggestion is that you should pay Larry's debts on condition that he takes me off your hands by marrying me. Is that it?"

He nodded.

"But that's not quite all, is it? There's still Monty Carr. When Larry and I are married we shan't want Monty Carr hanging about our doorstep asking for a thousand pounds."

"You can trust me to settle—"

"I can't. I've told you so. If you want to get rid of me—"

"For God's sake don't talk like that!" exclaimed Creet irritably. "Of course I don't want to lose you. But you've got to be protected."

"If you really want to protect me you must protect me from Monty Carr too. In other words, unless you write me a check for a thousand pounds you must write that statement instead. Otherwise I prefer my programme to yours."

Louis hesitated.

"How do I know—" he began.

"—that if you give me the check I shan't worry you any more?" She shrugged. "You must take my word for it. Blackmail isn't in my line."

He raised his eyebrows.

"0h, no; I'm not blackmailing you now, Louis. I'm just asking you to pay a debt which you promised to pay long ago. You can do as you like about it."

For some moments Louis seemed undecided, and then he gave a shrug.

"I'll cable to London and get it paid into your account. I'll see to it at once."

As he went from the room Jacqueline seated herself in an armchair, rested her elbows on her knees, and covered her face with her hands.

She was free. Again and again she told herself. Louis did not want her any more—was glad to be rid of her—and she was free; free of Louis, of Monty

Carr, of the constant fear, of the cheap little hypocrisies and deceptions, of the dread of meeting her father's eyes. She thought of Larry, and Larry's eyes. She wondered if she would ever again be able to meet Larry's eyes without flinching. It hurt her unbearably to think of Larry, yet she could not tear her thoughts away from him.

And then, at a touch on her shoulder, she raised her head and found Larry standing beside her.

CHAPTER XVII

Larry's face was very grave. She smiled up at him.

"Hullo, Larry! I thought you went out."

"Just for five minutes," he said. "Since then I've been sitting—out there." He nodded towards the veranda. "So it's pretty bad, eh, Jackie?"

She rested her head in her hands again.

"How much did you hear, Larry?"

"Oh, quite a lot. I listened—shamelessly. You've got to scrap all sense of decency when you're dealing with a Louis Creet."

"Then you heard—"

"That Louis is planning to protect your good name in a typically ingenious way. You're a rotten little coward, Jackie, aren't you? Why didn't you plug him and chance it? You didn't really imagine he'd stand by you, did you?"

"There's no reason why he should, Larry. Fortunately, I don't need protecting—in that way."

"You mean that—that what you told Louis—isn't true?"

She nodded.

"I see," said Larry. "Thank God for that, an3rway! It makes things a bit easier. But it might have been true, might it?"

"0h, for heaven's sake, Larry, don't start cross-examining me."

"Right—I won't. After all, there's no need to ask you that. If it couldn't have been true Louis wouldn't have taken the bait and been so anxious to protect himself. Besides, I'd guessed that much. You've been a damned little fool, Jackie, haven't you? I wish you were a boy."

She glanced at him in surprise.

"If you were a boy," he said savagely, "I'd give you the biggest hiding you'd ever had in your life for being a nasty, cheap little quitter. Louis Creet! And all the time I was thinking—picturing you—"

"Larry—please!" begged the girl. "You can't tell me anything about myself that I don't know already. You can't call me anything I haven't called myself a hundred times. I know exactly what I've been—just one of a gang of empty-headed young fools, flitting between dance and cocktail party and night club and heaven knows where else, being clever and modern and sophisticated, trampling on everything that's really worth having, wisecracking all the decencies out of existence, always after some fresh excitement, not caring

whom we let down, thinking nothing matters but our own rotten little selves. I know it all, Larry. There's no need to rub it in."

"Sorry," said Larry. "I didn't mean to rub it in. But it's all a bit of a shock, you know. When a man has stuck a girl on a pedestal—as every fool of a man does some girl—he always blames the girl for coming a cropper instead of blaming himself for having expected a human being to be an angel, specially for his benefit. But all this messy sort of business isn't like you, Jackie. I'd have betted on you."

Jacqueline sighed.

"I don't know what to say to you, Larry," she said. "I've been hoping all along that you'd never know. I made up my mind that I wouldn't let you know. I thought it out during the voyage and had it all cut and dried. I meant to treat you in an ofFhand, casual sort of way, just like any chance acquaintance, keep you at a safe distance, snub you if you started asking questions, and get away with it that way. But somehow—"

"It hasn't worked out according to plan?"

She shook her head.

"I can't treat you like that. You're a poisonous sort of person, you know, Larry. I never could make a good job of telling you a lie."

Larry grinned.

"Just as well we're not married, Jackie," he said. "You've had a splendid tutor, too, in Louis Creet. How did it start—money ^ Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"Money had a good deal to do with it," said Jacqueline. "You see, after you left England—"

She paused. No; she mustn't tell him that. She couldn't tell him now that if he had not left England it would never have happened, that it was because she had believed she would never see him again that she had begun to drift, not caring what became of her so long as she could banish thought for a while and deaden feeling. She couldn't go whining for his pity, offering her love of him as an excuse. She did not want his pity, and she would not have him think that she expected more than pity from him now.

"After you left England," she said, "and there was nobody to keep me in order, I—well, I got a bit out of hand, Larry. It was just rather stupid—no real harm in it; but that sort of thing costs money, and bills came pouring in, and I didn't care so long as I could carry on and have a hectic time. Louis took me about a good deal. I don't know why I let him, except that he had a Rolls and plenty of money, and Father and Mother both liked him. I just didn't care as long as I could keep up the pace. Sometimes I hated myself—

and was glad you weren't there to see me—but not often. You'd have hated me like poison then, Larry."

"I'd have clipped your ear," said Larry. " But go on."

"Bills, bills, bills—nothing but bills," said Jacqueline, "and I simply couldn't ask Father for the money—he had none, anyway—and I had to do something desperate to get out of the mess."

"Enter Louis Creet, eh?"

She nodded.

"But it was all my fault really," she said. "If I hadn't been the little fool I was it could never have happened. I asked Louis to take me to a gambling place—plagued him until he did. We went several times, and then one night I staked a thousand pounds."

"And lost?"

"And couldn't pay—naturally," said Jacqueline. "It wasn't on the square, Larry, but that doesn't matter.

I lost my head—I was crazy with worry over the bills—and made the bet and lost. And then—"

"I can guess the rest," said Larry. "Louis offered to come to the rescue—on certain conditions. But you must have been pretty hard-pressed, Jackie."

"It was Father," she explained. "I couldn't let him down. And then Mother was ill and had to have a voyage. But there's no need to go into all that—except that I'd like you to believe, Larry, that once I was in the mess there was no other way out of it. That's not an excuse, though. And then, when I'd kept my side of the bargain, Louis backed out of his—refused to pay the thousand unless I came with him on the voyage. And all the time he has been holding it over my head—trying to force me.... Oh, for heaven's sake, Larry, don't let's talk about it."

Larry's mouth was grim and the mad-dog look was in his eyes again.

"Listen, Jackie," he said. "Leave this to me, will you? There's only one way to deal with a swine like Creet, and I'm going to deal with him. I've a score or two of my own to settle in any case, and by God he's not going to get away with this lot. I'm glad you didn't shoot the cad. If there's any shooting to be done it's my business—"

She laid a hand quickly on his arm.

"No, Larry—please!"

He stood frowning at her, puzzled.

"By all the laws of decency," he said, "Louis is due for the high jump."

She shook her head.

"He isn't worth it, Larry. I'm not worth it, either. I've done enough damage already, and whatever damage Louis has done in the past doesn't really matter now. At any rate, nothing you can do can undo what has been done."

"But this can't go on," he protested. "If there's no other way you must tell your father—"

"Father must never know, Larry. I may be a nasty little fool who deserves a good hiding, but there's no need for Father to know it. I've kept it from him so far, and there's no object in telling him now."

Larry frowned.

"A thousand quid!" he said. "And if Louis had played the game with us I could have given you ten thousand without batting an eyelid and been glad of the chance."

"Thanks, Larry. I knew that. But there's no need to worry any more about the thousand pounds. Louis is going to pay that—to get rid of me. He has promised to arrange it at once."

"And you believed him?"

She nodded.

"'He had ruined her life, yet still she trusted him,' as Tubby would say. He'll give you a post-dated check on a bank that's gone broke and get you to give him twopence for the stamp, Jackie. And don't expect me to be sorry for you, because you ought to know better. If Louis kept a promise he'd die of suppressed dishonesty and a rush of remorse to the heart. Someone ought to smack you."

She shook her head.

"He'll keep his promise this time. He's cabling to London for the money to be transferred to my account. He's probably running to the bank to arrange it now. He's in a terrible hurry to get rid of me."

"What does he think you've got—fever?"

"I thought I knew Louis," she said, smiling. "I couldn't go on, Larry. I just had to get free of it all somehow, and I could see no other way of doing it. I feel pretty sure that I could manage it that way. Louis is scared out of his life of being connected with any scandal, and when I insisted that he must get divorced and marry me he was at his wit's end how to get out of it. Did you know he's married?"

"I knew he was married. His wife died five years ago.

She shrugged a shoulder.

"I might have guessed that," she said, "but I didn't. But I guessed what would happen if Louis believed that I was going to be a liability and an inconvenience and possibly the dickens of a nuisance to him. He'd promise to stand by me and protect me and all the rest of it, and take the first opportunity of getting rid of me and leaving me flat. I counted on that. That's why I told him what I did tell him. And it came off. He's scared stiff and anxious to get rid of me as quickly as possible. I'm worrying no more about Louis."

Larry nodded.

"Good for you, Jackie."

"I'm not proud of it."

"You can't be squeamish with a swine like Creet."

"I suppose not. All the same—"

She covered her face with her hands again, and sat for some moments in silence. Then:

"Larry!"

"Hullo!"

"Is it the least use saying I'm sorry?"

She felt his hands grasp her wrists and draw her to her feet; and as she raised her head she saw the lines around his mouth crease into a smile.

"Aren't you a damned little fool, Jackie!" he said.

Suddenly he pulled her almost roughly towards him, and his lips were pressed against hers. Her hands flew back to her face.

"Oh, Larry—why—did you do that—now.f^"

"Oh, good Lord, now you're crying!" exclaimed Larry. "What the dickens is there to cry about? Want a handkerchief?"

She shook her head.

"Mine smells of tobacco—Maholesburg—smoke two pipes and have the room to yourself—but you're welcome to it."

Again she shook her head, and for some moments he stood gazing at her with an air of bewilderment.

"Jackie!"

"Well?"

"For heaven's sake, shut up! You're ugly enough at the best of times, and if you go and make your nose red—I say, shall I go?"

She nodded, and he strode to the door.

"Larry?"

He paused and turned to find her looking across at him with brimming eyes.

"Just—thanks, Larry." He smiled at her.

"Stick it, Jerry," he said. "Another ten miles and you're over the hill."

Jacqueline sang to them that evening. She felt that she must sing, that she must have some outlet for her pent-up feelings. It had been hard at first to realize that she was actually free of Louis, that the bargain was definitely done with, that she was mistress of herself again, at no one's beck and call. But as the realization had gradually seeped into her mind it had seemed to her that she had emerged from a dark, enveloping cloud that blotted out all that was beautiful and stepped into brilliant sunshine. She had been aware of an urgent need to tell someone; and since there was no one who could be told she had shut herself in her bedroom and told herself again and again that it was true.

And in the evening she found relief in singing. The doctor, watching her, smiled with satisfaction; Jackie was obviously as right as rain, and he had worried himself for nothing. Mrs. Thurston, quick to note the change in her, decided that something had happened while they had been out that afternoon, and that she must visit Jacqueline's room this evening and see if she could get the child to tell her anything. Even the expression on Larry's face, which struck her as more forbidding than ever, did not seriously shake her conviction that the exciting event had actually happened at last. She must reconcile herself, she supposed, to the fact that Larry would probably bite the parson on his wedding day. She wondered whether, when she said good-night to him this evening, it would be tactful of her to kiss him.

Louis Creet, playing her accompaniments, showed every symptom of being more than usually pleased with himself—so much so that Tubby, glowering from a chair by the window, felt an almost ungovernable longing to drive his fist into his smiling face; while Mark, being of a more speculative turn of mind, stared at the ceiling and wondered why a so-called benevolent Nature should create cobras and tsetse flies and cholera germs and Louis Creets.

Jacqueline, noting Creet's complacency, smiled too. He was so clearly showing his relief at being well out of an awkward situation that she felt amused rather than resentful. After all, it was useless feeling resentment against him now; it was over and done with, and tonight she could feel no resentment against anyone. Besides, she had been too clever for Louis, beaten him soundly and made him accept her terms; and if she had used weapons which were not exactly above criticism—well, St. George would

probably have been killed by the dragon if he had tried to fight it under Queensberry rules.

When the others had gone to their rooms she lingered a few minutes in the drawing room, shutting the piano and then standing by the window, seeing new magic in the moonlit African night. She was disturbed by the sound of the door being opened, and turned to see Louis entering the room.

"I have been thinking things over, my dear, after our little chat this afternoon," he said, "and I think you will agree with me that the arrangement we made is not quite a fair one."

She faced him, frowning, her eyes searching his.

"Well, Louis?"

"Of course, I intend to do everything in my power to protect you. I'm still willing to clear up Larry's debts for him if you and he can come to an understanding, but the question of the thousand pounds is rather different. A thousand pounds is a great deal of money."

"Louis!" she exclaimed. "You gave me your word, and if you're going to back out of it now—"

He raised his hand.

"We'll keep this to ourselves if you don't mind, Jackie," he said. "It would be awkward for both of us if anyone should overhear. I admit that I made you a promise this afternoon, but a promise extracted as you extracted that one, Jackie—at the point of a revolver—is never considered a binding one, and in the circumstances I feel no obligation—"

"I meant every word I said, Louis."

"I don't doubt it," said Creet. "But you must see that to extract an extortionate sum—"

"Extortionate! You're forgetting that it was you who originally suggested it. You thought it worth while then—"

"Exactly," he interrupted. "Had you kept to our original bargain, Jackie, and played the game as I expected you to play it, I certainly shouldn't have grudged the money to help you out of your difficulty.

But you haven't. You've deliberately set out to avoid fulfilling your side of the bargain, and I don't feel inclined to part with a thousand pounds and receive nothing in return. It's unreasonable of you to expect it."

"I see," said Jacqueline. "So you're backing out again, eh, Louis? I should have known you'd slime out of it somehow. All right! I can't force you to behave like a gentleman, but I told you what I should do if you refused, and I mean to do it."

Louis smiled.

"All that melodrama stuff?" He shook his head. "Not you, Jackie! This is real life, not the cinema. Girls don't do that sort of thing in these days, and when you've thought it over you'll see things in a more reasonable light. After all, you haven't only yourself to consider. There's your father. If you were foolish enough to do as you threaten it would—affect your father considerably."

"Is this another threat?"

He shrugged.

"I don't wish to threaten, Jackie, but you really must be sensible. One doesn't like talking about these things, but in the circumstances it's only right that you should know that your father is considerably indebted to me— financially."

"Oh, I know you've been very generous. Mother told me. But it seems a terrible waste of money."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Spending five hundred a year," explained Jacqueline, "to keep you alive."

Creet frowned.

"It's very easy to make that sort of remark," he said, "but it does no good. I wasn't referring to the payment I make to your father as my medical attendant. I have at various times advanced him other sums when he needed them. It amounts in all to something over three thousand pounds— for which I hold his promise to pay."

"Three thousand pounds?"

He nodded.

"Setting up in Harley Street costs money, and without my help your father could never have done it. And without my help he could not stay there another day."

He saw her start and smiled.

"I don't suppose you understand these matters, Jackie," he went on, "but in cases like this the borrower promises to repay the loan not later than a fixed date. If he doesn't, the lender can force him to. He can even go as far as distraining—"

She cut him short.

"Father hasn't paid?"

"Your father hasn't been able to pay," he said. "The money is very much overdue, but out of friendship for him I've naturally let the debt run on.

What I want you to realize, Jackie, is that I could, if I chose, demand payment at any moment."

"I see. And it depends on me?"

"Naturally, if you're prepared to be reasonable, I shouldn't dream—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Louis, talk straight!" exclaimed Jacqueline. "You mean that if I insist on having my thousand pounds or the statement I asked you for, you'll come down on my father for three thousand, and if he can't pay—"

"There's no 'if'; he can't pay."

"And you'd sell him up? Louis, you couldn't—even you couldn't do such a foul thing."

"I'm quite sure, now I've explained the position, there'll be no need for anything of the sort," said Creet. "And you needn't worry over that thousand, Jackie. If you fix things up with Larry, I promise you that Monty Carr shan't worry you—"

"Until it suits you to let him!"

Creet did not intend to argue. He smiled and went to the door.

"It really is time you realized, Jackie," he said, "that you can't bully Louis Creet. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XVIII

For some time after Louis had left her, Jacqueline remained rooted where she stood. Her body seemed stricken with a sudden helplessness, as though some vital link between it and her brain had snapped, isolating it from its directing force, so that she could do nothing but stand there motionless, staring at the door through which Louis had gone. Her mind seemed deadened, incapable of thought. She was conscious only that some tremendous catastrophe had occurred and that she was so hopelessly involved in it that it was useless to struggle even if she could.

And as her mind began to work again and she realized what had happened, her first thought was that it could not be true. Modern and sophisticated as she thought herself to be, she was yet unsophisticated enough to believe that human nature could not possibly be capable of such deliberate evil. It seemed incredible that any man could be guilty of such baseness. Like everyone else, she judged others by her own standards and could not conceive of any others. Such callous indifference to the standards with which she was familiar left her dumbfounded, bewildered, incredulous, utterly unable to cope with it.

The striking of the clock roused her, and she went slowly across the room, switched off the light, and made her way along the corridor to her bedroom. She had a queer sensation that nothing was real; the bed was not a real bed, the dressing table not a real dressing table. She herself was not real. As she undressed and got into bed she had the sensation of taking part in something which was not really happening at all.

In bed she lay wide-eyed, staring into the darkness, trying to force herself to take stock of the situation calmly. It was useless telling herself that it simply could not be true. It was true. The position was the same now as it had been yesterday—with the difference that today she had played her last card and it had failed to take the trick. And she had been so certain that she had managed to free herself. In banking on Louis's cowardice and fear of scandal she had felt that she was banking on a certainty. So she had been: Louis had been anxious enough to get rid of her and would have let her down without compunction to save his own face. What she had not reckoned with was Louis's devilish ingenuity. She had seen no possible counter move for him to make, yet he had found one, and it was checkmate. Louis had her cunningly hemmed in on every side, and if he chose not to release her there was nothing she could do to release herself. She wondered why a man like Creet was allowed to live and prosper, while a man like Larry, who could not do a crooked thing, must just miss everything that was worth having. Why on earth had she been such a coward? She could have ended it all that afternoon. Just a slight pressure against the trigger of her revolver and

Louis would have played no more swindling tricks. In a fraction of a second she father, Larry, Mark, Tubby. It was appalling what havoc one man like Louis could work, how his rottenness spread out and touched so many others. There could surely be nothing wrong in crushing out of existence a pestilential insect such as Louis. Larry had called her a coward for not having done it. Perhaps she was. Larry would have done it. But would he? She could not somehow believe that he would.

The thought of Larry brought an almost intolerable pain. He had been wonderful to her that afternoon. She had hurt him appallingly, and he had uttered scarcely a word of reproach. She felt that she could have borne it more easily if he had been furiously angry, raged at her, lashed her with his scorn and contempt. His anger would have caused her less pain than that understanding smile of his, that gentle touch of his hands, that kiss. She had wounded him beyond all hope of healing, and it seemed to her that all the pain she had inflicted, intensified a hundredfold, had recoiled upon herself. Until that afternoon, when his lips had so suddenly been pressed against hers, she had not realized with what passionate intensity she loved Larry. But she knew now, and the knowledge hurt her unbearably.

She fell at last into a restless sleep and dreamed that she was running in a paper chase with Louis Creet and Monty Carr. They were ahead of her, running side by side; and as she sped along after them she could hear Louis panting for breath, and every now and then she saw him, still running, put a thermometer into his mouth and then make a note of his temperature in his pocket book. She could see the page of the book quite clearly and was surprised that his temperature should be 189. That seemed a great deal, she thought, even though he was running about in the African sun.

Monty Carr, as he ran, kept pulling rectangular slips of paper from his pockets and dropping them. One of these she picked up. It was a check for a thousand pounds, bearing her signature, and in the top left-hand corner, in red ink, were the letters "RD." She ran faster than ever. She must somehow catch Monty Carr, because she had something of tremendous importance to say to him. She couldn't remember at the moment what it was that she wanted to tell him, except that it was something about the ace of hearts.

She saw a huge, round hole in the ground a little way ahead, and as Louis and Monty Carr reached the edge of it they both took a flying leap and disappeared from view. She did not hesitate; she jumped down the hole after them. It was a very deep hole, and she travelled downwards at a terrific speed. Halfway down she flashed past Louis and Monty Carr, who were bobbing helplessly about, rather like a couple of toy balloons in a draughty room, moving neither up nor down. They both seemed very angry, and as

she went rushing past she heard Creet shout that they couldn't get any further down because they weren't heavy enough. But she could not stop.

At the bottom of the hole she found herself in a gold mine. The roof and walls and ground were all glistening with lumps of gold embedded in them. She knew it was gold because she examined several pieces very carefully and it was stamped "22 carat." She found a spade and began digging feverishly. She knew that she must get enough gold for her father and Larry and Mark and Tubby and herself before Louis got any heavier and came floating down to stop her.

But it was slow work. The spade was not a very good one. Its haft was loose in the socket, and every time she wielded it, it made a creaking noise....

She awoke with a start and sat bolt upright in her bed. She had heard something—a sort of creak—several times—from over there by the door....

Her fingers found the light switch at the head of the bed and pressed it down, and her glance, sweeping swiftly round the room, paused as it reached the door. The door was moving—opening—a fraction of an inch at a time; and each time that it moved came a slight squeak from the hinges.

She sprang out of bed, flung her dressing gown round her shoulders, and gripped the handle of the door, trying to close it. She felt it give slightly and then suddenly resist her pressure.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

"It's all right, darling," whispered Louis's voice. "It's I—Louis—"

Her grip tightened on the handle and she placed her shoulder against the door.

"Louis—what do you want?"

For answer she felt the pressure against her shoulder grow stronger and braced herself to resist it.

"Louis—please—go away! You can't come in here—you shan't Oh, for God's sake, Louis—"

Her voice was frantic, and she was struggling desperately, her body pressed against the door, to resist the pressure, to overcome it, to force the door back. But the task was beyond her strength. Her foot was slipping, her hands, fiercely gripping the knob, were growing numb, and slowly, inch by inch, the door was opening.

At the further end of the corridor Larry, a cigarette between his lips, was pacing the floor of his bedroom. He, too, was making an effort to take stock of the situation calmly. But calmness and clear thought were difficult. Each time that he tried to rivet his attention there came before his eyes the

picture of Jacqueline, a pathetic, crumpled figure in the chair, covering her face with her hands, telling him her story, and instantly he was swept by a hurricane of tempestuous anger which threw his thoughts into a turmoil, all the more maddening because it was so futile. Jackie had got herself into the deuce of a mess, and, short of putting a bullet through Creet, there seemed no way of getting her out of it.

He tried to review his own position. He must face the fact that, barring miracles, Louis would not budge over the question of the mine, and that he was in much the same position as he had been before he had left England. He would have a couple of thousand pounds, his share of the gold they had brought back with them. He had not lodged it with the Office of Mines, as Louis had demanded that he should, and he had no intention of doing so. Louis could do what he liked about it, but he and Mark and Tubby were going to have their two thousand apiece. It was little enough in all conscience, and, if it came to the point, rather than take legal action, Louis would give way about that.

But two thousand pounds would not be of much use. It would pay off some of his debts in England, but that was all. He was still as poor as ever he had been. Just as well, perhaps. Money wasn't everything, and, as was always suggested by philosophers harassed by no financial cares, it was probably better for a man to spend his life doing a job of work than idling away his time in affluence.—" Ruined by Riches," as Tubby would put it. A wry smile twisted one corner of his mouth. Well, he was fairly safe from the risk of ruin, anyway.

He was more concerned for Mark and Tubby than for himself. After all, he could scramble round and look after himself somehow. There was some talk of a diamond field down Namaqualand way, and if he could persuade someone to back him financially he could have a cut at that. It didn't matter enormously where he was or what he did.

But Mark and Tubby were different. They had been banking on the Chumbaziri goldfield, and Creet's attitude had knocked the bottom clean out of everything for them. Mark, the sly old devil, had a girl tucked away somewhere whom he had been hoping to marry, and Tubby, with Bunty and the kids to think of, had staked everything on the expedition. No wonder Tubby was taking it pretty hard. He would hate to be in old Tubby's shoes, going back to England and having to tell Bunty.

He'd have to keep an eye on Tubby. In his present state he was just as likely as not to put a bullet through Creet if he saw no chance of getting a square deal. But Tubby wasn't cut out for that sort of thing. If he did a thing like that he'd fret over it for the rest of his life and feel compelled to get it off his

chest by telling Bunty. And he'd never enjoy having the money. "Tainted by Blood," or something like that, he'd call it.

Larry smiled again. The marvel was that he hadn't himself killed Louis that afternoon after hearing all Jackie had told him. After all, he owed Creet a bullet more than either of the others. Apart from the mine, he owed him a bullet for Jackie. It hadn't, of course, come entirely as a surprise, all that Jackie had told him that afternoon. For some time he had had a vague feeling of uneasiness, which he had not been able either to explain or dismiss, that all was not well with her; and when he had met her at Lobito Bay he had suddenly been sure of it.

But even he, though he had never been under any illusions about Louis Creet, had not thought him capable of quite such unspeakable vileness. Creet—and Jackie! What a damnable little fool she had been! What a damnable, darling little fool! She had been so afraid of what he would say to her, yet so anxious not to shirk it, to admit that she had been to blame, not to whine for his pity or make excuses for herself. The best thing that had ever happened to Dr. Thurston was having Jackie for a daughter. And now, thank God, she had managed to rid herself of Creet

"Larry!"

It came to him distinctly, a sharp, shrill cry of panic, and brought him to a sudden halt in his pacing. Just for an instant he hesitated, doubting his ears in the return of the unbroken silence; and then he strode to the door, opened it noiselessly, and looked out.

The corridor was in darkness except for a thin beam of light which came from the partly opened door of Jacqueline's room at the farther end. For a moment he stood there, peering through the darkness, frowning. He heard the faint squeak of hinges, a gasp of dismay, caught a glimpse of a dark mass against Jacqueline's door, a bare ankle, the swinging tassel of a dressing gown, and suddenly stepped across the corridor and switched on the light.

He saw Louis, in dressing gown and pyjamas, with his shoulder against Jacqueline's door, straining to force it open; heard Jacqueline's "Louis—you shan't—I'd rather die " and went striding swiftly along the corridor.

Creet's back was towards him, and, before he could turn, Larry had sprung at him, his hands closed around his throat, jerked him savagely from the door, forced him, staggering, backwards, and held him, choking, gasping for breath, his hands beating the air, while Larry, with the hint of a scornful smile on his lips, watched him with that mad-dog look in his eyes. All the pent-up hatred in his heart went rushing to Larry's fingers, their grip grew tighter and tighter, and, as he saw Creet's face take on a purple hue, his

eyes bulging from their sockets, the veins in his forehead swelling, and heard the gasping gurgle in Creet's throat, Larry's hands gripped still more fiercely, and the smile on his lips grew more pronounced.

"Larry—for God's sake—you're killing him!"

He became aware of Jacqueline beside him, pulling frantically at his arm.

"Larry—please—let him go!" she begged.

For a moment Larry hesitated, and then suddenly his fingers relaxed, he withdrew his hands, and Creet, limp and barely conscious, collapsed on the floor and lay motionless.

"Larry, you've killed him!"

Larry turned to her and shook his head.

"You were just in time, Jackie," he said. "He wouldn't have stood much more of it. You'd better get back to your room."

Dr. Thurston, struggling into his dressing gown, came hurrying along the corridor, and a second later Tubby, resplendent in his incredible pyjamas, with Mark close behind him, came lumbering out of his room,

"What's the trouble, Larry?" began Dr. Thurston; and then, as he caught sight of the figure of Creet: "What does this mean?"

"Good Lord, Larry!" exclaimed Tubby. "He's not—dead?"

There was no mistaking the hopeful note in his voice, and Larry could not suppress a smile as he shook his head.

"All right, you fellows," he said. "I've just been giving our friend Creet a lesson in manners, that's all. There's no cause for alarm—or optimism," he added with a grin at Tubby. "Push off back to your room, Tubby. If he catches sight of those pyjamas it'll put him right out."

Dr. Thurston was down on his knees, watching Creet anxiously. Creet's hands were clutching his throat, and his breath was coming in quick, rasping gasps, but the purple hue had died away from his face, and his bloodshot eyes, shifting restlessly from one to the other, showed that he was again aware of his surroundings. And then, as his glance rested on Larry, he struggled unsteadily to his feet and stood swaying, his face distorted with passion, pointing a shaking finger.

"By God, Larry Deans! I'll fix you for this."

He turned and, with one hand against the wall for support, staggered along the corridor, went into his room and shut the door.

Dr. Thurston's face was a study in embarrassed perplexity.

"What happened, Larry?"

"Go to bed, Tubby. Take him off, Mark, will you?" said Larry, and, as Mark and Tubby went back to their rooms, he turned to the doctor. "I owe you an explanation, Doctor," he said, "and the sooner you have it the better."

He glanced at Jacqueline, saw the imploring look in her eyes, and shook his head.

"There are certain things you ought to be told, Doctor," he said, "and if you'll come along to my room I'll tell you."

"But, Larry," protested Jacqueline, "at this hour of night—there's no need—"

"Sorry Jackie, but there's every need. I'm going to tell the doctor everything. It's only fair that he should know."

"Everything?" repeated the doctor. "It all sounds very mysterious, Larry. I don't in the least understand—"

"You should have been told long ago," said Larry, took Dr. Thurston by the elbow, and urged him towards his room.

"Larry!"

He glanced back.

"Yes, Jackie?"

"Must you?"

He nodded.

She sighed.

"All right," she said. "I expect you're right, Larry. But if Father is to be told I'd rather—tell him—myself."

"What is all this mystery " began Dr. Thurston,

but Larry directed him into Jacqueline's room and signed to her to follow.

"Go on, Jackie," he ordered. "You know it's got to be done, don't you?"

She nodded and turned to enter her room. Larry caught her arm.

"No shirking, Jackie," he said. "Everything. Promise?"

She nodded, went into the room, and closed the door. She seated herself on the edge of the bed, her hands clasped on her knees, her eyes staring vacantly at the wall.

"Well, Jackie," said her father, "what's it all about, eh? If there's any sort of trouble you know you can count on me to see you through."

Suddenly her hands flew to her face and she flung herself on the bed, her face in the pillow, and her body shook with her sobs.

Dr. Thurston seated himself on the edge of the bed, and his hand stroked her hair.

"Pretty bad, eh, Jackie?" he said gently. "Come along—man to man—what is it?"

"Father—I can't tell you."

"Funking?"

She nodded.

His hand found hers and held it.

"That's not like you—funking," he said. "Out with it like a good 'un, Jackie. I'm on your side, anyway."

She gave his hand a grateful squeeze. And then gradually, phrase after hesitating phrase, still clinging to his hand, she told him all that she had told Larry that afternoon. And when she had finished. Dr. Thurston laid a hand on her head, and his lips touched her cheek.

"Well played, Jackie," he said. "Now go to sleep."

CHAPTER XIX

Back in his room, Louis Creet felt no inclination to sleep. For one thing, his throat was badly bruised where that brute Larry had dug his fingers in. He had treated it with a soothing lotion from among the numerous remedies without which he never travelled, but it was still uncommonly painful and gave him a sharp twinge each time he moved his head. And the wound to his pride had made his feelings no less sore than his throat.

On one point, at any rate, he was determined: there should be no more shilly-shallying over the mine. He had hesitated so far to take any definite step, because with a fellow like Larry Deans you never knew. Before definitely breaking with Larry, prudence had warned him to be quite certain that in so doing he was running no risk. Circumstances might arise, he had felt, which would make it expedient to give the fellow some sort of an interest in the mine, though not the quarter share he was impudent enough to claim.

But this evening's affair had settled it once and for all. Larry would get nothing now; and since obviously he must treat them all alike, Mark and Tubby would get nothing too. He would have the thing settled immediately; he would see to all the necessary formalities, and, once he was secure, Larry and the others could do what they liked about it.

It would, of course, antagonize Larry more than ever, but that really was of less consequence than he had thought. When Jacqueline had given him her disturbing news that afternoon his thoughts had naturally flown to Larry as the obvious solution of the problem. The few thousand pounds required to clear up Larry's debts had not seemed an excessive price to pay to extricate himself from an awkward predicament and prevent Jacqueline making a fuss, as she had seemed determined to do.

But on second thoughts he realized that such generosity was quite unnecessary. If Larry and Jacqueline fixed things up, v/ell and good; he would be out of his predicament without spending a penny. If they did not fix things up—well, there were less expensive ways of getting rid of Jacqueline than the one he had contemplated. Jacqueline could prove nothing, and in any case he was not tied to England. He supposed what she had told him was true. For one reason, at any rate, he hoped it was. It would hurt Larry Deans far more than Larry's fingers had hurt his throat.

This evening's affair, of course, was awkward. He had not expected that Jacqueline would welcome his visit, but he had been sure that, rather than risk rousing her father and being asked for explanations, she would at any rate submit to it.

But something had happened to Jacqueline—seeing Larry again, he supposed, was the cause of it—and that frantic call to Larry had been an unpleasant surprise. And now there was no knowing what consequences might follow. Would she tell her father? Creet smiled. The interview with her father might, in that event, be an unpleasant one, but what, in view of that £3,000, could Dr. Thurston do? She might, perhaps, tell Larry, and that possibility was more disturbing. Larry was a savage brute, and there was no knowing what he might do. Tonight's episode was a fair example of the sort of thing of which he was capable....

Towards daybreak he fell asleep, and it was not until nine o'clock that he awoke with a start, to find Larry sitting on the edge of his bed, regarding him with a quizzical expression. He sat up suddenly.

"Well? What do you want?" he demanded.

Larry smiled.

"I'm just wondering what makes the difference," he said, still studying him closely. "It's your collar, probably. It's puzzling. You see, Louis, you're no end of an ugly old devil when you're in bed, yet when you're dressed you really don't look so bad—"

"Get out!" snarled Creet. "Get out of my room, do you hear? After what happened last night I wonder you've the impudence to show your face—"

Larry cut him short.

"Speaking of last night," he said, "that's what I've come about—to tell you I'm sorry."

"Huh!" grunted Creet. "You behaved like a hooligan. Deans, and I don't intend—"

"What I mean," interrupted Larry, still surveying him critically, "is that you're a particularly poisonous sort of blackguard, Louis, but I admit that I was perhaps rather rougher with you than was strictly necessary. If you're prepared to overlook the hooliganism, I'm prepared to forget what caused it."

Louis regarded him suspiciously, knitting his eyebrows with a frown.

"What are you after, Deans?" he demanded. "You're not prepared to do anything of the kind. Not that I care what you're prepared to do," he added defiantly. "You're going to be damned sorry about last night. Deans, before I've done with you."

Larry smiled back at him.

"Since this is a friendly call, Louis," he said, "don't you think you might call me Larry ?"

Louis scowled.

"I don't feel inclined for foolery," he snapped. "Say what you've got to say and clear out."

Larry's smile vanished. When he spoke he had dropped his bantering tone.

"It's about the other two fellows—Tubby and Mark," he said. "After all, they've done nothing to upset you, and you've no cause to have any grudge against either of them, so why carry on the war in a friendly country?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean just this, Louis. Treat Mark and Tubby decently, give them the share in the mine which you know they're entitled to, and I'm prepared to drop my claim and clear out. You can't say that's not a fair proposal, because you'll still have a half share in the mine, which is just double what you're entitled to have. Still, if you'll do that I shan't grudge you my bit. After all, I don't mind this sort of life—a few more years of it and I might even come to like it—but the other two are different. They don't fit into the picture. They belong to some place where you can get a taxi. Besides, one of them's married and the other wants to be. What about giving them a little preferential treatment?"

Louis's thin lips formed a malicious little smile.

"Very noble, Larry," he sneered. "Which of you thought of it? You? A half-share split between three of you is better than nothing, eh?"

"I'm out of it—I've told you so," said Larry. "Will you do it?"

"Never in your life!" exclaimed Creet. "You'll get nothing out of me. Deans—nothing. Get that into your head. I've done with you. I'm not going to argue about it," he added, as he saw Larry was about to speak. "I've done with all of you. You're all as thick as thieves, and if one of you got a few thousand he'd be fool enough to share it with the others, and that isn't going to happen—see? I'd rather get nothing myself than let you get a penny piece. Deans, you—"

Larry rose with a shrug.

"Start the day well," he said, "and make up your mind to keep the tongue pure. But, seriously, Louis, think it over, anyway. I'm responsible for those fellows being in your bad books, and it's rough on them, you know. After all, there's quite enough to go round."

"Then it can go round me," retorted Louis. "And now get out. Deans. I've finished with you—for the moment," he added significantly.

Larry stood regarding him curiously.

"You're a rum bird, Louis," he said thoughtfully. "You must be pretty well a unique specimen."

Louis grunted.

"I've always understood," explained Larry, "that the foulest blackguard living has a spot of good in him somewhere, but you seem to be an exception. Psychologists would be interested in you, Louis."

He found Mark just finishing breakfast. Tubby, Mark told him, had gulped down a cup of coffee while he strode about the room, and had gone off somewhere looking as if he meant mischief. It wouldn't surprise him to hear at any moment that the whole population of Benguella had been murdered in cold blood.

"Seen Jackie?" enquired Larry.

Mark shook his head. None of the Thurstons had yet put in an appearance, he said. Larry, with a nod, seated himself at the table, and Mark, after several vain efforts to draw him into conversation, abandoned the attempt and went out.

Larry was oppressed with a desolating sense of failure. Everything had gone awry, and this morning it did not seem worth while to try to put things right. For the first time in his life he felt disinclined for further effort, ready to throw up the sponge and let events take their own course.

It was all an inextricable muddle, and he had not the energy to set about disentangling it. Besides, there was nothing to be done. As regards the mine, he had done all that could be done, and the next move was with Louis Creet. He knew what the move would be; Creet would make his claim to the mine, and the matter, as far as the rest of them were concerned, would be finished with. A lawsuit, even if they had the necessary money, must inevitably go against them and leave Creet in undisputed possession of the property. Oh, well, let him keep it. It was rough on Mark and Tubby, but it was useless going on like this. He would tell them bluntly that he had finished with the whole business and they must do as they thought best—make a fresh start somewhere, as he intended to do.

And then Jacqueline. There was nothing to be done about her. She had told her father now, and any action that was to be taken must rest with Dr. Thurston. He must try to dismiss Jackie from his thoughts. She would be going back to England in a few days' time, and the chances were that he would never see her again. He must not count on it, anyway.

Marriage was as definitely out of the question now as it had been before he had left England, and would probably remain out of the question permanently— thanks to Louis Creet. He must have a word with Jackie and make that quite clear to her. She was still fond of him, of course, but she must be made to realize that it was hopeless to expect that there could ever be anything between them beyond an occasional exchange of letters from

opposite ends of the world. It was bad luck on both of them, but there was nothing to be done about it. He'd get over it in time, he supposed. So would Jackie. She would marry someone else, no doubt, a bit later on. It gave him a savage sort of satisfaction to know that it would not be Louis Creet.

As he thought of Louis his face darkened, and for several minutes he sat motionless. And then suddenly he brought his fist crashing onto the table and rose to his feet. Creet—the swine—wasn't going to get away with this lot. If Creet imagined that he intended to stand by and see himself robbed of the mine, of Jackie, of everything he possessed or cared about, Creet would have a rude shock.

What in heaven's name was the matter with him this morning that he could have thought of doing so? He smiled. Lack of sleep, he supposed; he hadn't put his head on the pillow last night. There was nothing like lack of sleep for taking the kick out of you. But the kick was back now. He wasn't going to take this lying down. There must be something to be done about it, some card to be played which would trump Creet's trick. If he could only discover what card it was...

He found Mark, with a decanter of whisky on a table beside him, sprawling in a deck chair on the veranda. Larry pointed to the whisky and frowned.

"Too early for that," he said.

Mark gave a shrug, picked up the decanter, and began pouring whisky into a glass.

"All things considered, Larry," he said, "say when!"

Larry nodded.

"Perhaps you're right," he allowed, swallowed the drink, flung himself into the chair beside Mark and lighted a cigarette.

For some time they sat staring at the blue waters of the bay sparkling in the sunshine, Mark with an unlighted pipe in his hand, Larry smoking so furiously that the end of his cigarette formed a constantly glowing cone. At length Mark struck a match and lighted his pipe.

"What are we going to do, Larry?" he asked.

"God knows," said Larry. "He won't budge. I've had a cut at him this morning, but he won't even miss me and give you two fellows a straight deal. He's afraid you'd split it with me."

Mark smiled.

"Then he's less of a fool than you are, Larry. Thanks all the same. As far as I can see," he added with a wry smile, "the only thing for us to do is to find another gold mine."

"I don't feel like taking this lying down, Mark."

"Nor I. Nor does Tubby. But what can we do?"

Larry shrugged, and again they lapsed into silence. And again, ten minutes later, it was Mark who, staring stonily at the horizon, broke it.

"Larry, we must—do—something."

"Something—yes."

"The only question is—what?"

Larry took another cigarette from his case, lighted it, shot a quick look at Mark under cover of a cloud of smoke. And Mark, glancing at Larry, without moving his head, out of the corner of his eye, met his look, and sent it swiftly back to the sparkling waters of the bay. Then suddenly Larry turned to him.

"You know as well as I do that there's only one thing to be done, Mark," he said; "and you know as well as I do that we've got to do it. Why beat about the bush? I might as well stick my head in a gas oven. That would be a fitting end to the sort of life I've been having lately. But I'd like to do one useful thing before I go, and I can think of nothing more useful than blowing out Louis Creet's brains. You can safely leave it to me. It would be as well to say nothing to Tubby—"

He paused abruptly as Tubby came onto the veranda. His face was drawn and pale beneath its tan, his eyes were dull and lifeless, and he moved as if every movement were a wearisome effort. He held a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Listen to this, you fellows," he said listlessly. "It's a cable—just been delivered—from Bunty. Alan's got to go away to Switzerland—for a year. 'Nothing serious'"—he read the typewritten words—"'but imperative dry atmosphere. Doctor guarantees recovery. Have fixed Pontresina. Shall I take house there?'"

Larry glanced at Mark.

"That's all right. Tubby," he said quietly. "Wire 'Yes.'"

"How the devil can I wire 'Yes'?" exploded Tubby furiously. "Bunty thinks I'm rolling in money, but I haven't got a bean in the world. I haven't had the pluck to tell her that yet. Creet's taken everything. Even the house she's living in. Look here, you fellows, if you're knuckling under to him and letting him wipe his feet on you, I'm not. I'm going to have the whole thing out with him once and for all, and if he won't give us what we're entitled to, then I'll take it. I'll put a bullet in the swine and settle things that way."

Mark pushed the decanter in Tubby's direction.

"Sit down and have a drink. Tubby," he said. "Having things out will get you no further, and the other job has already been annexed."

Tubby glanced from one to the other with puzzled eyes.

"By me," said Larry. "You chaps are keeping out of this. You may think you've an excellent reason for putting Creet out, and so you have. But I've a better one. Never mind what it is: you must take my word that if it's a question of who has the best reason for sending Creet to hell, mine whacks yours hollow."

"You're—you're serious?" asked Tubby.

Larry nodded.

"So am I," said Tubby. "I nearly did it last night. I wish I had. You didn't think I was that sort of chap, did you? I'm not really, you know—hate killing things. But when it comes to smashing Bunty, I can't think of anything I'd stick at, and I'd think no more of putting Louis out than I would of shooting a goat. And I shouldn't care a cuss what happened to me afterwards. I don't think I'd ever regret it."

Larry laughed shortly.

"It certainly wouldn't fill me with everlasting remorse. Tubby. We've had to do it before, you know, and it doesn't keep us awake at night. Those fellows who got sleeping sickness and went mad—we didn't hesitate to shoot them. If we hadn't put them out they'd have put us out. It's just the same with Louis. Either he goes out or we go out—and several other people with us."

Tubby suddenly sprang to his feet.

"By God, you're right, Larry!" he exclaimed. "If ever a man deserved to go out, Louis Creet does. When a man goes batty and starts shooting up people, what do you do? There's only one answer—you put him out as quickly as you know how. That's what Louis Creet's doing—shooting my home to pieces." He pulled the cablegram from his pocket and waved it at them. "You heard me read this, didn't you? You know what it means? Well, I'm not standing for it. I'm having no more shilly-shallying. My only chance is to put Louis out, and I'm going to do it. If anything happens to me—afterwards—I know you fellows will see Bunty right—"

His voice broke, and he turned from them suddenly and began pacing the veranda.

"Steady, Tubby!" said Larry. "Come and sit down and have another drink. There's no need to tell all Portuguese West Africa about it."

Tubby obeyed.

"Louis should feel flattered," continued Larry, with a smile; "there's a regular scramble for the honour of killing him. But we can't all kill him. Louis Creet against the wall and a firing party of three would attract too much attention. I still think I've a better claim to the honour than either of you two, but as you don't seem to agree with me there's only one way out of it. We'll draw for it."

Tubby took a coin from his pocket and laid it on the table, covered by his hand.

"That suits me," he said. "Odd man out. The sooner we settle it the better."

Larry shook his head.

"Not that way, Tubby," he said. "It wouldn't do at all. If I won and did the job, you'd never be able to forget that I'd murdered a man, and our friendship would be ruined. And if you won, the same thing would happen: every time I looked at you you'd fancy I was remembering what you'd done. 'Accused by His Eyes,' or something like that. We'll draw for it with cards."

"Any way suits me," muttered Tubby, "as long as we get on with it."

"We'll nominate a card—say the ace of spades," said Larry, "and deal out the pack, and whoever draws the ace of spades will use his own discretion and do the job as he thinks best. That's a better way. Tubby; it'll spare all our feelings. The one who draws the ace of spades will say nothing about it. He won't show by word or look or movement that he has drawn it either when he draws it or at any time afterwards. Poker-face is the password, Tubby. And if it should come to a showdown, the two who didn't draw it will say nothing. They won't remember this conversation, but they'll stand by the other with all their resources and do their best to see him through."

"And his people," added Tubby.

"Of course," agreed Larry. "Any complaints?"

"Suits me," said Mark.

"And me," said Tubby. "But I hope to God—"

"Quite," said Larry. "So does Mark. So do I—rather more than either of you. Here comes Thurston: I daresay he can produce a pack of cards."

As Dr. Thurston came through the open door of the lounge, a spruce, alert figure with an unmistakable Harley Street air, Larry's eyes scanned his face. But it was as serene and expressionless as ever, and if Jackie had told him last night all she had promised to tell him, he showed no signs of it.

"At last," said Dr. Thurston, rubbing his hands together, "I've a job of work to do. You're all so disgustingly healthy that I was afraid of getting out of practice. Louis has been putting off the evil day for months, but he seems

quite a bit scared this morning—got a pain in his neck or something"—his eyes twinkled at Larry—"and he's actually going to let me overhaul him."

"Anything wrong with him, Doctor—really?" asked Mark.

"I shouldn't imagine so," replied the doctor. "He eats too much and takes too little exercise, of course, but so do L" He glanced curiously from one to the other. "You fellows look as if you're debating momentous questions."

"We are," laughed Larry. "The fact is, Doctor, that Tubby, as usual, insists that it's not his turn to buy cigarettes; Mark says it isn't his turn, and I'm equally sure it isn't mine, because I bought the last three lots. We were just arranging to draw for it. Can you find us a pack of cards?"

Dr. Thurston smiled.

"I've a couple of packs in my trunk," he said. "I scrounged them quite shamelessly on the boat coming out. I'll fetch one for you."

In a few moments—moments of silence and averted eyes with the three men sitting at the table—the doctor was back and tossed a pack of cards onto the table.

"There you are," he said, "a green pack. It's supposed to be an unlucky colour, but as it's only for cigarettes I don't suppose it's of much importance. How are you working it?"

"The one who draws the ace of spades buys the cigarettes," laughed Larry.

Dr. Thurston smiled.

"I'll deal them for you, shall I?"

Larry glanced at the others and nodded.

"Face downwards," he said.

The doctor, starting with Larry, began to deal, while the three men, motionless, sat watching, the gaze of each of them never shifting from the steadily growing pile of cards that lay in front of him.

"Seventeen each and one over," said the doctor, holding up the last card. "What do I do—"

Larry's hand shot out and took the card.

"That's mine," he said, and tossed it on top of the others.

There came a step behind him, and Dr. Thurston turned, to see Louis at the door of the lounge.

"Come along, Thurston; I'm waiting for you," he said irritably, and with a smile and a nod to the three at the table the doctor followed Louis into the house.

As soon as he had gone Tubby swept up the cards in front of him and began running them through his fingers, scanning them eagerly. Mark, picking up his hand, went through it carefully, calmly, purposefully. Larry, with a smile on his lips, spread his cards into a fan, gave them a quick glance, and tossed them back onto the table, and a moment later Mark's and Tubby's fell on top of them. And then the eyes of each of them sought in turn the eyes of the other two.

"Mind you " began Tubby.

Larry raised a hand.

"Shut up, Tubby," he ordered. "That's that. One of us has drawn the ace of spades, and it's up to him. We'll have no discussion and no mutual confidences. He knows what he has to do, and he'll do it, and no one but himself will ever know who's to blame. Or to be praised," he added; "it depends how you look at it. All agreed?"

The other two nodded, and Larry, with a swift movement of his hand, mixed the cards, gathered them up, and dropped them into his pocket.

Then he turned to Tubby and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Wire 'Yes,' Tubby," he said, with a smile, and strode into the house.

CHAPTER XX

Mrs. Thurston, alone that evening in the drawing room, came to the conclusion that everyone had been behaving in a very peculiar way—exactly as if everyone thought everyone else had some horrible infectious disease and was afraid of catching it.

It had started with Jacqueline, who, on the plea of a headache, had shut herself in her room and refused to come in to dinner; and from her the trouble seemed to have spread to all the others. They had scarcely been five minutes in the drawing room when Tubby had suddenly got up, mumbled something about needing a breath of air, and disappeared into the garden in a shamefaced way, very much like a dog who had stolen a bone and was slinking off to bury it; five minutes later Mark had announced that he was going in search of cigarettes and had not since put in an appearance; and almost immediately Larry, with what Mrs. Thurston, in the privacy of her own thoughts, always described as his you- can-all-go-to-hell air, had gone striding onto the veranda without making any excuse at all.

Next, her husband. After sitting for half an hour without speaking a word, fidgeting with the ring on his finger—which always meant that he was worrying— he had made a terribly bad job of pretending that he had something to say to Larry, and went straight off into the garden, when she was almost sure that Larry was still on the veranda. And finally Louis had refused quite brusquely to play the piano to her, declaring that he must go to the dining room and write letters. It was all very extraordinary and perplexing.

When things became too perplexing to be coped with, Mrs. Thurston had evolved by long experience an almost perfect method of dealing with them: she would just go to her bedroom, shut the door, settle herself comfortably on the bed with an interesting book, and resolutely decline to make any effort to cope with them at all. So now, since everybody was behaving in so perplexing a way, she got up from her chair and went along the corridor towards her room. At the door of Jacqueline's room she paused and knocked lightly but received no reply. Jackie had gone to bed, she supposed, and went on to her own room.

A few minutes later, comfortably settled in bed, she switched on the reading lamp above her head, selected a book from the pile on the table by the bedside, and prepared to enjoy what she called "a nice read." The book was entitled Her Crowning Folly, and dealt with the joys and tribulations of a woman who, married to a wealthy man who apparently had done nothing to deserve such harsh treatment at the hands of fate, had not sufficient intelligence to be faithful to her husband. Mrs. Thurston felt that this was "life" and had read the story several times already. Chapter Ten was her

favourite. Such a happy chapter, and she did like to fall asleep feeling happy. She would read Chapter Ten tonight.

But tonight Chapter Ten could not hold her attention, and though her eyes followed the familiar lines, the words conveyed no meaning to her. She hoped Jacqueline wasn't sickening for something. She didn't think so; nor did John. The child seemed to have something on her mind, which was always tiresome; she would much prefer her to have a cold or a rash or a definite pain somewhere than something on her mind. Last night, too—all that commotion in the corridor—with only a dressing gown round her shoulders, and Louis and all the others there. Jacqueline had been walking in her sleep, John had said, and bumped herself against a door; and walking in your sleep always meant that you had something on your mind. John really should have let her get out of bed and go to the girl, but he had got quite angry when she had suggested it.

Larry, of course, had something to do with it. Since she had met Larry again Jacqueline seemed to have quite turned against Louis. Such a pity, because really in these days a girl had to be practical and do the best she could for herself, and it was absurd to be so offhand and distant to Louis just because Larry said that Louis wasn't being quite fair over the gold mine. Louis, after all, wasn't the man to do anything really dishonourable, and it would be impossible to find a more generous man anywhere.

As for the squabble over the gold mine, she was quite sure that if they would all sit down and stop biting one another's heads off and talk it all over quietly, the whole thing could easily be settled. She really must have a word with Jacqueline and see if she could persuade her to be a little more reasonable about Louis. Louis had said only yesterday that he wished Jacqueline would be a little more reasonable, and she quite agreed with him. But Mrs. Thurston's interpretation of the word, had she but known it, differed considerably from that of Louis Creet.

She laid the book aside, switched off the light, settled her head comfortably on the pillow, and closed her eyes. She hoped John wouldn't wake her when he came to bed and want to start talking. And she hoped he wouldn't sit up too late gossiping with Louis and drinking more whisky than was good for him. Now she came to think of it, Louis had been drinking a great deal of whisky this evening—three or four glasses with his dinner and goodness only knew how many afterwards—one after another—almost as if he simply must empty the decanter...

She awoke suddenly, with a violent start, and with the sensation that some terrific force had blasted her back to consciousness. For a second she lay rigid, every nerve in her body quivering, her heart thudding, her hands

tightly clenched. She felt as if a current of enormous voltage had flashed through her.

She flung back the bedclothes and sat upright, every sense acutely alert, her eyes wide open. Yes, that was it: she had heard something—some shattering sound that had come crashing into her ears and seemed still to be reverberating in her head. She thought of thunder, but a glance at the window showed a clear, moonlit sky. She switched on the light and realized that she was alone. John was not there, and she was alone—and frightened. Something had happened—something terrible—and John wasn't there

She jumped out of bed, scrambled into her dressing gown, opened the door, and ran along the corridor. She had no idea why she was doing it, but she knew that at all costs she must run along the corridor. Some deep-seated instinct urged her on, and she was compelled to obey. But she did not want to obey. She was afraid, terrified of what awaited her ahead, yet had no choice but to run towards it.

The door of the dining room was ajar, and a beam of light stabbed the darkness of the corridor. Mrs. Thurston did not hesitate. The hand that she placed against the door was trembling, but she pushed it open resolutely and went in.

In the middle of the room, rigid, as if rooted to the floor, her hands pressed against her face, stood Jacqueline, barefooted, pyjama-clad, a dressing gown flung round her shoulders.

Mrs. Thurston took a quick step towards her and paused.

"Jackie!" she whispered.

She saw the girl's slim body shiver.

"Jackie! What is it?"

Jacqueline's hands left her face, and her mother caught her breath sharply as she saw the girl's ashen cheeks, her wide, staring eyes, her mouth working nervously. She seemed to be trying to speak, but her lips refused obedience, and no words came. And then she took a quick step towards her mother, covering her face with her hands again.

"Oh, God—Mother—it's horrible!"

And as Jacqueline moved Mrs. Thurston saw the thing at the writing desk—the limp, crumpled figure in the chair, sprawling forward across the desk—dangling arms with nerveless hands—the head twisted awkwardly on one side—the small red hole with blackened edges in the centre of the forehead. The inkwell lay on its side, and the ink was dripping onto the carpet. It flashed into her mind that somebody had told her that milk would take

inkstains from a carpet. She noticed the decanter on the desk. Louis had been drinking a great deal of whisky

"Mother—Louis—he's dead!"

Mrs. Thurston's hand found Jacqueline's arm and clung to it. She could not move. She wanted to turn away, to shut out the sight of that huddled figure in the chair, to rush from the room. But some force seemed to have planted her on that spot and then deprived her of all power of leaving it, and all she could do was to stand there, helpless, trembling, staring at the limp, sagging thing that had been Louis Creet.

She was conscious of her husband coming into the room in that brisk, businesslike way of his, brushing past her as he strode towards the writing desk, and bending over the figure in the chair. And then Larry was there—Mark—Tubby—standing round the desk. They all looked terribly scared. Except Larry, of course. Grave, but not scared. She could not imagine Larry looking scared....

The doctor's examination was a brief one. He straightened himself and glanced at Larry.

"Quite dead," he said in a low tone. "Instantaneous. Shot through the brain at close quarters."

Larry nodded.

"Good God, Doctor " began Tubby in an awed voice; and then he paused abruptly and shot a queer, uneasy look at Larry and Mark as they stood staring down at the body.

The doctor turned and strode across to where Mrs. Thurston and Jacqueline still stood together.

"My dear," he said, laying a hand on Mrs. Thurston's arm, "this is no place for you."

She wrenched her gaze from the group around the writing desk, and as it rested on her husband's face the hint of a smile showed round her lips. John was here now; she need be frightened no more now that John was here; she felt safe, calmer.

"There's nothing you can do, my dear," added the doctor. "Louis is beyond our help." He turned to Jacqueline. "Come on, Jackie—get a grip of yourself," he said, "and take your mother back to her room. She's to have a tablespoonful of brandy and get back to bed. You'd better stay with her until I come. Have a cigarette and don't worry."

He was bustling them towards the door as he spoke, smiling at them reassuringly. Death was no strange and terrifying thing to him, and he had

learned that a smile and a calm, confident manner were the finest preventives of hysteria at times like this. That and keeping people so busy that they had not time to consider how they were feeling.

At the door Jacqueline paused.

" Daddy—how—who—"

"God knows, Jackie," interrupted the doctor. "Time enough for all that later. The police will be along, and no doubt they'll want to question all of us, but you needn't let that distress you. Give your mother a good stiff brandy, but don't let her think it's more than a tablespoonful or she'll refuse to drink it. You'd better have a nip yourself from the look of you. There's some in a flask in my cabin trunk. And now run along and make yourself useful."

Jacqueline nodded and went ofF along the corridor, and the doctor, closing the door, went back into the room. He stood for a moment gazing gravely at the body.

"Dreadful!" he muttered. "Poor old Louis!"

And then he suddenly became the alert, practical doctor again.

"Mark, put through a call to police headquarters, will you?" he said. "Call me when you've got them, and I'll speak to them. Close those French windows, Larry, and pull the curtains. I'm going to lock this room until the police arrive. They won't be long, I imagine, and we'd better wait up for them. Tubby, can you make coffee? Then find the kitchen and make some and bring it to the drawing room. It's no use asking the servants; they're scared out of their lives and fit for nothing. Before you go, though, give me a cigarette."

A few minutes later, each with a cup of what Tubby honestly believed to be coffee, they were all seated in the drawing room.

"The police are coming along at once," said the doctor. "They can have a look round in the other room^ and then, if they want to talk, they can come in here."

"What I don't understand " began Tubby.

"Nobody understands anything yet, Tubby," said the doctor, "so we won't worry ourselves making guesses. All we know is that Louis is dead and that a bullet in his brain killed him. Who fired the bullet is a question for the police."

"Any theory. Doctor?" asked Larry.

"No, I haven't," he answered shortly; "and with the whole population of Benguella to pick from I don't propose to waste time guessing."

"These bungalows might have been specially built to suit the convenience of would-be murderers," said Larry. "Every room has French windows leading onto the veranda, and if they were open it would be the simplest thing in the world for anyone to walk along the veranda, do the job, and get away almost before the report had been heard. As the doctor says, anyone might have done it."

"Quite," agreed Mark. "A fellow like Creet, with all sorts of interests in various parts of the world, is bound to have enemies. He's been out here before, you know, and it looks to me as if somebody has been paying off" an old grudge."

"Absolutely what I was thinking," said Tubby. "I mean, the police may have an idea about who did it, mayn't they—official eye on dangerous characters and that sort of thing?"

"Nobody heard anything, I suppose?" said the doctor. "Before the shot, I mean. No footsteps on the veranda or anything of that sort? Where was everybody?"

For a moment no one answered him. Mark, as usual, was staring at the ceiling; Larry seemed engrossed in studying the glowing end of his cigarette; Tubby was examining his fingernails.

"It's none of my business, of course," added the doctor, " but the police will want to know about all of us. It's all very unpleasant, but we may as well face the fact that when they start casting about for a likely murderer their first thought will be that the crime was committed by someone in the house. After all, Louis, as far as we know, knew nobody out here, and the person with some motive for killing him will naturally be looked for first among those who knew him. From all I've heard of police methods in this part of the world, we may all find ourselves under lock and key before the morning, and it would be as well for each of us to have a clear-cut account of ourselves to give them."

"Good Lord, Doctor!" exclaimed Tubby. "You don't really think—"

He caught Larry's eye and paused.

"The doctor's quite right," said Larry. "It's just as well to have it all cut and dried. As far as I'm concerned, I was in my bedroom. I'd been sitting in a chair, smoking, and was just dropping ofF to sleep, I fancy, when I heard the shot. It didn't strike me at first that there was anything wrong. I thought it was someone having a shot at a wild dog again; they were at it last night, you know. It was only when I heard people moving about that I really woke up and realized that the shot must have been in the house and not outside. I went straight along the veranda to the dining room and met Mark and Tubby on the way. That's my account, and if it's of any use to the police

they're welcome to it. What about you, Tubby? If you tell your story in your usual florid style I imagine they'll hang you to save time.

Tubby managed a rather sickly smile.

"As a matter of fact, I was in the garden," he said. "I've been sleeping pretty badly the last couple of nights—worrying and that sort of thing—"

"What about?" snapped Larry.

"Oh, well, about the mine and one thing and another. Good Lord, old boy, we've all been worrying, haven't we? After the way old Louis was treating us—"

"Just what I expected!" Larry interrupted. "Now listen to me, young Tubby. If yoU don't want all kinds of trouble with the police, you'll just answer 'Yes' or 'No' to whatever questions you're asked and leave it at that. When you go beyond 'Yes' or 'No' you're not safe."

"Safe?" repeated the doctor, frowning. "Tubby has nothing to be afraid of—"

"If Tubby is his usual charmingly loquacious and indiscreet self, Doctor, he has the deuce of a lot to be afraid of—always supposing, of course, he's afraid of getting arrested and charged with murdering Louis. Perhaps he isn't, but I am, and I don't suppose Mark fancies it, either."

"If it's all the same to Tubby," Mark told the ceiling, "I'd appreciate being excused from the hanging."

Tubby shook his head dejectedly.

"Hanged if I see what you're driving at, Larry," he said.

"This," said Larry. "I asked you where you were when the shot was fired. You told me you were in the garden. But you didn't stop there. You went blundering on to tell me that you'd been sleeping badly, that you were worried, that Mark and I were worried, and that we had every reason to be worried because Louis had served us a dirty trick over the mine. In other words, in one sentence, if I'd been a policeman, you'd have given me the best possible reason for supposing that you or Mark or I had shot Louis because he'd swindled us."

"Good Lord, Larry, I didn't mean—"

"Of course you didn't mean that," snapped Larry, "but the fact remains that if the police had been looking for someone with a motive for doing Louis in—as they will be—you'd have unconsciously supplied them with the names of three people, each of whom, in the view of the police, had an excellent motive. If you don't want all sorts of complications over this rotten business, keep your mouth shut as much as you can and don't volunteer any

information you're not asked for. If you start letting yourself go you'll hang the lot of us."

"There's something in that. Tubby," said the doctor. "No need to volunteer information which, after all, would only put the police on a false scent. Larry's probably exaggerating, of course, but—"

"I'm not exaggerating in the least," said Larry. "We may just as well face up to the fact that all three of us had a first-class motive for wishing Louis out of the way, and once the police get their teeth in a motive it takes a lot to make them drop it. It's common knowledge here now about the Chumbaziri goldfield; everyone in the place seems to know that we three and Creet are interested in it, and we can count on the police having that information. What nobody knows is that we and Creet were at loggerheads over the mine, and there's no earthly reason why they should know it. In my opinion it's up to each of us to see that that particular bit of information doesn't get to their ears. Is that agreed?"

The doctor nodded.

"You can rely on me," he said. "No use in creating trouble; we've enough already. From this moment I don't even know that you had anything but the friendliest feelings for Louis."

"But, hang it all!" protested Tubby. "I'll have to tell them the truth, you know—"

"Of course. Tubby," soothed the doctor. "But I agree entirely with Larry that there's no need to do more than answer their questions truthfully without volunteering information. As a matter of fact, if you suggest to the police that you three had a good motive for committing the crime, you won't, in one way, be telling the truth at all. The fact may be true, but the inference which you would inevitably lead the police to draw—that one of you three shot Louis—would be false. Truth, Tubby, isn't nearly such a simple thing as we're inclined to imagine."

Tubby sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Just say what you're asked, please, Tubby," said Larry, "and no gratuitous frillings."

"Oh, all right," said Tubby. "I'll do my best. I was in the garden, anyway."

"Ask me where I was, Larry, will you?" said Mark.

"Well, where were you?"

"Bed," grinned Mark. "The perfect answer, Larry—lucid, brief, and unequivocal—and all in a three-lettered monosyllable. How judges would love and counsel hate me!"

The doctor smiled.

"I was in the drawing room," he said. "At the risk of a reproof from Larry, I will add that I was reading. No harm in that, eh, Larry?"

"Depends on the book," said Larry.

A few minutes later the police arrived. The inspector, a dapper little Portuguese, spoke English fluently. He had a matter-of-fact manner which seemed to suggest that murder was quite one of the commonplaces of life and nothing at all to get disturbed about, and somehow gave the impression that if he sent you to the gallows you could rely on him to do it with the utmost politeness. With him were three uniformed policemen.

In a few words the doctor introduced himself and explained what had happened. The inspector was charmed to meet him. He had a cousin who was a doctor in Lisbon. He would have been a doctor himself, but the examinations proved too much for him. If it would not be troubling the doctor too much would he conduct him to the room where the gentleman was shot I

His examination of the dining room was brief to the point of casualness. Sherlock Holmes would have shuddered at it.

"Murder, of course," he pronounced, and gave a stream of orders to his subordinates in Portuguese, and turned again to the doctor.

There were certain formalities to be observed, he said apologetically, but they would inconvenience the doctor as little as possible. He had given instructions for photographs to be taken, and the body would then be removed. And now he regretted that he must ask certain questions. Perhaps—in the other room?

They returned to the drawing room.

"There are we four in the house," explained the doctor, "and my wife and daughter. It was my daughter who was first on the scene. There's no reason why you shouldn't question her at once, but if you can possibly spare my wife—"

"Of course—later—tomorrow, if necessary," said the inspector. "Perhaps, however, I might ask the young lady a few questions? I will not distress her more than I can help."

The doctor nodded.

"I'll fetch her."

Jacqueline was very pale when, a few moments later, she entered the room, followed by her father, and at the inspector's invitation seated herself on a chair.

"And now just a few little questions," said the inspector, seating himself opposite to her. "Your father tells me that you were the first on the scene after the shot had been fired. You heard the shot?"

She nodded.

"And what did you do?"

"I was in my bedroom—reading," said Jacqueline.

"I jumped up and ran out into the corridor. There was a light in the dining room, and I rushed in there. I saw Louis—Mr. Creet—he was all sort of crumpled up—"

The inspector nodded.

"And you met nobody?"

"In the corridor? No—nobody. I suppose I was quicker than everyone else."

"And in the room—not anybody but the murdered man?"

She hesitated, frowning.

"Not—not exactly," she said.

The inspector smiled.

"And what, my dear young lady, does 'not exactly' mean?"

"Well—you see—it was all so quick—but just as I entered the room I saw someone—a man—disappear through the French windows onto the veranda. It was only a sort of flash, you know."

"A man?" exclaimed the doctor. "You told me nothing about this, Jackie—"

The inspector held up a hand.

"If you please. Doctor," he said politely. He turned again to Jacqueline. "And this man you saw disappearing onto the veranda—what was he like?"

She shook her head.

"He was gone so quickly," she said—"just a sort of flash—so quick that I wondered if I'd really seen him at all. Perhaps I didn't."

"We will suppose that you did," said the inspector. "You recall how he was dressed?"

"Oh—I don't know—something light. A tropical suit, I suppose, like everybody wears. That's really all I can tell you; it was all so vague and over so quickly."

The inspector nodded and was thoughtful for a few moments.

"And now, my dear young lady, tell me this," he went on. "Mr.—Creet, is it?—You knew Mr. Creet very well?"

"Oh, yes."

"In fact, you were a great friend of his?"

"Yes—I suppose I was that."

"Then perhaps you have some idea as to who may have done this terrible thing?"

Jacqueline hesitated. It flashed into her mind that she must be very careful what she said to this polite little man with the shrewd eyes. She suddenly saw quite clearly that a rash word from her might work untold havoc. Who might have done this terrible thing? Well, except for her mother, there was not one of them who had not an excellent reason for killing Louis—Larry, Tubby, Mark, her father, and she herself a better reason than any. She must on no account say anything.

"You are thinking very hard, my dear young lady," came the inspector's voice. "I asked you to tell me if you had any idea who might have done this terrible thing."

She raised her head and looked straight into the shrewd eyes that were watching her.

"I've no idea at all."

"You know of no one who had any reason to dislike him—no enemy—no one who, perhaps, was jealous of him—"

"No—no one at all."

"He has never mentioned to you anyone who had a quarrel with him?"

"Never."

The inspector rose.

"That is all I have to ask you," he said. "But I should like to say that you are a very—clever young lady."

Jacqueline glanced at him quickly.

"Clever?"

"Some people are not clever," said the inspector. "They tell me lies and all the time, when they think they are deceiving me, I know that they are telling me lies. You were clever enough to know that you must tell me the truth."

"Oh—I see," laughed Jacqueline nervously.

The inspector turned to the doctor.

"And now," he said, "just a few questions to you four gentlemen."

The doctor nodded.

"OfF you go to bed, Jackie," he said. "I'll look in and see you later."

Jacqueline hurried back to her mother, found that she had dropped off to sleep, and with a sigh of relief went to her own bedroom. She did not get into bed; sleep was out of the question. She flung herself into a chair and lighted a cigarette and sat staring out through the window at the moonlit garden.

And there, almost an hour later, her father found her.

"Not in bed yet, Jackie?"

"What's the use of trying to sleep, Father? Has the inspector gone?"

"We've just given him a whisky and got rid of him. We've told him all we know, and there's nothing more to be done at the moment. Sleep's the only thing now, Jackie. If you don't think you can manage it, I'd better mix you something, shall I?"

She shook her head, half smiling.

"Don't worry about me, Daddy; I shall be all right. Mother's asleep."

The doctor smiled.

"Your mother's a very wonderful woman, Jackie. Good-night, my dear."

He kissed her and went out, and Jacqueline continued to stare into the garden. A sleeping draught? That, at any rate, would have brought forgetfulness; but there were things which at the moment she did not wish to forget. There were horrible, hideous things, too—but there were others.

Louis was dead. That, she supposed, was horrible. Everybody seemed to think that death was horrible, but she had never quite understood why death should be thought any more horrible than birth. Death was very much the same as falling to sleep, and being born like waking up, and there was nothing horrible about falling to sleep or waking. Of the two, falling to sleep, she thought, was much the more pleasant. People didn't think death pleasant, though; they thought it horrible. Her thoughts went to the limp figure with the dangling arms sprawling on the desk, and she could not repress a shudder. Yes, that had been horrible—horrible and terrifying. She would welcome any draught that would blot the memory of that scene from her mind.

But there were things she wanted to remember tonight, to turn them over and over in her mind, savouring them to the full. She was free. Louis had been forced to loose his grip of her by a grip that was stronger than his. How she had hated Louis—with a fierce passion of hatred of which she had never dreamed herself capable. Often she would gladly have killed him. If ever a man had deserved to die, Louis Creet had. And now he was dead. And she was glad.

She supposed she shouldn't be feeling like that about it; she should be feeling sorry for him. Louis was a dreadful coward, and he must have had a few pretty bad seconds as he saw the muzzle of the revolver pointed at his face. She was, perhaps, sorry about that—sorry that he had had to face those moments of agonizing terror before the shot rang out. But that was the utmost limit to which she could extend her sorrow. She was not sorry that he was dead. How could she be? Apart from herself, there were Larry and Mark and Tubby. They wouldn't be sorry that Louis was dead, either. Everything, she supposed, would be all right now. The mine would be theirs without any more bother.

She rose from her chair, pressed out her cigarette in the ashtray, and began to brush her hair in front of the mirror. Her head was aching appallingly, and the brush, she hoped, would soothe it. And as she stood there, her glance wandering carelessly over the dainty litter on the glass top of the dressing table, she had a vague feeling that something was missing. Something which she felt should be there was not there.

She wrinkled her forehead thoughtfully, running over rapidly in her mind the various articles which should be on her dressing table. Everything seemed to be there, and, laying down her brush, she took a final glance at herself in the mirror, decided that she looked "pretty awful," and turned to go towards the bed.

Halfway across the room she paused abruptly, catching her breath, shot a quick, nervous glance at the dressing table, stepped quickly back to it, once more ran her eye swiftly over the articles that lay on the glass top, opened the drawers—though she knew that it was useless to do so—and slammed them shut—impatiently; glanced hurriedly round the room. And then, panic- stricken, she stood staring at her reflection in the mirror with horrified eyes.

She knew now what was missing from her dressing table—her revolver. She had laid it there after that scene with Louis. She was certain of it—positive—just there beside her powder box. And it was gone.

CHAPTER XXI

Jacqueline seated herself on the edge of the bed. helpless before the rush of terrifying thoughts that came pouring into her mind. Louis killed by a revolver bullet—and her revolver was missing!

She had not the slightest doubt that it was with her revolver that the fatal shot had been fired. She knew in some instinctive way that that was true. No sooner had she realized what was missing from her dressing table than that appalling truth had flashed into her mind, and so overwhelming was the realization that it did not occur to her to doubt it or to search for any other explanation of the weapon's disappearance. Someone, she knew, had taken her revolver and with it had killed Louis Creet. But who?

Larry? The thought suddenly stabbed her mind and made her wince with pain. No, not Larry. She could not, would not believe it. Not Larry. Anyone rather than Larry. The thought was hideous—absurd—grotesque. She must be crazy for such an idea to come to her. If only she weren't half out of her mind she would see how absurd it was; if only she could think clearly she would see that it could not possibly be Larry, that it was against all evidence, all likelihood, all reason to suppose that Larry had anything whatever to do with it. Why should Larry do a thing like that?

And almost instantly she knew why. The mine. Louis had been trying to cheat Larry out of the mine. Larry had told her that, had admitted that there was nothing to be done, that Louis, if he chose, need give them nothing, and Louis, he had said, would certainly choose. Wasn't that a reason why Larry should have done it? Hadn't Larry, if you looked at it with an unprejudiced mind, the best possible reason for wishing Louis out of the way? Most people would say so. The police would say so. A jury would consider it pretty convincing evidence, if not that Larry had killed Louis, at least that he might have killed him.

That, of course, was because they wouldn't know Larry as she knew him. Larry could kill a man—yes, but not from that sort of motive, not for no better reason than that there was the risk that he would rob him of some money. Larry, to commit a cold-blooded act like this, would need some more compelling motive than that.

Well, he had it, hadn't he? It was no use blinking the fact that he had, and that she herself had supplied him with it. She remembered the cold fury in his eyes when she had told him about herself and Louis Creet. Had Louis been there, Larry would have killed him then. "There's only one way to deal with a swine like Creet...." That was what he had said, and he had meant it. You could always tell when Larry meant a thing. Last night, too, in the corridor. If she had not been there Larry would certainly have killed him

then. She wondered if any of them had mentioned that scene of last night to the inspector. It would be just like Tubby to blurt it out.

No enemies? Well, she had lied about that, as she would lie a thousand times again for Larry. Even if she had known beyond all question that he had fired the shot, she would still have lied. And he had not fired it. It wasn't a thing she could argue about. In the face of all evidence, all probability, all logic, she knew that Larry had had no hand in it.

And then, having a tendency towards logic herself, she asked herself the inevitable question: if not Larry, who? And because she also had the courage to face facts, she forced herself to face this one: that if what she had told Larry would be enough to make him shoot Louis, then that information would equally impel her father to do the same. And her father knew everything. She had kept nothing back last night, and though he had said but little she had felt his hand shaking and had seen the look in his eyes. Yet it could not be her father. Her knowledge of that fact was as sure as her knowledge that it was not Larry.

She got into bed, determined to think no more about it, and closed her eyes. And instantly came another question: what was she to do? Should she tell the police about the missing revolver, or should she keep the discovery to herself? If she made it known, and a search were made for it, who knew where it might be found? Whoever had taken the weapon had, she was convinced, killed Louis Creet ... and suppose it had been Larry! She was glad she had not discovered the loss before she interviewed the police inspector; it might have slipped out. Yet, if she did not tell the police and the revolver were found....

On and on, round and round the endless circle—Larry—her father—tell the police—don't tell the police—Larry If only she could stop thinking!

Breakfast the next morning was, for Jacqueline at any rate, a trying meal. She had lain awake until far into the night, considering this new aspect of the situation and all that it might imply. Ought she, she wondered, to tell the police about the missing revolver? She would have decided to do so but for one persistent fear which, try as she did, would creep into her mind and send a little shiver down her spine. She tried to ignore it, to laugh at it, to dismiss it as absurd and impossible, but always it presented itself again, insidious but importunate, refusing to be ignored or dismissed: Larry?

She looked round the table from one to the other. Larry's face was, as usual, a mask. Save for a certain tightening of the lips, a squaring of the jaw, there was nothing to indicate any unusual tension on his part. She noticed that he contributed little to the perfunctory conversation that went on, and that whenever Tubby or Mark spoke he did not raise his eyes to theirs. But then

everybody this morning was awkward and uncomfortable, and nobody seemed inclined to talk much, thank goodness!

There seemed to be a general understanding that nobody wanted to discuss last night's happenings, to turn the conversation as quickly as possible whenever it veered in that direction.

Only her mother was anything approaching her normal self; but then her mother was a remarkable woman.

She was horrified, of course—it was a terrible thing to have happened, especially in one's own house—and she was mildly curious as to who had committed the crime, with a strong tendency to the belief that it must have been a "nigger," because you never could tell with black people, who were quite different from white people, whatever people said. Her sole idea seemed to be to help everyone through a very tiresome time by being as cheerful as she could.

"Do you know what I've been thinking?" she said, pouring out coffee as she spoke and addressing no one in particular. "Do you remember hearing about two men who escaped from the gaol—two dreadful murderers? Isn't it possible they—did it?"

Jacqueline's heart leapt. Here was a possibility she had overlooked. The next moment, however, her rising hopes were scattered, as Larry shook his head.

"No," he said laconically, "they were captured yesterday, seventy miles away in the bush."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Thurston with obvious disappointment. "Such a pity! If they had been still at large I feel sure it would have been found that they did it."

"Then it was just as well for them that they were caught," laughed Dr. Thurston.

There was a period of constrained silence before Mrs. Thurston spoke again.

"What a dreadful thing to happen! Poor Louis!" she sighed. "And so incomprehensible. Why should anyone want to kill him? I mean to say—"

"Oh, Mother," interrupted Jacqueline, "do please talk about something else."

"But, my dear," expostulated Mrs. Thurston, "Louis is dead, and the mystery is, who killed him? By talking it over intelligently we may be able to help the authorities by evolving some theory. Besides," she added, "what else is there to talk about? I little thought, when I woke up suddenly last night, that such an awful thing had happened. I thought at first it was a thunderstorm. The bang, I mean. By the way, what time was it? I didn't notice."

"Ten minutes to two," replied Mark and Tubby in unison, looking up. Their eyes met, and each turned hastily away from the other's.

Larry cast a warning glance at the two men.

"Yes, that's right," he agreed. "There must have been an electric storm in the air last night: we were all awake, it seems."

"And the doctor hadn't even come to bed!" said Mrs. Thurston. "You were sitting up very late, John."

Dr. Thurston raised his eyes from his plate for only an instant.

"Yes," he said, "I was—reading. Too hot to sleep."

Jacqueline glanced quickly at her father. So he had been up at the time when Louis was killed. She frowned thoughtfully. That figure she had seen disappearing onto the veranda—was it possible? All the doubts of last night began racing through her mind again, and she felt suddenly sick with fear. She wished now she had not mentioned that figure to the inspector, but at that moment it hadn't occurred to her that there was any need to lie. If only she knew what to do! If only she could talk to someone about it....

"Then if it wasn't those dreadful niggers," her mother was saying, "who was it?"

"That, my dear," said the doctor drily, "is precisely what we all want to know, but we shall do no good by talking about it. The matter is in the hands of the police, and we must leave it at that. By the way, the inspector may want to ask you a few questions. He was considerate enough not to disturb you last night. I'm seeing him again this morning, and I'll find out then. Nothing to be scared about, you know."

Mrs. Thurston nodded.

"I've never been scared of a policeman yet, John," she said—"not even an English one—and I certainly shan't start now."

"If you're clever, Mrs. Thurston," said Larry,["you'll tell him the truth." His eyes met Jacqueline's for an instant. "Jackie was so clever that he congratulated her."

Jacqueline sighed. Clever? She was not so sure.

As they rose from the table, Jacqueline took a sudden resolution. She followed her father from the room, slipped a hand into the crook of his arm and squeezed it affectionately. Her father recognized the symptoms.

"What is it, Jackie?" he asked. "Want to talk?"

She nodded, guided him into the garden, and paused.

"There's something that's rather worrying me. Daddy," she said. "Of course, there may be nothing in it, but there may be everything. Anyway, I've got to tell you. It's rather—frightening."

Her father saw the anxiety in her eyes and forced a smile.

"Out with it, Jackie," he said. "If we could get through last night I don't imagine there's anything that can frighten us this morning."

"It's—my revolver, Daddy. It's missing. I left it lying on my dressing table, and last night, after you'd gone to bed, I discovered that it was gone, and that means—oh, you know what it means as well as I do. Somebody took it—through the French window, I suppose, when I wasn't there—before Louis was shot."

"And that scares you, eh, Jackie?"

"Of course it scares me," she exclaimed. "You must see, Daddy, what it means—what the police will think it means, an3rway. Louis was shot with a revolver, and my revolver is missing, and whoever took it—"

"Shot Louis?"

She nodded, avoiding his eyes. "Pretty obvious, Daddy, isn't it?"

"It would be a permissible inference, Jackie," said her father, "if somebody really had taken your revolver."

"Somebody has."

He smiled.

"Sure?" he asked. "I know you, Jackie. You're a careless little devil. Only a careless little devil would leave a loaded revolver kicking about among her powder and lipstick and all the rest of her adjuncts to beauty. I wouldn't mind betting your revolver isn't missing at all."

"Daddy, I'm absolutely positive—"

"That you left it on your dressing table," he laughed. "I know. If you weren't so absolutely positive, Jackie, I might be worried, but I'm not in the least. I'm not going to start getting worried until you've had another look round."

She shook her head.

"A revolver can't get hidden on a dressing table, Daddy."

"I'm not suggesting it can," laughed her father. "Since you're so positive that's where you put it, Jackie, the dressing table is the last place to look." He slipped his arm into hers. "Come along and we'll make a thorough search together," he said. "If it's nowhere in your room, the police... But it'll be time enough to talk about that when we're sure it isn't under your pillow."

Together they went to her bedroom.

"A systematic search, please, Jackie," said her father. "I'll take this side of the room with your trunk

and the chest of drawers, and you Oh, all right,"

he laughed, seeing the look on her face. "I suppose you think I should crumple your fal-lals, eh? Very well, you take this side and I'll take the other. And for goodness' sake, Jackie, search properly. It's a thousand to one it's here somewhere."

The doctor looked under her pillow and began stripping the bed, and Jacqueline turned her attention to the chest of drawers. But the revolver was not there. Of course it was not there. She had left it on her dressing table, and someone had taken it and shot Louis, and they were only wasting their time looking for it when they should be deciding what was to be done.

She went down on her knees, opened her cabin trunk, and began groping with her hand among the contents. Her fingers touched something hard and cold, closed over it eagerly, and drew it hastily from beneath the dainty garments that hid it.

"Daddy!"

Dr. Thurston, exploring the wardrobe, glanced over his shoulder, saw her holding up the revolver, and turned towards her with a smile.

"In the trunk?"

She nodded, gazing thoughtfully at the weapon in her hand.

"Well, that's that, Jackie," said the doctor. "The revolver episode is closed."

"Is it?" said Jacqueline thoughtfully.

"Well, isn't it? What's biting you, Jackie?"

"I'm just wondering," said Jackie, "who put it in my trunk. Somebody. I left it on the dressing table—"

Her father took the revolver from her hand, snapped it open, closed it, glanced at the barrel, and tossed it into the open trunk.

"I know what you're thinking, Jackie," he said, "but you're wrong. The revolver hasn't been fired. You can see for yourself. Every chamber is still loaded, and there's not a trace of smoke in the barrel."

She rose from her knees.

"Righto, Daddy!" she said. "Sorry."

"You'll lose yourself one of these days," laughed the doctor and went out.

She smiled as she watched him walking briskly down the garden. It was no use arguing with him about it. If he believed that she had been mistaken and had put the revolver into the trunk herself she would never persuade him that she hadn't. But did he really believe it? Did he, in any case, think

her such a fool as not to realize that the person who had taken her revolver from the dressing table and shot Louis Creet with it would clean and reload it before putting it into her cabin trunk? And that, of course, was what had happened.

She closed the trunk and went thoughtfully from the room. She found Larry sitting alone on the veranda and flung herself into a chair beside him.

"It's a nice old how-do-you-do, Larry, isn't it? Where's all the happy throng?"

"Mrs. Thurston's in the drawing room," he told her. "I fancy she's thinking out a few frank remarks for the benefit of the inspector if he's a nuisance with his questions. Mark and Tubby have gone for a stroll—in opposite directions." He scrutinized her keenly. "Aren't there creams and things you can use?"

"Creams?"

"I've seen them advertised, Jackie, and I gather that they'd remove the furrows from a ploughed field in a few days. I daresay you'd get one somewhere in Benguella. You should do something about it, anyway."

"About what?"

"That furrow between what's left of your eyebrows," said Larry. "Worried?"

"Who isn't?"

"I'm not. Nor is your mother. What's gnawing at you, Jackie?"

She hesitated a moment. Then:

"Larry," she said, "I'm going to ask you something, and if I make a fool of myself we'll change the subject.

Larry nodded.

"That's a bet, Jackie."

"It's about last night."

"It would be!"

"What really did happen?"

"Louis Creet was shot," said Larry. "Memory failing or what?"

She made a gesture of impatience.

"I didn't mean that."

"Louis getting shot strikes me as the outstanding feature of the evening. Except, of course, the inspector. Charming, wasn't he? I was waiting for him to kiss your hand. You took a risk, you know, Jackie."

"Risk?"

"Lying the way you did," said Larry. "If you forget his charming manners, that bloke had a nasty knowing look in his eye. No enemies? Nobody who might possibly be jealous of him? I'd no idea you could lie like that, Jackie, and I've half a mind to clip your ear. At the time I wanted to—kiss you. And I was scared stiff that Tubby would shake you by the hand and burst into tears of gratitude. If you'd let it out that we three were at daggers drawn with Louis over the mine, we'd all probably have been in clink this morning. You know what the police are: one whiff of a motive and they warn the executioner. You were fine, Jackie. As a token of his gratitude Tubby made a subtitle for you—'She Lied to Save His Life.' Why did you do it?"

She shrugged a shoulder.

"There seemed no object in putting silly ideas into the inspector's head," she said.

"That's precisely what we all felt," he told her, "and we—well, we didn't exactly lie, but we suppressed a few facts which the charming policeman might have considered relevant. It isn't always decent to be absolutely truthful, you know. If Tubby and Mark and I had been absolutely truthful last night, the inspector would have found us dancing round the dining room singing songs of thanksgiving." "Larry—you're horrible!"

"There you are!" laughed Larry, "I tell you the truth, and you promptly call me horrible. I'm glad Creet's dead. So's Mark. So's Tubby—only he has such a nice mind that he doesn't like to say so. You're glad, too.

"Am I?"

"Of course you are. And because you re a rotten little hypocrite you're probably snivelling to yourself and saying, 'Poor Louis! How dreadful! I'm ever so sorry.

"It is pretty dreadful, Larry."

"Good Lord, Jackie!" he exclaimed. "You re not one of those slops, are you, who always want to speak well of the dead whether they're good, bad, or indifferent. Don't be a blithering idiot! They don't die. Everything they did is still going on—all the good things, all the fine things-and all the foul things. Am I to take my hat off to a swine like Louis Creet just because he happens to be dead? A bad man is bad, dead or alive.

She made no answer to that. It struck her that there was no possible answer.

"I'll tell you something," continued Larry. "You remember that bloke in The Silver King who goes down on one knee and says: 'O God, put back Thy universe and give me yesterday'?"

She nodded.

"Well, Jackie, here's a bit more horrible truth for you. If I could put back the universe to yesterday, there's not one single thing that happened then that I'd want to change. What happened last night I'd want to happen again. And if I'd killed the swine I'd still say the same."

Suddenly she leaned forward and laid a hand on his arm, gazing earnestly at his face.

"Larry—that's just what I want to ask you," she said. "Did you?"

She saw the sudden hardening of his mouth and the obstinate forward thrust of his jaw.

"Larry—please—don't be angry," she begged. "I had to ask you. I must know. I can't go on like this, wondering, not being sure. You could have killed him, couldn't you? After what I told you yesterday? You'd have gone straight away and killed him then if I'd let you, wouldn't you?"

He nodded.

"And then, night before last—you almost did kill him then, Larry. And there's the mine as well. I was thinking this out most of last night, and I couldn't help seeing that the way Louis was treating you was another reason why you should want to kill him."

He smiled faintly.

"A pretty convincing case for the prosecution, eh, Jackie?"

"It's not meant to be a prosecution," she told him. "It's just that the idea has come to me that you might have done it, and I can't rest until I know. Did you?"

He reached out a hand and patted hers.

"Darling, even the police inspector hadn't the nerve to ask me that."

"I'm not to be trusted, eh, Larry? Afraid I've such a high sense of my duty as a citizen that I'd feel bound to inform the police? That's what they call a squeaker, isn't it?"

Larry said nothing. Jacqueline sighed

"Then if you can't tell me that you did kill Louis," she said, "can you tell me that you didn't? Larry—please—if you knew how I feel about it, how I'm blaming myself for having caused the whole ghastly business, you'd do something to put me out of my misery. If only you'll say you had nothing whatever to do with it—won't you?"

Larry placed the thumb of his right hand against his nose and extended the fingers.

"That to all Nosey Parkers!" he laughed. "If you want to know who killed Louis, why ask me, anyway? Why not ask the Inspector? He's the bloke who ought to know. I'm not so sure that he doesn't."

Jacqueline lay back in her deck chair and was silent for some time, watching Larry narrowly between her half-closed lids as he sat staring at the sea. She asked herself if there was any difference in him. She had a furtive sort of belief in the popular fallacy that no one could commit a horrible crime like murder without it leaving its mark on his face—a change of expression, a different look in his eyes. She remembered how, in the mirror of Louis's elaborate dressing table, she had sought for just such an alteration in herself before venturing to face her mother's scrutiny and had failed to detect the least difference. But perhaps it didn't work that way round. On that occasion it was not she but Louis who had been the murderer.

Larry, in any case, bore no visible stigma of guilt. His face told her nothing—except that he had not the least intention of telling her anything. After all, the whole thing was probably a mare's nest. She was as bad as the police—according to Larry; she had got a whiff of a motive and had promptly warned the executioner. It didn't follow that, because he had good reason for doing so, Larry had killed Louis. Yet, if Larry had not killed him, why should he hedge and dodge the issue and refuse to tell her so?

"Who is it now?" asked Larry. "If you're looking for a good surprise ending, Jackie, you might do worse than make the inspector the murderer."

"I'm wondering, Larry," she said. "You don't think that Mark—or Tubby—"

"I've no reason to suppose it was either one or the other," interrupted Larry. "You've a nasty, suspicious mind, Jackie. Why not bring your father in with the rest of us and make a good job of it?"

Jacqueline sighed.

"I've thought of that," she said. "I'm not ragging, Larry; it's nearly driving me crazy, I told Daddy everything night before last, and it struck me that he might—"

Larry was shaking his head.

"The doctor wouldn't have shot him," he grinned; "he'd just have operated. But, seriously, Jackie, you've no need to worry your head about it at all. I'm not worrying. Leave it to the police, and for heaven's sake don't plague the life out of everybody by asking questions. Especially not Tubby. I'm off now—business over the mine."

He took a few steps and hesitated.

"By the way, Jackie—that Monty Carr fellow. You've no need to worry over that now, of course. For the first time in my life, as soon as things are fixed up, I'm going to write a four-figure check."

CHAPTER XXII

Jacqueline watched him go with a smile on her lips. That was like Larry. She remembered telling Louis that Larry was one of those men whom a girl could ask for £1,000 and not be afraid that he would expect anything in return, and Louis had not believed her. He would not, she supposed, have believed it of any man. She wished he could have been there and seen the look on Larry's face when he had said that to her—a shy, rather sheepish look, as if he had no right to say anything of the sort and was afraid she would be annoyed about it. The way he had hurried off, too, because he was afraid she might try to thank him and make him feel uncomfortable. It was queer the way a decent man always seemed half ashamed of doing a decent action.

She would thank Larry later, since that was the only return that she could make to him. Larry had been quite right; a bad man was bad, dead or alive, and all the foul things he had done went on, breeding more foul things, and so on and on, she supposed, forever. Louis had done a foul thing, and Louis was dead: but the foul thing he had done had not died with him. It still clung to her, would always cling to her; and Larry, when he looked at her, would always see it and remember and look away from her again.

Yet he had offered her that check for Monty Carr. She was not sure that she would need it now. The whole affair, she had realized almost as soon as realization was too late, had been a carefully laid scheme between Monty Carr and Louis in order to put on her a thumbscrew which Louis might turn to suit his purpose, and it was possible that Monty Carr, now that Louis was dead, might press her no more for the £1,000 which he had never really expected to receive. No doubt Louis had paid him handsomely for his assistance. But it was a relief to know that, no matter what might happen, she need worry no more about Monty Carr.

It was a relief, too, in another way. If Larry was able to write his first four-figure check, that could only mean that he was sure now of his share in the mine; and that, in turn, must surely mean that he had had no hand in killing Louis Creet. Unless he were innocent of that, not even Larry would have the confidence to assume that he was safe from detection and proceed so calmly to arrange the business of the mine and plan the future. Larry would not have offered her £1,000 unless he had been certain of being able to let her have it; and how, unless he were innocent, could he be certain? Of course she had never really believed that he had killed Louis: it was only because she had been half out of her mind last night that the thought had come to her. And yet, if Larry were innocent, why had he not been willing to tell her so when she had asked him? Just "No" would have set her mind at rest, and he had refused to say it. And that must really mean... And so it began all over again.

She saw Tubby mooning about the garden and smiled faintly. There was no hope of getting any information from Larry if he did not wish to give it to her, but Tubby Storman was a different proposition. Old Tubby was a dear. He would no more do a rotten thing than Larry. But he was different. With Larry, she felt, it was a question of deliberate choice; he had worked out a code of conduct for himself in which every action and motive was labelled good or bad, and disciplined himself to observe it. Larry always struck her as being stern with himself, harsh in his judgment of his own actions, regulating his life by the strength of his will. But with Tubby it was a matter of feelings. Bad things hurt Tubby. He did not submit an action to the judgment of his reason: he just felt that it was good or bad, and that settled the question beyond all argument. Not so clever as Larry, of course. If she had asked Tubby what she had asked Larry, he might not have answered with a direct "Yes" or "No," but he would have floundered and blundered to such an extent in trying to evade the issue that she would almost certainly have known the answer as surely as if he had given her a direct reply. And Tubby knew something. Mark, too. All three of them had something on their minds, and if Larry would not tell her...

She went to the balustrade of the veranda and called him, beckoning. He came slowly, reluctantly, pausing every now and then to gaze thoughtfully at a plant in the garden, obviously anxious to prolong the journey to the veranda as much as possible. She remembered doing just the same—pausing to gaze in the shop windows, waiting with exaggerated caution for traffic to pass before she crossed the road, deliberately choosing the longest route—when she had been on her way to the dentist. Dear old Tubby! He was dreadfully transparent. He would probably try to show her how unconcerned he was by talking about the weather.

He paused by the veranda, and his chubby face creased into a friendly smile.

"Hullo, Jackie! Topping morning, isn't it?"

"Come up here, Tubby, and sit down."

He lowered himself into a deck chair beside her and gazed with an air of innocent interest at the horizon.

For a few moments Jacqueline watched him with amusement in her eyes. Then:

"Tubby, who killed Louis Creet?"

She saw him give a violent start and instantly suppress it. His face, as he turned to her, was almost ludicrous in its exaggerated expression of bewildered innocence.

"Good Lord, Jackie!" he exclaimed. "What a question! Why ask me?"

"I have asked you, Tubby."

"Yes—absolutely—of course you have."

She could see that he was thinking furiously, his mind in a sudden panic. She decided on further shock tactics.

"Did you, Tubby?"

"Good God, Jackie, I wouldn't—what I mean is, you've absolutely no right to say a thing like that, you know. It's a pretty rotten sort of thing to say to a fellow. I mean, I liked old Louis. He was jolly good to me, one way and another. Did I tell you about what he did at Christmas? He sent a whole lot of toys and things—"

She cut him short.

"I didn't ask you, Tubby, to give me all the reasons why you shouldn't want to kill Louis. I asked you if you killed him. But you'd never have the heart to kill a man who sent toys to your kids at Christmas, would you?"

Tubby forced a grin. "It's pretty amusing, really, Jackie. Do I look as if I've got a cold-blooded murder on my conscience?"

"You do. Tubby—exactly."

"Eh?"

If it had not been of such terrible importance to her, Jacqueline could have laughed at the startled, distressed look on his face.

"Oh, you're not the only one," she said. "Mark looks just the same, and Larry's nearly as bad. You've something on that nice old mind of yours. Tubby, haven't you?"

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose we've all got something on our nice old minds," he admitted. "Everything's in a nice old mess all round, if you ask me. All that fuss with Louis over the mine " He stopped abruptly.

"But we don't want to talk about all that."

"I do. Tubby."

"Well, I don't," replied Tubby with a touch of impatience. "And what's more, I'm not going to talk about it, so it's no use to keep nagging at me. If I start talking I always tell people all sorts of things I don't mean to tell them. At least, that's what Larry-says."

"And Larry told you to keep your mouth shut and tell nobody anything, eh. Tubby?"

"Hang it, there you go again!" exclaimed Tubby. "Just because you've got an idea in your head that I know something about old Louis, you keep on trying to pump it out of me, and I'm jolly well not going to tell you."

"Then you do know something?"

"I'm not going to say whether I do or don't," said Tubby resolutely. "It isn't reasonable to expect it. A fellow doesn't give his pals away, Jackie, and you've no right to ask him to."

Jacqueline smiled. Dear old Tubby! "A fellow doesn't give his pals away." But which pal? She sat for some minutes in thoughtful silence.

"Tubby, did Larry do it?"

Tubby's jaw gave a very fair imitation of Larry's in his most obstinate moments.

"Or Mark?"

Tubby shrugged a shoulder.

"More likely to be Larry," added Jacqueline. "He was furious with Louis over the mine—and other things—and he's not so soft-hearted as you, Tubby. Larry would shoot a bad man while you were trying to persuade him to be good. Oh, well! Larry wouldn't have done a thing like that without some very good reason—"

Tubby swung round and faced her. "Good Lord, Jackie, you mustn't go thinking that Larry—I mean, you do jump to conclusions so. I didn't say Larry had done it. I've no reason for thinking he did it any more than—than anyone else. I'd hate you to get ideas like that into your head. I mean, if Larry had done a thing like—well, I know how I'd feel about it. I'd never be able to look Bunty in the eyes again, and Larry would feel the same. I wish to goodness you'd forget the rotten business, Jackie. The police are looking after it, and it does no good to keep on nagging at it."

"Righto, Tubby!" said Jacqueline. "We'll talk about something else. I suppose the mine will be all right now, won't it?"

"I suppose so."

"Does Bunty know she's probably the wife of a millionaire?"

He nodded. "I wired her first thing. It absolutely knocked her over, I bet. I expect all she's worrying about now is when I'll get home."

Jacqueline smiled. "I'd like to be there when you do," she said. "What will you do. Tubby?—when you first meet her, I mean, after all this long time. I think I can picture it. You won't say much; probably neither of you will say anything. You'll just take her head in your hands, and look in her eyes and kiss her, eh. Tubby?"

Tubby's eyes softened, and a smile crept over his face.

"That's about it, Jackie," he said softly.

Jacqueline nodded. "Straight in her eyes—without flinching—eh, Tubby?"

He shot her a quick, suspicious glance. "Here, I say, Jackie, what—what are you getting at?" he exclaimed, rising from his chair. "If you're still trying to trip me up and get at something—"

She shook her head. "I won't try any more, Tubby, I promise you."

"Huh!" grunted Tubby. "Well, I'm not risking it, anyway."

He strode away, and for the rest of the day nobody knew what had become of him.

It was not until after dinner that evening that he put in an appearance at the bungalow—to find Larry and Mark seated on the veranda.

"Come on, Tubby!" Larry called to him as he was hastily entering the house. "Sit down and have a drink. I've been looking for you all the afternoon. Where have you been skulking?"

Tubby poured out a drink, swallowed it, and sat down. "Been at the club," he mumbled.

Larry smiled. "Africa is full of wonders," he laughed. "A club in this benighted spot!"

"Just like any other rotten club," growled Tubby; "a lot of old hens all cackling about the—murder."

"I met the local bank manager this afternoon," said Mark, "and he could talk of nothing else."

"And that," laughed Larry, "is the first time for many years that I've heard a bank manager mentioned without getting a shiver down my spine. What did he

"Only that everybody thinks it's all very curious." Larry nodded. "Bright blokes, bank managers. And now let's get to business. Less whisky, please, Mr. Storman. There's no room in this firm for directors with purple noses."

Tubby, with a guilty air, replaced the decanter which was halfway to his glass.

"Sorry!" he said. "But a chap must do something."

"This is the first official meeting of the firm," said Larry, "and I should hate to record in the minutes that Mr. Percy Storman was blotto. And now try to look like a business magnate. Tubby, and listen. I've seen the lawyer bloke and completed all the necessary formalities for the registration of the mine.

It's in our joint names, of course. I've paid the denouncement fees and, incidentally, God knows how many milreis to the mining agent. A mining agent. Tubby, is a voracious animal with predatory instincts and an insatiable appetite for milreis, that lives as far as possible from the discomforts of a goldfield. But if you don't feed the brute generously there's likely to be trouble over your title."

"You've put—him—in for a share?" asked Tubby.

"You mean Louis Creet?"

Tubby nodded.

"Louis Creet, late but not lamented," said Larry, "is in for an equal share with the rest of us. That was the original agreement. I've no idea who his heirs are, but in any case they're entitled to it, and there'll be more than enough to go round. By the way. Tubby, you'll have to mention Louis now and then, but there's no need to look like a chief mourner and breathe his name with awe and reverence. If it's troubling your conscience that he died before you'd forgiven him, you can put up a tablet to his memory in our office—when we get one. But don't expect me to raise my hat when I pass it. Next, I've wired to an engineer at the Cape—a first-class man—to bring up a staff and get busy organizing the mine at once. Is that all approved of?"

Mark nodded.

"Absolutely," said Tubby. "You've done wonders, but—well, doing all this—getting the engineer up here, for instance—it seems to me that until we know—one way or the other—"

The speech tailed off lamely.

"What Tubby means," explained Mark, "is that perhaps we're being a little optimistic in making all these arrangements until we know for certain that we're not all going to be hanged."

"You've got a rotten way of putting things, Mark," said Tubby, "but that is how it strikes me. It seems to be pretty obvious to me that until this rotten affair over Louis is settled we'd be much wiser to hold our hands. If people get to know we're registering the mine, they might imagine—well, you know the rotten sort of thing they'd be likely to say."

"Everybody knows already that we've registered the mine," said Larry. "It's all over the town. And as Louis is in for an equal share with us they can hardly say we killed him to do him out of his interest. Besides, they're not likely to hang all three of us, and if I'm to be the one for the high jump, I'd like to know that everything's in order and you two blokes secure."

Mark smiled. "As a racing man, Larry," he said, "I've just had a cheery thought: that if I'm selected for the high jump I shall enter the next world

over the Styx. That's probably a bit beyond you, Tubby, but you can take it from me that it's a fairly bright effort."

"We'll put it in the minutes," grinned Larry. He pulled a map from his pocket and spread it on the table. "Have a look at this," he said. "In a year's time we'll have a proper concrete road running from the bush—Chumbaziri—Pylapo—Timalani—and so home."

They leaned over the table, watching the tip of Larry's pencil as it traced the route. And suddenly, as he leaned back in his chair again, Tubby gave a violent start, staring fixedly out into the garden.

"What is it—something bitten you?" asked Larry.

"Take the advice of a hard-bitten explorer," said Mark, "and if you feel like scratching, scratch."

"Good Lord, Larry," said Tubby in a hoarse whisper, "what does that fellow want? The inspector, I mean. I just caught sight of him—coming up through the garden. Didn't you see him?"

"No, I didn't. Don't be a blithering fool. Tubby. Is the inspector supposed to have been lurking in the bushes and listening, or what?"

"The nearest cover for even a small-sized police inspector," remarked Mark, "is a good twenty yards away. In any case, we've said nothing that couldn't be said without a blush by a young curate at a mothers' meeting."

"Yes, but what does he want—coming here at this time of night?" persisted Tubby.

"For your information. Tubby," said Larry, "there was a murder committed here last night, and a murder is something in which every policeman takes a morbid interest. He has probably thought of a few questions which he forgot to ask last night. I've been expecting him to roll up all day."

"So has Mrs. Thurston," smiled Mark. "She's counting on being questioned. I fancy it's the first murder she has had anything to do with, and she doesn't want to be left out of it."

"This isn't business," Larry reminded them. "We're getting like real directors already. That's the route, anyway, and there's plenty of limestones round here. Of course we shall need a police guard of some sort or we shall have a crowd of Portuguese gold buyers squatting on the property, and half the gold will go west. I should say there'll be no trouble about that, though. And then there's the question of plant. I imagine it'll take some time to get the proper plant out, and in the meantime we'll start them hand-washing."

The other two nodded their assent.

"And now about us," continued Larry. "I'm going up country again at the first possible moment, and I propose staying there six months at least. But there's no need for all three of us to be there. The Thurstons, I believe, intend catching the next boat home, and I suggest that you two go with them."

"Eh?" exclaimed Tubby.

"The idea is, Tubby," explained Mark, "that you and I should leave Larry roaming about the swamps of West Africa and push off to Piccadilly. As far as I'm concerned, Larry, there's nothing doing."

"Absolutely couldn't be done," said Tubby firmly.

Larry made a gesture of impatience. "What's the use of staying out here?" he asked. "Neither of you would be of any more use than a pain in the neck. Quite seriously, though, it's essential for one or other of you to be in England. There'll be a ton of things to see to at that end—all the machinery to buy and— everything."

Mark leaned back in his chair and regarded the roof of the veranda.

"J'y suis, j'y reste," he said. "That's a French saying, Larry, meaning, 'You can't put that sort of thing over on me.' You're rumbled."

"Absolutely," said Tubby. "Got you taped, old boy."

Larry frowned. "I don't know what you think I'm up to," he said. "If you imagine I'm going to hide the mine while you're away and pretend I've lost it—"

"What you're up to," said Mark, "is pushing us out of the country in double-quick time because you think we'd better go while the going's good. Talk sense, Larry, for God's sake. You know there's going to be the devil's own row over this Louis Creet business—"

"And if you expect Mark and me to push off," Tubby

interrupted, " and leave you to face the music Good

Lord, Larry! Have a heart! Quod dixi, dixi; and that's what the Romans used to say when they meant, 'Cut it out, old boy.'"

"I see," said Larry. "So you're going to make a good start by being damnably awkward—"

He stopped and turned as Dr. Thurston came onto the veranda.

"Sorry, you fellows," said the doctor, "but I've a bit of bad news for you. Nothing to worry about, but—well, disappointing. The police inspector has just been to see me."

"Well?" rapped Larry.

"He was very polite about it," said the doctor, "and broke the news as gently as he could, but it boils down to this: that until this trouble over Louis is cleared up none of us must leave Benguella. If we try to, I gathered, we shall be arrested."

CHAPTER XXIII

Mrs. Thurston, always susceptible to "atmosphere," had found the week following Louis's death a very trying one. She had scarcely passed a comfortable minute. Meals, with all at the table eating their food as if they hated the sight of it, and never saying a word except to bite somebody's head ofF, had been dreadful ordeals, and she had several times, in sheer desperation, pleaded a headache and gone without her lunch rather than face the half-hour at the table.

She had no idea what it was all about, and everybody, when she had made tactful enquiries, had chosen to be annoyingly baffling. That dreadful affair over Louis, of course, had upset them, but it did not, she felt, account for the extraordinary way everyone was behaving.

Jacqueline, just when she had seemed to have suddenly recovered her old spirits, had just as suddenly relapsed into a state of irritable depression. The child was obviously unhappy, but she could get nothing out of her, and after several attempts at coaxing her to confidence, she had given up trying. She had an idea that it was all in some way connected with Larry and Louis, but she could not make head or tail of it. If people would be so baffling, there was really nothing for her to do but leave things alone and hope that they would sort themselves out somehow.

Even John was behaving in a most puzzling way. He was usually so cheerful, no matter how difficult things were, and if anything went wrong he had always talked it over with her. But during the last few days he seemed to have closed himself up and deliberately shut her out from any share in his thoughts; and every now and then, when he had not been aware that she was watching him, she had seen his face clouded with anxiety and caught a look in his eyes which had puzzled and distressed her. But he had laughed off her questions and declared that she was imagining things.

And Larry, Mark, and Tubby presented a still more baffling problem. They had hardly a civil word for anyone—least of all for one another. Such a pity, when they had been such tremendous friends. Larry, of course, had always been inclined to be short-tempered, but now he was really quite the most amiable of the three. Except that he was smoking a great deal more than usual, Larry was much as he always was. But Mark never seemed to want to speak to anyone, and resented it when anyone spoke to him, and was behaving exactly like a sulky child, sitting for hours at a time on the veranda staring at the sea and drinking glass after glass of whisky. And yesterday, when Larry had said something to him about it, she really had thought that Mark was going to jump up and hit him.

As for Tubby—well, she had never known anyone change so utterly as Tubby had changed. She did wish he would sometimes sit down. He was never still for five minutes on end now—always lumbering about the place as if he were trying to escape from someone who was following him, with a look in his eyes which somehow made her want to stroke his head and comfort him. And when he did sit down, he kept fidgeting with his hands, twisting his fingers and making the joints crack, as if he were trying to stop himself from screaming.

As Jacqueline came into the room Mrs. Thurston glanced up and gave her most cheerful smile.

"Such a lovely morning, Jackie—"

"Where's Father?" asked the girl.

"He's out," said Mrs. Thurston. "Something about the police and an aeroplane, dear, but he was in a dreadful hurry and I really didn't quite understand. I believe he said he might have to go to St. Paul de Loanda or some such place—the names are really very hard to remember, dear; so much more muddling than in England—but I hope he's not thinking of going by aeroplane. I'm sure with a black man as a pilot it wouldn't be at all safe."

"It would be a Portuguese pilot, Mother," said Jacqueline with a smile, "and it's really quite safe when the pilot hasn't had too much gin. They haven't had a crash, Larry says, for nearly a fortnight. What's Father going to St. Paul for?"

"My dear, it's no use asking me," sighed her mother. "Nobody tells me anything these days, and I've given up enquiring. Everybody seems at sixes and sevens, and I'm sure I've wished a dozen times that we'd stayed in England and gone to Bournemouth or somewhere for a month. What with Larry and the others—"

"What's wrong with Larry?"

"My dear, what's wrong with everybody? They all seem so dreadfully worried and strange and unlike themselves."

Jacqueline gave a shrug.

"It can't be very pleasant for them, Mother, can it? About Louis, I mean. Of course, there's absolutely no evidence against Larry or Mark or Tubby; they were all elsewhere when the shot was fired. Still, somebody shot Louis."

"But nobody could possibly suspect Larry or Mark or Tubby of having done it," protested Mrs. Thurston. "Anybody with the least sense would know that none of them could possibly do such a dreadful thing."

Jacqueline smiled.

"You know it. Mother. So—so do L But it's rotten for them, all the same, feeling that other people suspect them. And of course people do. They suspect all of us. Me, too, probably. After all, I was there—in the room—when the others came in—and if anyone is under suspicion—"

"My dear, don't talk such nonsense," interrupted her mother. "Why should you shoot Louis? He was always very good to you, and I'm sure you were very fond of him, and you could have no possible reason—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Mother, don't let's talk about it," interrupted Jacqueline. She laid a hand on her mother's shoulder and smiled at her. "It's been a rotten sort of holiday for you, darling," she said. "I really do believe Bournemouth would have done you more good."

"My dear Jackie," said her mother, "I wouldn't in the least mind Africa if only people would cheer up!"

Jacqueline was anxious to avoid further questioning. All the questions which her mother had put or would put to her were questions which she had asked herself dozens of times during the past week and had been unable to answer. She had the same complaint against everyone as her mother: nobody would tell her anything—not even Larry.

Larry had been avoiding her—purposely, obviously manoeuvring so that he should not be left alone with her. She thought she understood why. Larry had put her on a pedestal, and she had toppled off, and he had no interest in the broken pieces. She did not blame him. Men were like that—different from women. If Larry had tumbled off a pedestal she would not have avoided him, no matter how chipped or broken he might be. Besides, he didn't want her asking any more questions.

Stepping onto the veranda, she saw Larry, sprawling in a deck chair, making pencil notes on a slip of paper, frowning ominously. As he heard her step he glanced up.

"Hullo, Jackie! How many sleepers three feet apart in a mile of railway line? Or should I write to Einstein? I'm working things out—for the mine, you know."

She flung herself in the chair beside his.

"How's the mine going, Larry? All fixed up?"

He nodded.

"Absolutely, Jackie. I hope you appreciate the fact that you're probably sitting next to a millionaire."

"Then if the mine's all right, Larry, what in the name of fortune is wrong with you all?"

Larry raised his eyebrows.

"Wrong?"

"With you, Mark, Tubby, Father—everybody," said Jacqueline. "You're all behaving as if you had a secret pain somewhere, and not one of you is fit to speak to."

Larry sighed.

"And I thought I was being particularly charming. I made three splendid jokes at breakfast, Jackie. Even you didn't laugh, though."

She gave a shrug.

"I'd seen them in Punch," she said. "But seriously, Larry, you haven't quarrelled, have you, with Tubby and Mark?"

He shook his head.

"We love each other like the Three Musketeers, Jackie."

She leaned back in her chair with a sigh and for some minutes sat watching Larry's face as he worked at his figures. And then she sat upright again.

"Larry," she said, "is it anything to do with me? Oh, don't pretend not to understand. All this glowering and glaring and sulking and never having a pleasant word for anybody. You're all three the same, and Father isn't much better. Of course you're fed up with me; I can understand that. But I don't see why Mark and Tubby—oh, I don't know! Do I come into it somewhere?"

He shook his head.

"Then what is it? Louis Creet?"

He shrugged.

"We won't talk about Louis if you don't mind, Jackie. You know what they say—De mortuis nil nisi bunkum—and I don't think I'm equal to the bunkum!"

"You're worried about it, aren't you, Larry?"

"Good Lord, aren't you a damned little nuisance!" sighed Larry. "Yes, if you must know, of course I'm worried, and Mark and Tubby are still more worried because they've got sweeter natures than mine. And Tubby can't stand the idea that a few Portuguese policemen may have a suspicion that he plugged Louis."

"Somebody killed him, Larry."

"Quite. And it's a bit nerve-racking, Jackie, hanging about here and feeling all the time that everybody thinks we did it. It's not surprising, is it, if our tempers are a bit ragged? I believe Tubby lies awake every night wondering

how long a drop they'll give him and whether it's the thing to shake hands with the hangman—just as a sort of sporting gesture."

Jacqueline nodded.

"It must be pretty foul," she admitted, and was silent again.

"Larry," she said suddenly, "you know, don't you? Who did kill Louis?"

Larry continued gazing at his slip of paper.

"'I, said the sparrow,' he grinned, "'with my bow and arrow.' Or it wouldn't surprise me to learn, Jackie, that an angel was sent to put him out—just to purify the African atmosphere."

"In other words, mind my own business, eh?"

He nodded.

"And put some powder on your nose," he added. "It's shiny."

She rose.

"Righto, Larry!" she said. "I said you'd changed, didn't I? So you have. But I suppose a man can't be expected to become a millionaire without changing. It's hard to believe when you never know where your next fiver's coming from, but they say most people are spoilt if they get a lot of money. Once upon a time you used to tell me everything."

"And now I've changed, eh, Jackie?" He shook his head. "Barring a few grey hairs, which only make me look more distinguished, I'm the same fool I always have been."

"Then why won't you tell me what's worrying you?"

He tossed his paper and pencil onto the table, rose, and placed a hand on each of her shoulders.

"Listen, Jackie," he said gravely. "Things are pretty difficult just now one way and another, and you're only making them more so. There's something I'd very much like to tell you, but just at the moment I can't do it—and that's the chief trouble as far as I'm concerned. That's good enough, isn't it?"

She nodded, and as Larry seated himself again, Mark and Tubby came onto the veranda, flung themselves into chairs, and stared gloomily out to sea. Jacqueline stood for a moment glancing with perplexed eyes from one solemn face to the other; and then she smiled.

"The Three Disgraces!" she laughed, and went indoors.

Tubby glanced up, glaring. I say, what the deuce did she mean by that?" he demanded. "I tell you, Larry, the way people keep on hinting things—"

He was cut short by the appearance of Dr. Thurston, who came hurrying from the garden.

"I've just been seeing the police," he announced.

Tubby glanced at him sharply.

"They phoned and asked me to call round," added the doctor. "They've been through to St. Paul.... They want me to go over at once and see the governor."

"Good Lord, what for?" demanded Tubby.

Dr. Thurston shrugged.

"As the medical man-on-the-spot, I suppose I've got to answer still more questions," he said. "The police here don't seem satisfied, and there's no getting out of going. They're sending me over by 'plane, so I should be back before sundown. I'm off at once. Meanwhile"—with a wave of his hand towards the decanter on the table—"go steady with that, all of you, or I shall be having you on my hands."

As soon as the doctor had entered the house. Tubby sprang to his feet.

"Good Lord, Larry!" he exclaimed in an agitated voice. "What does that mean?"

"Probably that a drunken Portuguese pilot will break his neck," he said. "According to the law of averages another accident is well overdue."

"But if the police have sent him—what I mean is, why?"

"Oh, shut up, Tubby!" exclaimed Larry. "To fetch a rope, probably. Three ropes, for all I know. They'll line us up in a row, I expect, and we shan't hear what the chaplain's saying because of your teeth chattering. Sit down and have a drink and don't get the wind up. You get on my nerves."

Mark helped himself to a drink and swallowed it at a gulp.

"You're getting right on top of me, Tubby," he said irritably. "You're making it so poisonously hard for all of us. The whole rotten business is getting on my nerves. And you don't help, Larry, by spitting poison every time you speak. You know what they're saying in the town now, don't you?"

"The town can go to blazes."

"That's all very well," said Tubby. "You may not care, Larry, but I do. I suppose I'm not cut out for this job, and it's pretty rotten, I can tell you. They're saying quite openly now that one of us three must have shot Louis—
"

"Since one of us three did shoot Louis," said Larry, "they're not so far wrong, are they?"

"Staring at us in the street," said Mark, "pointing to us, crossing the road to avoid us as if we were lepers—"

"And you're so thin-skinned that you blush all over your face," snapped Larry, "and give them every reason for doing it again. Let them stare, let them point, let them cross the road! Who cares, anyway? Drowning kittens is more in your line than shooting a swine like Creet."

"Well, I don't mind admitting that I feel pretty rotten about it," said Tubby. "Frankly, Larry, it's getting me down—"

"Then for heaven's sake creep in the corner and have a good snivel and get it over."

"What I mean is, murder's murder, whichever way you look at it," explained Tubby. "I've been thinking a good deal about this business—"

"Then stick to thinking," interrupted Mark savagely, "and stop talking. Tubby. You've done nothing but talk, talk, talk all the morning, and it does no more good than Larry's snarling sarcasm."

"Who wouldn't snarl?" said Larry. "We went into this thing with our eyes open. We all knew the risks we were running, and we were all prepared to take them. And now, Tubby, when the thing's over and done with, you start whining because people look at you in the street. If you've no more guts than that, you should have kept out of the business and left it to me, as I wanted you to."

"It isn't a question of guts at all," said Tubby. "Not as far as I'm concerned, anyway. I don't care much what happens to me now that Bunty and the kids are provided for."

"You'll start and look guilty," said Larry, "every time you see a policeman's helmet for the rest of your life."

"And every time you see a revolver," added Mark, "your eyes will fill with tears."

Tubby heaved a prodigious sigh.

"I don't know why you both keep nagging at me," he complained, striding up and down the veranda. "I'm only saying it isn't a question of guts at all. It's just knowing all the time that one of us did it and sort of not being able to look one another in the eyes, if you know what I mean. And it'll always be the same. I've been thinking about this a good deal, and it's pretty clear to me that we'll never be able to forget it. What I'm getting at is that we've always been pretty close friends and good pals and all that sort of thing, and this business is going to mess up our friendship."

"Severed by Sin," suggested Larry.

"0h, shut up," snapped Mark, "and let him get it off his chest. Go on, Tubby."

"Well, you see my point, don't you?" said Tubby. "I don't mind telling you chaps that, after Bunty and the kids, I reckon our friendship's about the best thing I've got, and it seems a pity to go messing it up this way."

"If you'll take a good strong nerve tonic. Tubby," said Larry, "there'll be no messing up."

"I'm not so sure," said Mark. "It's come pretty near to it already, if you ask me. What's it going to be like in a few months' time—in a few years' time?

Larry shrugged.

"If Tubby doesn't get a grip of himself," he said, "one of us will have been strung up before then, so the other two will have easy consciences and can love each other to their hearts' content. Why the devil can't you sit down, Tubby?"

Tubby, with a pained expression, subsided into a chair.

"Besides," he added, "as I said just now, murder's murder whichever way you look at it."

"'Execution' is the word in this case, Tubby," said Larry. "Creet got what he deserved."

Tubby shook his head.

"It looked like that a week ago," he said, "but I don't see it that way now. I've done a good deal of thinking lately, and it's as clear as daylight to me now where I slipped up. You said we were justified in shooting those bearers who got sleeping sickness and went mad, because if we hadn't killed them they'd have killed us. But Louis hadn't got sleeping sickness and gone mad, and we knew jolly well he wouldn't have killed us. He'd have swindled us out of the mine, and that's all."

"It isn't all," said Larry, "but never mind."

"What I'm getting at," continued Tubby, "is that there's a difference between shooting a man to stop him killing you and shooting a man to stop him pinching your money."

"It makes no difference now, anyway," said Larry with a shrug. "The job's done, and I'm telling you that there's nothing for it now but to put up with it without making a song about it."

"And I'm telling you, Larry," exclaimed Tubby excitedly, starting to his feet again and restlessly pacing the veranda, "that I can't put up with it. It's getting me down, and when I think that I've got to go on like this My God, Larry, I can't do it—keeping it up year after year, pretending all the time to

Bunty, always wondering if something's been found out.... Damn the money! I'd rather fling the whole lot in the sea. I wish to God I'd never come to Africa, never found the mine, never had anything to do with our rotten agreement. For two pins I'd make a clean breast of the whole business."

Larry sprang to his feet.

"Do that, Tubby," he said grimly, "and I'll break your neck without turning a hair. You're not alone in this. I'm in it, Mark's in it, and however you may feel about it now, you made the agreement and you're going to stick to it."

"Oh, don't mind me," said Mark. "After all, there's a good deal in what Tubby says. I'm not squeamish, but there's a rotten stink about this business. Let him blab if he wants to."

Larry eyed them both scornfully.

"A couple of quitters, eh?" he said. "But you're not going to quit, either of you. You made an agreement with me, and I hold you to it. Louis got killed—with your consent—for backing out of an agreement, and now you're wanting to do the same."

He paused, watching them with puzzled eyes.

"Good Lord, Mark—Tubby—what's happened to you?"

"Look here," said Tubby; "it's not that I want to let you and Mark down, but—well, it's conscience, I suppose. I always was a sentimental sort of ass, you know; but I'm built that way and I can't help it. I'd feel much happier if I made a clean breast of the whole thing and took the consequences. If you and Mark agree, I'll own up to having shot Louis. It won't affect you two—"

Larry cut him short.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Tubby. If you didn't kill Creet, then one of us two knows you didn't, and you'd leave him no choice but to come forward and say so. You'd be forcing him to give himself away. And if you did kill Creet, you'd be incriminating both of us, because we agreed that if one of us got into a mess over this affair the other two should use all their resources to get him out of it, and we'd be obliged to come forward and admit we had a hand in it too. We'd be accessories before the fact, Tubby, so you can cut that idea of yours right out."

Tubby returned dejectedly to his chair, and for a while no word was spoken.

"Look here, you fellows," said Larry at length. "If you feel like that about it, it's no use going on. I'm not blaming you; you're possibly quite right. We were all a bit worked up when we made our agreement or we should probably never have made it. But if the agreement is to be ended, there's only one fair way of doing it."

Mark and Tubby glanced at him inquiringly.

"We can't have anyone owning up to a crime he didn't commit," continued Larry, "because, as I said just now, the one who did commit it would be obliged to inform the police that he was a liar. If you're really serious about it, what I suggest is this: that the one who did shoot Creet should give himself up to the authorities, and that the other two should be under no obligation to do anything to help him. In fact, they should be under a definite obligation to keep their mouths shut and give him no help at all. One man in a mess because of Louis Creet is quite enough; he's not worth all three of us. What do you say?"

For several moments the other two remained silent.

"Yes, but look here, Larry," began Tubby, "it doesn't seem fair—"

"It's perfectly fair," interrupted Larry. "Anyway, it's that or the original agreement. What do you say, Mark?"

Mark shrugged.

"If it suits you and Tubby it suits me," he said. "Anything for a quiet life."

"Tubby?"

Tubby's eyes were distressed.

"Hang it, Larry, I don't quite see it's fair—"

"Mark and I agree. Yes or no?"

"Oh, all right!" sighed Tubby. "Have it your own way."

Larry smiled.

"Then that's settled," he said. "The executioner of Louis Creet will proudly enter the police station and confess his noble action tomorrow morning. Is that agreed?"

They nodded.

CHAPTER XXIV

Dr. Thurston was not back by sundown—not, however, because the pilot had broken his neck or the law of averages claimed its overdue accident. Both pilot and the law of averages were partly responsible: the pilot because, having generously filled himself up at St. Paul during his hour's wait for his passenger, he entirely overlooked the necessity of rendering a similar service to the aeroplane, with the result that, when scarcely more than half of the return journey had been covered, he was forced to descend in search of petrol; and the law of averages because it insisted that, in obedience to its demand that not more than a very limited mileage should be flown without mishap, he should today damage his machine in landing and be unable to proceed.

A message had come through from the doctor that he was finishing the journey by car, and after dinner Mrs. Thurston, anxious to escape the "atmosphere," chose the first possible moment to retire to bed.

Jacqueline, having played the piano for half an hour to an audience of three men who gave no sign that they were even aware of her presence, dropped her hands to her lap and glanced from one to another with a puzzled frown.

"Rounds of applause!" she laughed. "I'll sing 'Parted,' Tubby, shall I?"

"Good Lord, no—please don't," begged Tubby. "Thanks all the same, Jackie, but I'm a bit off 'Parted.'"

She got up from the piano.

"Who'd be a millionaire!" she sighed. "Where is it. Tubby—in the neck?"

"Eh?"

"The pain," laughed Jacqueline. "You're a cheery crowd, aren't you?" She turned to Larry. "When shall we be able to leave this God-forsaken country, Larry? It's beginning to get me down."

"Ask a policeman, Jackie."

"And who's coming back to England? All of you?"

"Someone will have to stop behind," said Larry. "I fancy I shall be staying in any case."

Mark and Tubby glanced at him, but he avoided their eyes.

"As a matter of fact," said Mark, "we haven't decided yet who'll be stopping. One of us, though."

"Absolutely," agreed Tubby. "The mine, you know, Jackie. Someone will have to stay behind to see about the mine, but we haven't agreed yet which one of us it's to be. We shall know—tomorrow."

She nodded and went thoughtfully to the door.

"I'm going to write some letters," she said. "But couldn't somebody smile before I go?"

Tubby forced a smile and turned his face towards her.

"How's that, Jackie?"

"Awful!" sighed Larry. "If I had to find a title for that close-up, Tubby, I'd call it 'Tortured by Toothache.' Mark could do better than that. See what you can do for the lady, Mark."

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Mark. "How's that, Jackie?"

She shrugged.

"If I had to find a title for that, Mark, I'd call it 'Earth Falling in a Coffin,'" she said, and went from the room.

Tubby sprang to his feet.

"Look here, Larry," he began, "you had no right to say that, you know—about staying on here, I mean. We agreed this morning—"

Larry cut him short.

"For God's sake. Tubby, don't start walking about again. It's trying for all of us, but we can't all keep dancing about the place, and it's time you stuck to a chair and gave Mark and me a chance."

He rose, pushed Tubby into a seat, and himself began pacing the room.

"Look here, you fellows," he said. "I've been thinking things over, and I've a suggestion to make. I told you a week ago, didn't I, that I'd a better reason for putting Creet out than either of you? That was true, and if things had been arranged the way I wanted them arranged, I'd have done the job and you two wouldn't have been mixed up in it at all. That's one point."

"It's a damned bad one," said Mark. "But carry on."

"And the next point," continued Larry, "is that it was I who first suggested that the only way out of our troubles was to put a bullet into Creet. If I hadn't suggested it, you two fellows would never have thought of it. That's a good point, anyway."

"Speaking for myself," said Tubby, "I'd been thinking of it ever since he refused to sign the contract. Look here, Larry, old boy, I know what you're getting at, but you made an arrangement with us this morning, and you've got to stick to it."

Larry ignored that.

"The next point," he went on, "is that if anybody is to get into a mess over this business, I stand to lose less by it than either of you two. Shut up. Tubby, and wait until I've finished. I'm a free agent. Whatever happens to me, there's nobody to care a hang. But you're different. Tubby has Bunty to think of, and when a man has a wife he's not a free agent. He's bound to take her into his calculations, and if one of us is to own up to plugging Creet, Tubby has less right to do it than any of us."

Tubby shook his head.

"Absolute rot, old boy," he said.

"Much the same applies to Mark," said Larry. "He's a secretive old devil, but there's a girl in the background somewhere. He's had a whole lot of letters in a feminine handwriting, anyway, and has never torn one of them up, and that's pretty convincing evidence against him. That being so, he's got to take that girl into his calculations, and that definitely rules him out.

"Therefore," said Mark, "by a process of exhaustion we arrive at the conclusion that the only one of us who has the least right to say he shot Creet is Mr. Larry-Deans. Shall I punch his head, Tubby, or will you?"

"Rot, old boy!" said Tubby. "Besides, you can't keep chopping and changing about. We fixed this up this morning, and we'll stick to what we said."

"Moreover," added Mark, "I could put up a very convincing case, Larry, that in handing myself over to the hangman I should be doing the girl in the background a far better turn than by condemning her to have breakfast with me every morning for the rest of her life."

"I was talking seriously, Mark."

Mark grinned.

"Forgive the comment," he said, "but Tubby and I are inclined to think that you were talking pretty average rot."

"In any case," announced Tubby, "I'm not agreeing. You can go on talking if you like, Larry, but I'm sticking to what we said."

"By a majority of two to one, Larry," said Mark, "your motion is defeated."

"Righto!" shrugged Larry. "Then we'll draw for it."

"We'll do nothing of the sort," exploded Tubby. "Good Lord, Larry, cut it out! I've had enough of drawing to last me a lifetime."

"I disapprove of lotteries," said Mark. "They're illegal."

"Oh, well, for heaven's sake, let's do something, then," exclaimed Larry irritably. "All this hanging about and doing nothing but stare at our feet and look as if we'd pinched a penny out of a blind man's tin— it's enough to

drive a chap crazy. There's the dickens of a time yet before tomorrow morning. Can't you recite something, Tubby? No, on second thoughts, there'd be another murder if you did that."

"This is the first time I've ever watched the time pass and not been able to fill it in," sighed Tubby. "Just watching the damned hands go round!"

"What's wrong with cheating time with a game of poker?" asked Mark.

Larry shook his head.

"Not with Tubby," he said. "It's like picking a kid's pocket. You can know every card in his hand by looking at his face. Nap, if you like—solo—anything as long as we do something. Come on, Tubby! We're all rich men now, so for the first rime in our lives we'll play for tenners. I've got some cards in my room— the famous green pack that sent Louis to hell. I found them in my coat pocket yesterday. Find a table, one of you, and I'll fetch them."

He went striding from the room; and when, a few moments later, he returned, the card table was open and Mark and Tubby were seated at it. Larry joined them and began shuffling the cards.

"What's it to be—Nap?"

They nodded.

"Tenners," he said, and placed the pack on the table. "Cut, Tubby."

Tubby, however, did not cut immediately. He leaned forward and stared at the cards, his lips twisted into a rather wry smile.

"What's wrong. Tubby?" asked Mark.

"I'm just thinking," replied Tubby, still gazing at the cards in front of him. "It just struck me that after all the doctor was right. About the colour, I mean. If you remember, he said green was an unlucky colour

"Cut, Tubby," said Larry shortly.

They cut; Larry dealt; and then, just as they picked up their hands, the door was opened and Dr. Thurston came briskly into the room.

"Thank heaven for motorcars!" he said. "I don't wish the fellow any harm, but the sooner that pilot breaks his neck the better for the future of flying."

"Gin?" grinned Larry.

"Ran out of juice," said the doctor, "and half shook the life out of me landing. We very nearly turned turtle, but the fellow only smiled. Apparently he's used to it."

He stood, his hands thrust into the pockets of his coat, scanning their faces.

"What's the game?" he asked, with a nod towards the table.

"Nap," said Larry. "Care to join in?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I'm for something to eat," he said. "I'm famished. And after that pilot I fancy I'm entitled to a drink. I'll join you when I've fed."

He turned to go and then paused.

"In the meantime," he said, "if you're playing Nap, you'll probably be glad to have—that."

His hand was withdrawn from his pocket and tossed a crumpled green-backed card face downwards on the table.

"It's a bit dishevelled," he added, "I've had it in my pocket for a week."

The three men glanced at him—three pairs of eyes surprised, puzzled, inquiring; and then Larry's hand shot out, seized the card, and turned it quickly over.

It was the ace of spades!

CHAPTER XXV

For several tense seconds they sat motionless, gazing at the crumpled card; and then suddenly Tubby was on his feet.

"Doctor," he began excitedly, "you don't mean that—that all the time... Hang it, Larry, you see what this means, don't you? If that card's been in the doctor's pocket—"

"Steady, Tubby!" laughed Dr. Thurston. "The trouble with you fellows is you're not accustomed to verandas, or it may be that after a year in the forest with nobody within earshot you've developed a habit of shouting at one another. Anyway, you were talking pretty loudly out there that morning when I was in the lounge. I couldn't help overhearing your plan for deciding who was to—buy the cigarettes. All things considered, I wasn't surprised, and I couldn't bring myself to blame you, but at the same time I couldn't bring myself to let you run that sort of risk."

He paused, smiling reflectively.

"It just goes to show," he went on, "that when people say that good can't come out of evil they're talking nonsense. It must be a terribly evil thing to scrounge two packs of cards off a liner, yet if I hadn't scrounged two packs—if, for instance, I'd only scrounged one pack—there's no knowing what trouble might have followed. Louis, I haven't the least doubt, would now be dead just the same, and in addition one of you three fellows would have been in a pretty tight corner, so I reckon there's a balance of good, anyway."

"But look here, Doctor " began Tubby.

The doctor raised his hand.

"One moment, please. Tubby. Let me finish, and then you can say what you like. As it was, I was able, since I had two packs, to take the ace of spades from the pack I gave you and substitute the two of diamonds from the other pack. I placed the two deuces of diamonds together so that there was no chance of them both falling to the same hand and giving the game away."

"Then you mean. Doctor," exclaimed Tubby, "that old Larry—Mark—none of us—"

The doctor nodded.

"None of you, thank God!" he said. "Louis Creet died—by other means."

Tubby sank into his chair, rested his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands. The doctor laid a hand on his shoulder.

"An interfering old fool, eh, Tubby?" he said. "But you must try to forgive me, I couldn't have one of you chaps in trouble over a swine like Creet. And now"—turning to go—"I'm going to scrounge something to eat."

"Just a moment. Doctor," said Larry. "Somebody shot Louis. If none of us did it, who did?"

The doctor's face was grave.

"Creet shot himself," he said.

Larry's eyes searched his.

"You think the authorities will believe that?"

"They do believe it," replied Dr. Thurston. "I saw the governor at St. Paul today. As a matter of fact, I saw the governor, the deputy governor, the minister of justice, the minister of health, and all their secretaries and deputy secretaries and assistant deputy secretaries. I was rather disappointed at not being introduced to the shorthand typists. I also saw an English doctor—the only one of the whole lot who really mattered. A chat with him and the whole thing was soon settled. It's definitely accepted as a case of suicide. You'll hear no more about it, and if you feel like sailing for England by the next boat there's no one in Portuguese West Africa who wants to stop you."

Larry nodded.

"Very clever, Doctor," he said. "But you must have forgotten to mention two important points at St. Paul—that Jacqueline distinctly saw somebody disappearing onto the veranda as she entered the room, and that, if it was a case of suicide, it was rather peculiar that no weapon was found. If Louis shot himself, what became of the revolver?"

The doctor smiled.

"No, I mentioned both points, Larry," he said. "I told them the truth—that the figure Jackie saw was myself, and that no revolver was found because I had already taken it away."

He saw Larry's quick movement of surprise and smiled. It was an achievement to startle Larry.

"I hadn't gone to bed,"" he explained, "when the shot was fired, and within a few seconds I was in the room—well ahead of any of the rest of you—and the first thing I noticed was that the revolver grasped in Louis's hand was the one I'd given to Jackie for this trip. I couldn't imagine then how he had got hold of it, but I discovered afterwards that Jackie had left it on her dressing table, and Louis, presumably, passing along the veranda, had seen it and helped himself to it. There's a French window to the veranda, you know, and as Jackie often left it open, that was no doubt the explanation."

Larry nodded.

"And not wishing Jackie to be mixed up in the affair," added the doctor, "I took the revolver, slipped it into my pocket, and just got away via the veranda as someone entered the room. Apparently it was Jackie, and she just caught sight of me. She came to me later and told me that her revolver was missing, but I sent her back to make a thorough search of her room and she found it in her cabin trunk. As a matter of fact, I'd cleaned it and reloaded it and put it there—the next morning—just before breakfast, after she'd left her room. But I don't want Jackie to know that. I've been hoping all along that the police would decide it was suicide without my having to say anything. I didn't want Jackie mixed up in the affair if I could avoid it—especially if it was going to be a case of murder, and if I'd said a word she'd have been in it up to the neck."

"And that's that, Larry," said Mark. "So it really was suicide, eh, Doctor? I wonder why Creet did a thing like that."

"As a compendium of interesting facts, Mark, I can supply the answer to that question," said Dr. Thurston. "There's no need now for professional secrecy. Louis had been playing with the idea of a medical examination for months, and that morning, after the little affair of the night before, he actually nerved himself to face the ordeal. He always had a sneaking fear there was something seriously wrong with him, and when I'd had a look at him it was my job to tell him he was right. He had cancer."

"Poor devil!" muttered Tubby.

"I told him that at the most he had only a few months to run, and that if he underwent an operation he'd be facing a good deal of pain and a fair certainty of not pulling through it. He took it pretty badly—far worse than I'd expected—put away a whole bottle of whisky in about twenty minutes and behaved like a madman. I had no end of a job to quieten him down. There's the answer to your question, Mark. Creet wasn't the first man with cancer to prefer a bullet. Still, it's over and we'll try to forget it. What's the programme now?"

Tubby jumped up.

"I say. Doctor, this is marvellous, you know," he exclaimed. "I mean, after all this time—thinking one of us three—oh, well, you know what I mean, don't you?"

"Without making a speech about it—thanks, Doctor," said Mark.

"And I'll tell you what I'm going to do," added Tubby excitedly. "There's a boat tomorrow, and I'm catching it. I'm going straight off now to pack my things."

He went striding across the room, and Mark rose and followed him.

"Catching the boat, too, Mark?" asked Larry. "There's no reason why you shouldn't. I'm staying on here anyway and can carry on until you get back."

"Perhaps I will," said Mark. "But the urgent need of the moment is to tell someone I'm probably a millionaire." He smiled at Larry. "I think I'll drop a note," he said, "to the girl in the background."

As the door closed behind them, Larry rose and stood looking at the doctor with amused eyes.

"You're a bad liar. Doctor," he said.

The doctor raised his eyebrows.

"I don't quite follow you, Larry—"

"Louis wasn't as bad as that. Why did you tell him he was going to die, Jackie?"

Dr. Thurston's face grew grave.

"So you've guessed, eh, Larry? I wasn't afraid of the others, but I feared you might." He laid a hand on Larry's arm. "I've not had a happy time, Larry," he said. "You understand, I know. I took the simplest way with Creet. I thought I knew him well enough. I banked on his doing—well, just what he did. If he hadn't—" He hesitated. "Yes, there'd have been no other way. If he hadn't done it, Larry, I was going to shoot him. I'd have been ready to answer to God for killing Louis Creet."

Larry nodded, turned, and went towards the door.

"Larry!"

The doctor was absently turning over the cards on the table.

"About—about Jackie. You realize that it was not her fault—she played the game—"

Larry gave him a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Doctor," he said. "I'm going to look for Jackie now."

He found her in the garden, bathing, she told him, in the moonlight, and slipped his arm through hers.

"The doctor's back," he said. "The authorities are satisfied that Louis shot himself, and there's no reason for hanging about any longer. Mark and Tubby are catching the boat tomorrow, and I suppose you'll all go together. I'm staying out here for a bit."

"Alone, Larry?"

"That depends, Jackie—on you. I couldn't start talking until I knew where I was over Louis and the mine and all the rest of it, but it's plain sailing now and I can talk. I want you to stay out here and marry me."

For an instant her arm pressed his against her side, and then she withdrew it and faced him gravely.

"Why, Larry?"

"Because I love you. It's commonplace as a reason, but it happens to be true."

"It's not because you want to—to be kind to a poor, pathetic little Magdalene?"

He shook his head.

"And in spite of—everything?"

"Good Lord, what rot you talk!" exclaimed Larry.

"When a man loves a girl he doesn't love her in spite of anything; he loves her because of everything—everything she has ever been or done or thought or felt—everything that has made her just what she is. That's how I love you. There's no need to argue about it, is there?"

She shook her head, smiling.

"No need at all, Larry," she said.

Dr. Thurston was standing at the window of the bedroom.

"Are you awake, my dear?"

Mrs. Thurston's voice, muffled by the bedclothes, assured him that she was wide awake.

"I've been telling you," said the doctor, "that everything's all right and we can catch a boat tomorrow if you want to. Mark and Tubby will be going, and the four of us may as well go together,"

"Four of us, John?"

"You, Mark, Tubby, and I. Larry stays behind for a bit."

"But there's Jackie."

The doctor smiled, gazing out of the window.

"I don't fancy Jackie will be going, my dear," he said. "She's out there in the garden now—with Larry."

Mrs. Thurston sat bolt upright in bed.

"John—do you really think?"

"He's kissing her, anyway." He turned from the window. "I think we can call that a deal, my dear. I wonder if the shipping people would transfer Jackie's ticket to Mark or Tubby."

"Such a saving if they would, John. But are you quite sure?"

The doctor waved a hand towards the window.

"Judge for yourself," he laughed.

Mrs. Thurston sank back on her pillow with a little sigh of contentment.

"Such a dear boy," she murmured sleepily. "But I do hope he'll be nice to the parson."

THE END