THE LADY OF ASCOT

BY

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The Lady Of Ascot

CHAPTER I

Curiosity being one of the besetting sins of John Morlay, it was impossible that he should pass the entrance to the lodge or fail to witness the signs of activity which were there to hold and detain the attention of the idle. He saw Little Lodge through a narrow gap in a trim box-hedge—a little too narrow for the curse-mumbling workmen who were carrying in a wardrobe and were expressing their views accordingly. Yet the gap was not accidental.

Behind, folded back, he saw a pair of even narrower ironwork gates; beyond those, a little shaven lawn, something that might have been a lily-pond, and a tiny house.

It was a pseudo-Queen Anne manor, so small that it might have been built by some plutocrat to give his young and pampered daughter the joys of a practicable doll's house. It was very red, had little iron lanterns at the door, and trim windows with chintz curtains.

This was Little Lodge, discoverable only to such explorers as John Morlay, who preferred by-ways to the roaring, smelling high road. And this was not even an ordinary by-road, but a cul-de-sac from a rambling blind alley that led nowhere. There are scores of such places in and around Ascot.

Obviously a new tenant was moving in—or was it a new proprietor? He followed the workmen staggering with their load up a gravelled path, recently weeded. The baby lily-pond was full of ridiculously clean water. A gardener leaned on the crossbar of his mowing-machine, wiped his brow automatically, and greeted John with that odd mixture of respectfulness and freedom which servants employ to strangers who might, for all they know, be their new employers, and, on the other hand, might be nobody worth so much as giving a "sir" to.

"There were seven million tadpoles in that pond," he said extravagantly.

"I only counted six million," said John, and the man was baffled. "I'll meet you half-way—six and a half." Mr. Morlay was in his most generous mood.

"When I came here this grass was so high," the gardener attempted again. His hand wavered between his waist and his knees.

"That's nothing," said John. "I often get lost in the grass round my house. Who are these people—some new tenants?"

"Them?" The man jerked his head towards the open doorway. "No, bought it. Old Lady Coulson lived here for years. Always wore green hats for Ascot. You remember her?"

John felt that the inquiry called for cogitation. "No," he said at last. "How many green hats did she wear?"

The man looked at him suspiciously.

"A countess has got it now," he said reflectively.

"One of the hats? Oh, you mean the house."

"A young countess," said the gardener. "I ain't seen her. She's coming here from school. There's a maid and a cook coming down, and a woman in for the day—I'm tempor'y."

"Temporary what?" asked John, interested.

"Gardener. Two days a week." He shook his head. "You can't do it on two days a week; you've got to have a man pottering about all the time. There's no greenhouse—nothing. What about the winter? You've got to pot 'em out—
"
"Pot what out?" asked John.

"Flowers."

John Morlay looked round.

"What flowers?" he asked.

The gardener drew a long breath, then emitted a string of names such as one might choose at random from a seed catalogue. When he had finished, breathless, John suggested buttercups. The gardener looked at him as at an enemy, and resumed his mowing, if, indeed, he had ever started mowing.

The visitor strolled over to the door, looked down the passage, on which a strip of grass matting had been laid. There was a smell of new paint. A white-coated workman in the hall dropped six feet of wire to survey him. Turning, he walked slowly round the house. It was, he decided, a delightful,

unreal little place, the very home for a countess—a young countess—and he wondered which of the many countesses he knew or had heard about was the fortunate proprietor.

He became aware that there was another man in the garden—a tall, broad-shouldered, shabby-looking old man, with a grey, forbidding face. He was scowling at the house from the garden adjoining; hesitating, like one who expected to be ordered away, before he took courage to come slowly towards the visitor.

"Any chance of a job here, guv'nor?"

His voice was harsh and loud.

The other surveyed him curiously. Over the shoulder of his shabby jacket he carried a soldier's haversack; his boots were big and broken, the trousers frayed at the heel; his collarless shirt was open at his sunburnt throat. John recognized the style of the suit, knew the shabby grey material; the clothes did not fit at any part of the man.

"I've no job for you, my son," he said. "How long have you been out?"

The man blinked at him; his unshaven face puckered for a moment in an expression of supreme resentment.

"Hey?"

"How long have you been out?"

The man turned his eyes to the garden, to the house, to the sky, to everywhere except John.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"How long have you been out of gaol?"

"Six months"—defiantly. And then: "Are you a busy?"

"A sort of one," said John with a little smile. "What were you in for?"

The man was eying him steadily now.

"That's my business. You've got nothing on me, guv'nor. I haven't got to report or anything. I'm not even on ticket-of-leave; I've served my sentence." The man's voice grew strident. "Every day, every hour of it. See? No remission, nothing. They treated me like a dog—I treated them like dogs—that's me!"

As they were watching, two of the furniture men came past one of them was carrying an oil painting. It was difficult, from the glimpse John had of it, to distinguish either its portrait or its artistic value. He saw vaguely that it was a young girl, dressed in blue. Her hair was yellowish, and there was a bunch or a bowl of flowers or a bouquet or something near her hand.

The ex-convict shuffled his feet uneasily. It was obvious that he was anxious to be gone. The habit of years held him, to be questioned further by authority. Morlay, recognizing the symptoms, dismissed him with a "Good day", and he went stalking across the lawn into the lane.

Morlay waited for a while before going back to the house, approved of everything, and came back to the gardener.

"Countess who?" he asked.

The man shook his head.

"I haven't got it right—it's foreign—Eye-talian. It begins with an'M'."

"Thank you for telling me so much," said John.

He made his way across to the narrow gateway, stepped to the side to allow the workmen to pass, and went out into the pleasant cul-de-sac. At the end was the big furniture van he had noticed before. He had come up to this when he saw a car stop and a woman alight; middle-aged, rather plump. He thought she might be the housekeeper, but the gardener had not mentioned a housekeeper, and, anyway, John's curiosity did not extend to the domestic staff.

He strolled back to the main road, looked up and down for Peas, presently spied him in the distance, and went to meet him.

Romance coloured this dull spot, and romance was the young countess. This Lady of Ascot was probably one of those butterflies who would flick into view for the race week, entertaining gaily, and then, drawing down the white blinds and locking the front door, would flit away to Deauville and the Lido

until fashion beckoned her back to her little mansion, all aired and repainted for her arrival.

Peas, walking rapidly towards him, brought him to the rough realities of life.

This youngish-looking sub-inspector from Scotland Yard seldom rejoiced in but rather bore with patience the name of Pickles. He was more generally known as "Peas", and for a curious reason. He was red-haired, and that made it worse, for it was a natural transition from Pickles to Mustard Pickles, and thence to Mustard. So generally was he called by this name that quite staid people like Under-Secretaries of State fell into the vulgar error of referring to him as "Inspector Mustard".

From the standpoint of the criminal community the name had a special significance, and he was helped to a reputation, not wholly unfounded, of being a cunning and a dangerous man.

"That Mustard is hot," they said, and so he became, in their strange rhyming argot, "peas in the pot", which was reduced, by their as strange economies, to "Peas".

Peas had come down to Ascot at the request of the Berkshire police to investigate a commonplace ladder larceny, and had invited John Morlay's companionship partly because he needed an audience, partly because John Morlay's big car was a convenience.

Though it wanted a little time to the period when every house in Ascot would be occupied, there was in residence quite a number of important people, including a belted earl whose young wife had a weakness for sapphires. She had sapphire rings and clips and bracelets of an incredible value, and she "travelled" them, as they say in theatrical circles.

One night when she was entertaining a select party to dinner some person or persons unknown put up a ladder, mounted to her bedroom, smashed the safe which was on the right-hand side of her bed, and took three precious cases of stones. The intruder would have escaped unobserved, but a maid entered the bedroom. She did not at first see the intruder, and, when she did, saw little that would help in identification, for a black silk stocking covered the face. The girl opened her mouth to scream, but a hand "like a vice", as she dramatized it, caught her by the throat and "strangled her scream".

She read fiction of an exciting kind, and knew the clichés of violence by heart. She fainted. She said she was "choked into insensibility", but obviously she fainted. And any nice-minded girl is entitled to faint in such alarming circumstances.

Peas interviewed her. He was a thin, freckled man, who was over forty, but seemed too young for his job. The maid resented his questions, and complained to her employers that he had no manners, and that, instead of getting on with the matter of the burglary, he had wasted his time in inquiring into her personal and private affairs. As, for example, who was her young man? what was his trade? did he live at Ascot? and had he ever been to the house?

"The girl is quite respectable," protested her mistress.

"So far as I am concerned there isn't anybody who is respectable," retorted Peas wearily.

He was rather ruffled by the time he came up with Mr. Morlay.

"It's the usual ladder larceny," he said, "with the usual bat-headed servant-gel who bursts into tears the moment you ask her whether's she's walking out with a feller she's known for years or one of those flash pick-ups that do all the good work for a gang. Where's that Ford of yours?"

"In the royal stables," said John. "I would have put it away in a vulgar garage, but somebody recognized you. 'Isn't that the great Mustard Pickles?' they said. 'We can't allow his friend's car to mix with common flivvers—'"

"Laugh and the world laughs with you," said Peas complacently. "When you consider my natural ability, it's a crime to send me on a case like this."

John Morlay had never discovered whether Peas' extravagant claims to excellence were part of a rather ponderous jest, or whether he really believed that nature had been more than usually prodigal when she had fashioned his mentality. You either liked Peas very much or you loathed him. It needed a sense of humour to find him tolerable—John Morlay had that, and more.

"There's nothing in the case that a child of six couldn't understand." Peas sniffed as they went in search of the car, which was standing in the garage of a small hotel. "It might trouble a local bumpkin, but not a man with my experience and reputation. It's the same crowd that has been working

country houses for weeks. There's no sense in explaining the matter to you, Mr. Morlay, because you're not a regular—"

"By the way, I saw a man in the neighbourhood who is obviously an ex-convict," interrupted John, and told of his meeting.

Peas listened and shook his head.

"Don't know him—anyway, it wouldn't be an old man. I've got an idea that the bird who did this job is working solitary."

Peas knew Ascot very well, he confessed, as they were driving back to Town; but as he claimed to know all places and all men very well, his companion did not at first take the statement seriously.

"I know all the old crowd," said Peas, "but there's a lot of new villas goin' up—people moving out and movin' in. I don't know this Countess Fioli—"

"Countess Fioli!"

The ear swerved. Mr. Morlay had an unpleasant habit of communicating his emotions to his steering-wheel. "Good lord! I know her—slightly."

"Don't drive to the common danger," said Peas. "It's a curious thing, but nothing ever upsets me when I'm driving. If a feller was to jump up from the side of the road and shoot at me I wouldn't bat a lid—"

"Stop talking about yourself for a minute, Peas. Is she the countess who is taking that new house?"

Peas nodded.

"She's a schoolgirl—leavin' in the middle of term, which is bad. Schools don't like kids to leave in the middle of term. She's comin' up next week—her guardian or something has bought the house, and that's all there is to it—there'll be another bright little home for Diamond Dan or Sapphire Saul to burgle, and more work for the Intelligence of Scotland Yard."

"Meaning you?"

"Name three men in Europe with my brain," said Peas complacently.

CHAPTER II

Sometimes there drifted into the offices of Morlay Brothers suspicious people—and their suspicions were probably well grounded—who desired that other people, less suspicious but more sinful, should be kept under observation, their comings and goings reported, and their lives and doings so faithfully recorded that on a certain day a judge and a jury should be presented with vital facts which would confuse the watched and vindicate the watcher. Sometimes these visitors got as far as John Morlay himself, and that good-looking young man would listen solemnly to the preliminaries, and then, when the narrative had reached its most delicate and intimate stage, would interrupt regretfully.

For Morlay Brothers, though they might undoubtedly and truthfully be described as private detectives, dealt only with the commercial credit of people, and were mainly interested in their operations between ten o'clock in the morning and six o'clock in the evening. Which are the least culpable hours of the day. They dealt with the "long firms", which are the bane of the manufacturer's existence; with swindling traders and suchlike unromantic wrongdoers; and for fifty years Morlay Brothers (the original fraternity long dead, and the grandson of one reigning in their place) had confined themselves to this lucrative and usually colourless branch of criminal detection.

John Morlay was sitting in his office overlooking Hanover Square, forgetting that there was such an obese village as Ascot, and with the mysterious lady of Little Lodge completely escaped from his mind, when Selford, the ancient guardian of his privacy, came sidling into the room.

"Want to see that Mr. Lester?" he asked.

John Morlay could truthfully have said, "No". Instead, he made a little grimace.

"Shoot him in," he said.

One's first impulse when Julian Lester was announced was to invent a lie; then his inevitability became so poignantly apparent that the first inclination went by the board.

Not that John disliked him. Julian could be amusing and provocative. At the same time, there were many other visitors he would have preferred. Julian was a little too tailor-made, his manners a trifle too precious. It was a wholly

inexcusable prejudice, but John Morlay hated his jewelled sleeve-links and his pearl tiepin and his habit of laying his glossy hat upon the table as though it were some rare piece of bric-à-brac. He glanced first at the clock and then at his engagement tablet, and saw with satisfaction that in a quarter of an hour he would have an excuse for saying, "Outside, Eliza!" which was his vulgar way of dismissing friends and semi-friends.

Julian came in, looking as though he had stepped out of the proverbial bandbox. He put his silk hat in exactly the spot John Morlay expected, and skinned his gloves slowly. The two men presented a contrast in good looks. John Morlay, lean-faced, brown-skinned, and blue-eyed; Julian, a normal development from the pretty-boy stage, his olive face smooth, a shiny little black moustache neatly balanced on a lip that pouted a little.

"Sit down," said John. "You're looking happy—whom have you swindled?"

Julian pulled up the knees of his trousers and sat down, and then, seeing the smile on the other's face:

"You can snigger—you're a rich man, John, and I'm a poor devil with a tailor to pay."

John Morlay pulled a drawer of his desk, took out a box, and snicked open the silver lid.

"Thank you, no. I never smoke cigars. May I have one of my own cigarettes? Thank you."

Every movement of the man was deliberate. John watched him, half irritated, half smiling, as he took out a silver cylinder from his pocket and produced a black amber holder and fitted his cigarette with loving care.

"And what brings you to this part of London? There's a horse show in full swing, Ascot at hand, and a dozen social engagements claiming you," he said.

"Sarcasm is wasted on me, my dear fellow." Julian flicked a speck of tobacco ash from his knee, "I have come to see you on business."

"The devil you have!" said John, his eyebrows going up in astonishment.

Julian nodded soberly.

"Of course it's quite confidential, and all that sort of thing, John, and I realize that I shall have to pay. I don't know what your charges are—"

"Don't bother about the charges, but I warn you I am not in the divorce business, nor in the counterespionage business."

Julian drew a long breath, sent one ring of smoke after another upward, and watched them break against the white ceiling.

"I am a bachelor," he said. "And, what is more, I am a very careful bachelor. I find life sufficiently complicated without that—um—er—those—er—interludes."

He pulled steadily at his cigarette, his eye upon the Adams cornice above John Morlay's head.

"Do you know the Countess Marie Fioli?" he asked unexpectedly.

John gaped at him.

"I know of her, yes—in fact I was talking about her a couple of days ago; but I've never met her." The other man smiled.

"Really, my dear fellow, you must have a heart of ice. When I took the trouble to catch your eye at Rumpelmeyer's just before Christmas, and even introduced you—"

John Morlay's eyebrows rose.

"That child? Good lord! Why, she is a babe."

"Eighteen," said Julian patiently, "and leaving school this week—in the middle of term. Irregular, but in many ways desirable."

He drew delicately at his cigarette.

"My sainted mother was married at seventeen; my lamented father was eighteen when he married. Youthful marriages are not phenomenal in our family."

John sneered.

"Your lamented father was lamentably rash!" he said. "You are a living proof of that! And do you intend that Marie Fioli shall marry at eighteen?"

Julian waved his cigarette airily.

"I have not definitely decided," he said. "There are a few mysteries to be cleared up. She is charming."

"I remember her," said John thoughtfully. "She was amazingly pretty." And then, as an idea occurred to him: "You haven't come to see me about her?"

Julian nodded.

"I'm a poor man, John, as I think I've already told you. My income is exactly three hundred pounds a year, and I earn a little more by scribbling for the better-class reviews. I have no parents to engage themselves on my behalf in finding a wife, and, what is more important, pursuing the delicate inquiries which are part of a parent's duty."

John leaned back in his chair and laughed offensively.

"I am getting a glimmering of what is known as your mind," he said. "You wish me to stand in loco parentis and discover whether the lady's fortune is sufficiently substantial to make her worth your while?"

To his surprise the young man shook his head.

"The extent of her fortune doesn't matter," he said. "It is pretty sure to be a considerable one. In fact, I have every reason to believe that, even with the milking that it's had, there remains enough to keep my young lady in comfort."

"And my young lady's young man," said John sardonically. "Tell me what you mean by 'milking'. Has somebody been robbing her?"

Julian rose, walked to the window, and looked gloomily down into Hanover Square, his hands in his pockets.

"I don't know—it is all very odd. The old woman has bought her a place at Ascot—cost about five thousand. Naturally, I haven't seen the deeds, so I don't know whether it is bought on Marie's account or the old lady's."

"Which old lady?"

Julian returned to his place by the desk, carefully extinguished his cigarette and replaced the holder before he went further.

"You probably have never heard about Mrs. Carawood?" And, as John shook his head: "You wouldn't. She keeps a ladies' mantle establishment—. in fact, she keeps a dozen, in various parts of London. Carawood's Ladies' Second-hand Mantle Stores."

John nodded; he had seen the name.

"Nineteen years ago Mrs. Carawood was a nursemaid in the employ of the Countess Fioli, a widow who had a house at Bournemouth, and who was, I know, a member of a very noble family. The Countess Fioli died. I have been unable to trace any will whatever. The only thing that we are certain about—I have pursued a few inquiries already"—he said this a little apologetically—"is that soon after the child was left in her care Mrs. Carawood became a wealthy woman. Four years later she opened her first store, and thereafter added one to the other, until she now has a chain of shops throughout London, all of which bring in, I should imagine, a considerable sum of money."

"Deplorable. And the child?"

"I must admit," said the other reluctantly, "that she has looked after Marie very well. She sent her to a good preparatory school, and afterwards to the best collegiate school in England. In fact, she is devoted to Marie, or seems to be—and, by Jove! she ought to be devoted! She was obviously using the money left to this poor little girl of mine—"

"Why obviously?" interrupted John. "Quite a number of people with little capital have floated shops and created successful businesses. And let us get this right: is she engaged to you? I refer to the young lady about whom you are speaking so possessively."

Julian hesitated.

"No, not exactly."

"Why shouldn't Mrs. Carawood have made money honestly? Lots of people do"

"Not this kind of woman." Here Julian was definite. "She is almost illiterate; can just read and write, and you will understand her mentality better when I tell you that her favourite forms of literature are those twopenny novels which are issued weekly for the delectation of servant girls."

There was an awkward pause here.

"What do you want me to do?" asked John at last. Julian was a little uncomfortable.

"I don't quite know," he confessed. "I want exact data, more exact than I have been able to get, as to the money—how it is invested—"

"In the business apparently," said the other dryly.

"I want to be sure of that. Obviously, my dear fellow, I cannot afford to marry until I am sure that—"

"That she has enough to keep you." John Morlay was brutal; he was also a little irritable. "I'm afraid your commission is out of my line."

Julian shrugged his shoulders, rose, and took up his hat and gloves.

"I feared that might be the case," he said. "But please do not misunderstand me. Marie is a lovely girl, and even if she were as poor as—as—well, as I am—it would make no difference to my affection. Only, it would be unfair to marry her unless I could keep her in the style and—you know what I mean."

"Pure altruism—I know."

John saw him out and was amused.

When he was alone he found it difficult to concentrate his mind upon the three bills of lading which had been occupying his attention that morning. An owner of a second-hand wardrobe store who bought beautiful little houses at Ascot excited the interest and suspicion of his commercial mind. Taking the telephone directory, he found Mrs. Carawood's name against one—shop 47 Penton Street, Pimlico. Evidently this was her headquarters, for none other of the stores seemed to be connected. He had no engagements that night, and had arranged to go to Marlow on the morrow. But he had not the slightest intention of visiting Penton Street as he walked across Hanover Square towards St. George's Church. For the life of him he could never

account for the impulse which made him hail a taxicab and direct the driver to that quiet street in Pimlico where Mrs. Carawood had her head office.

It was a smaller shop than he had expected. The window, tastefully draped, held no more than three dresses to tempt the passer-by. A shopgirl in neat black received him, and told him Mrs. Carawood was not at home.

"If your business is private," she said, "I had better call, Herman."

Before he could stop her she had passed round a wooden screen at the back of the shop, from which there presently emerged a tall, lank youth wearing a green-baize apron. His red hair was long and untidy, and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles gave him an appearance of comic ferocity.

"Mrs. Carawood, sir? No, sir, she is not in. She's gone down to Cheltenham to see m'lady."

He said this with a certain pride and relish, lingering over the title as though he were loth to remove himself from the reflected glory of it.

John Morlay's eyes had taken in the store. He now saw that it was impressively fitted. The walls were panelled with oak, it boasted a parquet floor, and most of the models hung in cases behind plate-glass. At one end of the store was a carved wooden partition, and towards this Herman was glancing from time to time, and at first John Morlay thought that the story of Mrs. Carawood's absence from Town was a conventional fiction.

"Perhaps you'd like to come into the office, sir?" said the youth. He looked again towards the screen, and John realized that the boy had only been making up his mind to take this momentous step.

The "office" was a space behind the partition, and consisted of a desk, before which was a chair, and bookshelves. The lower of these contained what were evidently Mrs. Carawood's account books, while on the upper were crowded hundreds of paper-covered volumes, which he realized at a glance were that peculiar brand of fiction which the owner favoured.

Herman found a second chair and invited the visitor to sit.

"Mrs. Carawood always goes down to Cheltenham just now—before term ends. She has to make arrangements about m'lady coming home."

John smiled.

"By 'my lady' you mean the Countess Fioli?" he said.

Herman nodded vigorously.

"You're a friend of hers, sir?"

"Well..." Jack hesitated; "I wouldn't call myself that. I know the young lady slightly."

Herman beamed.

"It's the likes of that young lady," he said, "who shows that old Fenner is wrong."

"Who is Fenner?"

Jack was surprised at the cordiality of his reception, and only learned later that to Mrs. Carawood's factotum a friend of "my lady's" was something almost godlike.

"Fenner? Why, he's a socialist." Herman's lip curled. "He's a talker, and educated, and all that sort of thing."

"Does he speak badly of my lady?" asked Morlay, secretly amused.

Herman shook his head.

"Not him! That's the only good thing about Mr. Fenner, he runs down kings and lords, but he never says anything wrong of my lady."

The unknown Fenner had his points, then.

The visitor turned the conversation towards Mrs. Carawood and her shops. She had, he learned, some five or six, and they were "doing well". Also he discovered that she had left for Cheltenham that afternoon—Herman gave the exact hour of the train.

"Mrs. Carawood is a great reader?" asked John, his eyes on the shelf.

Herman smiled seraphically.

"Every one of them she's read," he said, and touched the tattered covers with a tender hand. "And every one I've heard!"

"You mean you've read?"

Herman shook his head.

"No, sir, I don't read or write," he said simply. "But after closing-hours Mrs. Carawood reads to me."

"Does Mr. Fenner approve of that?" smiled John Morlay.

"It don't matter whether he do or whether he don't," said Herman. "He says it puts ideas in me head, but that's all right—what's wrong with ideas?"

John Morlay walked slowly back towards Victoria, puzzled. And then he did a thing which was more inexplicable to himself: he called a taxi, drove to his flat, and, packing a suitcase, made his way to Paddington and caught the dinner train to Cheltenham. He had conceived a sudden desire to see Mrs. Carawood—or was it "my lady"?

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Carawood passed under the familiar grey arch of Cheltenham Ladies' College, turned to the left and towards the circular stone stairs.

The "crocs." were beginning to arrive from the houses, long double lines of girls in blue, their flaming house colours worn in the shape of ties. She had passed the Cranmore croc. in the street, and had seen two senior girls bicycling to "Coll." wearing the Mendip necktie, and they were at once invested with a special glamour, for Marie's house was Mendip—the first house in the college for all field sports.

The college porter, hurrying past, recognized her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Carawood—have you seen her ladyship?"

"No, Mr. Bell." The stocky, dark-faced woman almost smiled. "I came down by the late train yesterday. Is my lady well?"

Her voice had a Cockney twang to it; the college porter, who liked her, yet thought her "a bit common", felt that, for all the respect due to a parent or guardian, he was dealing with a social equal, if no worse.

"She was all right when I saw her yesterday," said the porter. "Are you taking her home?"

Mrs. Carawood shook her head.

"No," she said, rather shortly, and went on her way.

At the top of the staircase a prefect, with the shield of office hanging like a medal from her blouse, showed her through a doorway and to a pine seat. She was in the gallery that surrounded Hall on three sides. At one end was a stage draped with heavy blue curtains. In the centre a table with a silver reading-desk and a bowl of flowers on top. An organ was playing softly, and already the girls were filing in, each going to her place until the floor-space and all the galleries were filled.

The visitor looked upon a sea of white blouses and neatly brushed heads. Last to enter were the seniors, sitting at the head of the congregation. A girl prefect came into Hall, whispered to a mistress, and went out. Mrs. Carawood's eyes glowed at the sight of the slim figure until it had vanished from sight. Then, over her shoulder, she looked at the door.

Marie appeared, flushed and breathless, came silently to the pew, and sat down by the woman's side. Their hands met in a clinging hug, and then cheek touched cheek for a moment. Through a door by the side of the platform came the senior prefect, prayer-book in hand, and behind her a majestic woman, in academic gown, her cap under her arm, a lady with a grave, rather tired face.

From the opposite gallery John Morlay watched the pair. He had been one of the first of the visitors to enter Hall, and had taken his place in the solitude fully a quarter of an hour before the first line of girls had filed in noiselessly to their places.

The woman he recognized as the visitor to the house at Ascot. She was in the region of fifty, swarthy of face and yet not unpleasant to look upon. There was something of the gipsy in the romantic Mrs. Carawood. Her black hair was untouched with grey, and at this distance, where the lines about her eyes were invisible, her face was singularly smooth.

The girl, when she came, rather took his breath away. He had retained a memory of a slim and pretty schoolgirl, but in the months which had passed since his first and only meeting with her, a subtle maturity showed. It would be, he thought, ridiculous to describe her as a woman; it would be equally absurd to speak of her as a child. Nature had modelled so delicately that figure and face were in some manner transformed. She had been boyishly slim, with a certain awkwardness of movement and gesture; he had been conscious of long limbs and an almost masculine grip of hand. There were harmony and grace in her movements now; the gaucherie of childhood had come to be a rhythm; the round, firm cheeks had delicate shadows.

All through the short service which followed her appearance his eyes did not leave her. When the golden head was bent in prayer and all other eyes were downcast, his were fixed upon these odd companions, the woman in her severe black dress, the girl in her white blouse. And the longer he looked the more revolting seemed the cold-blooded scheme of Julian Lester. There was a new ugliness in the commission which this exquisite young man had offered. There and then John Morlay dissociated himself from his "client".

After the simple service was over the two passed down the stairs together into the corridor; and then Mrs. Carawood became aware, even in the soft ecstasy which always filled her when she was in the girl's presence, that a man was standing watching them, a tall, good-looking man with a smile on his lips.

"The Countess Fioli, is it not?" he asked, hat in hand.

The girl stared at him for a moment and then laughed softly.

"Oh, I remember you—you are Mr. Morlay."

John Morlay was staggered.

"Mr. Lester introduced you at Rumpelmeyer's."

The frown that had gathered on the woman's face slowly disappeared, and John thought he detected a sigh of relief. They walked towards the porter's gate together, and then, with a quick kiss and hug for her guardian, and a nodding smile to John Morlay, the girl passed through the doorway.

For a second there was silence, and then, looking at Mrs. Carawood, he saw her staring at the doorway through which Marie had vanished, and there was in her face so concentrated a devotion that even he was astounded. He saw a light in her eyes, a certain tenseness in her mien, which spoke eloquently of the emotion which even that brief interview had aroused.

"You are very fond of your little—friend?" said John softly.

With a start she turned to him.

"Fond of her?" Her voice was husky. "Why, I should think so! She's like my own."

"Soon she will be leaving school, won't she?" Mrs. Carawood nodded.

"Next week," she said. "She's going into residence."

There was almost a note of pomposity in this—an exaggerated self-consciousness.

"Rather young, isn't she, to set up housekeeping at Ascot? Or is she going to Italy first?"

The woman's eyes met his and he saw in them the dawn of suspicion.

"No," she said shortly. And then, as if repenting of her brusqueness: "I don't know what I shall do with her yet. She is very young."

"Too young to marry," stated rather than asked the other.

He was not exactly supporting his client's case; but then, he did not regard Julian Lester in that light. He was ridiculously anxious to discover whether Mrs. Carawood favoured the suit of the elegant young man, and he had his answer when he saw the cloud in her face.

"Much too young," she said emphatically. "Marie has no wish to leave me."

There was no further excuse for lingering. With a lift of his hat he turned away, and she watched him from the entrance until he had turned a corner and was out of sight. Then she saw the porter.

"Who was that gentleman, Mr. Bell?" she asked. "The man who was talking to you?"

She nodded.

"He's Mr. Morlay. He came down here two years ago over some fraud that had been worked in the staff. He is a sort of detective..."

Her trembling hand went up to her mouth; the dark face turned grey. The porter was speaking, yet she did not hear him.

"A detective!" Her heart beat painfully as her lips formed the words. "A detective!"

The wonder which was in John Morlay's mind would have been intensified if he had been a witness of her agitation.

CHAPTER IV

He strolled down into the broad parade, with its avenue of elms and its pleasant shops, and pissed the morning looking into windows at objects he did not see, his mind completely occupied by a vision of beauty which had swept him off his feet. He had remembered in a dim way that the girl was pretty, but she was now at an age when the changing lights and colours of youth are focused to perfection. Women meant very little to him; if he was not wholly absorbed with his work and his sport, little had come into his life to divert him to the pleasanter paths.

"I was a fool to come here, and a fool to see her," he said, and the faded old lady to whom he found himself addressing his remarks edged away in alarm.

John discovered that he had been sharing with her a view of a shop window entirely devoted to the more intimate garments of femininity.

All the way back to Town he was turning over the problem which Julian Lester had unconsciously set him. He was a shrewd judge of human nature, and if there was one thing more certain than another in his mind, it was that Mrs. Carawood was an honest woman. There was no reason in the world why the girl should have been left with any money at all. If a search had been made for the will of her late mother, it was equally certain that Julian would have made deeper investigations to discover the properties which had fallen into the hands of Mrs. Carawood.

It was late when he got back to Town. He had dined on the train, otherwise he would have dressed and gone out. Instead, he put on an old smoking-jacket and a pair of slippers and settled down with a book to pass the hours that separated him from bedtime.

But no book, however exciting, could have held his attention that night. Presently he put it down and began to get in order the possibilities of Mrs. Carawood's conduct. So doing, there was a ring at the outer door, and his one manservant entered to announce the last person in the world John Morlay wished to see.

"Sorry to interrupt you, dear old man," said Julian, as he came in with his mechanical smile, and he evidently felt an apology was necessary for his resplendent evening-dress. "I've been dining with the Weirs," he said. "I called you up to ask you, but you were out. Your clock right? Ten, eh?"

He had laid his coat carefully on the end of the settee, and sat down as carefully in the most comfortable chair the room held.

"You went to Cheltenham, they tell me! Good egg! I thought from your deucedly unpleasant manner you weren't going to take up this case."

"My deucedly unpleasant manner betrayed the t rut h," said Mr. Morlay, "because I'm not!"

Lester's eyebrows rose.

"You aren't helping me?" he asked in dismay.

"I will help you to this extent," said John slowly. "Mrs. Carawood is, I am convinced, a perfectly honest woman. If Marie Fioli has any property, it is as safe in her hands as if it were in the Bank of England."

Julian smiled.

"Really, my dear fellow, for a man with your vast experience of human nature—" he began.

"My vast experience of human nature," interrupted his host, "has so far enabled me to detect a crook, male or female, whenever I have met them. If this woman isn't an honest woman, then I'm greatly at fault."

"Did you question her?" asked Julian.

John Morlay filled his pipe and grinned.

"Oh, surely! I put her to the torture, and she admitted she was honest! Of course I didn't question her. I met her by accident. The accident was of my own devising."

"Did you see Marie?" asked the other eagerly. "Yes," John nodded, "I saw Marie."

"What do you think of her?"

"I think she's..." he hesitated, "very, very sweet. Moreover, I think she's much too good for you, Julian."

Julian was not by any means disconcerted. All his life people had been rude to him.

"Very likely," he said with a laugh. "Everybody's too good for everybody, if it comes to that, my dear man. And, after all, John, I did not employ you to discover her superior spiritual qualities—"

"To be exact," John interrupted him again, "you did not employ me at all. A whim took me to Cheltenham—I tell you I am not taking up the case."

Julian sighed.

"Then I must get somebody else," he said in aggrieved tones. "I really think you've treated me rather badly, John. People say you are so terribly clever in worming out other people's secrets that I thought you'd jump at this job. If it is a question of fees—"

"It isn't a question of fees at all," said John; "it is a question of principle. I do not take that kind of case, in the first place—secondly, I do not spy upon young girls and their guardians. Why don't you see Mrs. Carawood and ask her point-blank where the girl's money is invested?"

"Because she'd tell me a lie—and her suspicions would be aroused. What an absurd question to ask me!"

"I suppose it is." John pulled at his long upper lip thoughtfully.

"You won't touch the case?"

"Not with a twenty-foot pole," said the other emphatically, and Julian sighed again.

"If you were a lady's man I should think you were in love with Marie," he said banteringly.

"I'm not a lady's man," said John shortly, and opened the door for his visitor.

CHAPTER V

There was one word which ran through Mrs. Carawood's head day and night. A detective! She pondered the matter in the quiet of her pretty little room above the shop in Penton Street. The panic which the discovery evoked had not yet subsided, but she was capable of reasoning now. On one thing she was determined: this young man must be won to her side, must be a friend rather than a menace. How was this to be brought about?

He liked Marie. For one fleeting second she had seen the admiration in his eyes and sensed the straightness of the mind behind that mask of a face. And yet she knew that he had gone to Cheltenham especially to see Marie. Who had employed him? There were no living Fiolis to interest themselves in the girl. For one terrifying moment this thought had occurred to her.

If others could pay detectives to ferret out her secrets, might she not also pay to guard them? On the Monday her lawyer told her something about the house of Morlay, and spoke glowingly of John's integrity and high principles. Such a man would not hound her to moral destruction. Suddenly her mind was made up. She would walk into the lion's den and meet her danger half-way.

To say that John Morlay was astonished when her name was brought in to him would be to understate his emotions. He pushed aside the work on which he had been engaged and went half-way across the room to meet her.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mrs. Carawood," he said.

Her lips were dry; for some time she could not speak.

"I've come—on business, Mr. Morlay," she said jerkily.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he laughed, as he pushed a chair towards her. "I only see unfortunate tradesfolk when they've been hopelessly swindled."

She shook her head.

"I haven't been swindled—I don't think there's anybody in the trade who could catch me," she said.

From her tone he gathered she was satisfied with her business qualities.

"No, I wanted to see you about..."

She paused, and he sat waiting.

"About my lady."

"The Countess Fioli?"

His interest quickened as she nodded.

"She's in no kind of trouble, is she?"

"No, my lady knows nothing about business. It's—it's something else."

He did not speak, and presently she went on.

"I'm my lady's guardian—you probably know that. She was left to me by her mother when she was only a few weeks old."

"You're a widow, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"That's it; I'm a widow. I've got no man of my own I can trust; I can't even tell my own lawyer what I want to tell you, Mr. Morlay. Just now I feel the need of a man's help."

She paused again. Her scheme, which had seemed so fine before she had left her house, was becoming a lame, unconvincing thing.

"I want somebody to watch her interests," she said rapidly. "Somebody I can turn to when there's any trouble coming along. I wonder if you would help me?"

He was staggered by the proposal. The last thing in the world he expected or desired was the post of deputy-guardian to the Countess Marie Fioli.

"I don't quite understand what you mean, Mrs. Carawood," he said. "Perhaps I am a little dense—"

"No, you're not dense, you understand all right," she said doggedly. "If other people can employ you to make inquiries about her—"

"Nobody has employed me to make inquiries about Marie," he interrupted. "I certainly was curious, having heard so much about her."

She knew instinctively that he was quibbling, and guessed, with her quick native wit, that such employment had been offered him, and that he had refused it.

"I put it badly, I suppose. I'm not an educated woman," she said a little helplessly. "But I don't see that I'm asking you anything that a gentleman could not do. Perhaps I'm mad, but I want a protector for her. I can pay, Mr. Morlay; I am not a poor woman."

John Morlay leaned back in his chair, watching her.

"I think I understand now," he said. "You wish me to act in a protective capacity. It is not unusual for rich people to employ detectives for that purpose, but unfortunately I am not that kind of detective."

Her saw her face fall, and went on:

"I should be honoured and proud to act in an honorary capacity if you would allow me, and if it would not be distasteful to your young lady."

"That means you will help, but you don't want paying?" she asked eagerly.

"That is just what it means," he smiled, but she shook her head.

"I want it to be a business arrangement. I can't let you do it for nothing," she said. "I shouldn't feel that I had a—"

She hesitated, seeking a delicate expression.

"A hold on me?" he helped her. "But how do you think your lady would like the idea of having a paid friend?"

That view had not occurred to her, and for a moment she was taken back.

"Marie wouldn't mind," she said, "if it pleased me. Will you do this for me 3"

It was a wild, lunatic idea, and one which, in his calmer moments, he would have rejected without a second's thought. But Mrs. Carawood's urgency disturbed his judgment. He hesitated for a second, and then:

"I will do anything I can," he said. "Now tell me just what my duties will be."

On this the woman's mind was made up.

"She'll be living at Ascot for a few months—I've bought a house for her. I don't expect you to live there, but she won't be at Ascot all the time, and I want you to go around with her when she's in London. I don't know exactly what will happen, but I've a feeling here"—she pressed her big hand on her breast—"that there is trouble coming for Marie—and for me. And I want somebody I can rely upon to be there to help me meet it when it comes."

It was an amazing proposal; little less than that he should give up his time to chaperoning a young lady with whom he was only slightly acquainted. All that was sane in him rose in revolt at the preposterous suggestion. Then, to his own astonishment, he heard himself agreeing to this fantastical scheme, and realized that he found pleasure in the prospect.

All the way back to her store Mrs. Carawood was rehearsing almost word for word the interview that she had had. She herself had some glimmer of doubt; but for the moment she was elated that she had countered the peril of discovery, and had brought to her side as an ally one who, she knew instinctively, might well be the most dangerous opponent.

When she reached Penton Street she found the inevitable Mr. Fenner engaged in the inevitable argument with her assistant.

Mr. Fenner was a carpenter with anarchistic leanings; a dapper man, whose hair was neatly parted so that it fell over his forehead like a brown wave breaking upon a barren shore. He had the voice of a public orator and a manner of gloom. He was a loather of aristocracy and a lover of the proletariat, though there were members of his party who took leave to doubt his sincerity. Every evening, when his work was done, excepting on those occasions when the demands of the toiling masses claimed his presence on open-air platforms, it was Mr. Fenner's practice to call at Penton Street. There were excuses enough for his presence. His skilful hands had laid the parquet flooring and covered the bare walls with panelling. He would have refused all payment for his work, but that Mrs. Carawood was firm on the point, even going to the length of ordering him to leave her shop.

"Good evening, Mrs. Carawood," said Fenner "It's a pity you didn't come before. I was just giving Herman my views on the capitalistic classes."

"Leave Herman alone," said Mrs. Carawood.

"And if it comes to capitalists, Fenner, you were telling me last week that you had six hundred pounds saved in the bank."

"That's not capital, that's savings," said Mr. Fenner calmly. "It's wrung from the tyrants with the sweat of me brow."

"Uh, huh!" Herman had a sepulchral laugh. Mr. Fenner turned his pained eyes on the scoffer, but made no retort.

CHAPTER VI

John Morlay, the day following that on which he had received his appointment, came to the shop after business hours, and would have turned away, but that he saw a gleam of light through a gap in the blinds. His ring was answered immediately, and, in the surprise of his arrival, Mrs. Carawood did not put away the book from which she had been reading. He remembered only then Julian Lester's contemptuous reference to her weakness, and a glance at the title confirmed in part the story of her literary taste.

In some confusion she snatched the book from the table and thrust it among the papers on the shelf.

"You're a great reader, Mrs. Carawood?"

"Why, yes, I am," she said, "but not the kind of books you'd read, Mr. Morlay."

"I don't know that I'm any wiser for that," he smiled. "There was a time when I was rather keen on blood-curdling romances."

"Did you grow out of it?" she asked, so naively that he could have laughed.

"I don't think one ever grows out of a love of adventure," he said.

He had come on no particular errand, unless it was (and this he would never confess to himself) a desire to hear more about Marie. But he was diffident of raising the subject, nor did she help him. Herman disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a tea-tray. Mrs. Carawood drank tea at all hours, she said apologetically, and this was one of John's pet weaknesses also. Presently he arrived, rather directly, at the real object of his visit.

"I've been wondering, Mrs. Carawood, if you have any plans for your young lady's future?"

She shook her head, and at that moment her face became troubled.

"No—it is worrying me a little," she said. "I suppose m'lady ought to do something. It isn't good to be idle. She's a wonderful writer; perhaps she'll make a book."

"I sincerely trust she won't," he laughed. "You mean write a book?"

She flushed and nodded, and he hated himself for the joke that had brought a little hurt to her. She was very sensitive about her lack of education—a small but natural vanity that was a little pathetic. It took a long time before he could lure her to talk about the girl, and then he learned of Marie's childhood, of her phenomenal intelligence, and of the beauty that had made old ladies and gentlemen turn in the street and ask whose child she was.

"She had a perambulator that cost twenty pounds," said Mrs. Carawood proudly, "all lined with real Russian leather, with a little hood over the top. It was lined with pink because she was a girl and because..."

She talked on and on and on, and John listened without any slackening of interest. He felt that he could not know too much about this radiant creature who had come into his life with such dramatic unexpectedness.

"Are you married, Mr. Morlay?" she asked suddenly.

"No, I'm not. Is that a disadvantage?"

She was looking at him steadily.

"You're a gentleman, of course—I trust you," she said. "Perhaps people will say I'm foolish to bring Marie into the company of a young man like you, but she's very young, and you are a gentleman."

"That's the danger," he said flippantly.

This challenge of hers brought him face to face with a truth which he had studiously avoided looking upon.

"I suppose you mean, Mrs. Carawood, that you don't want me to fall in love with the Countess Fioli?" He put the question jestingly, yet, try as he did, he could not find any amusement in the idea. "Well, I promise you this: if I do, I shall come along and tell you about it before I tell her."

"It's natural people should fall in love with her," she nodded. "I don't mind that a bit. Only—"

"Only you have a big responsibility. I quite appreciate that, and I'll promise you that, even if I fall head over heels in love, I shall remember that she is—um—a client."

Mrs. Carawood sighed deeply. This was the one thing she had intended saying when she had come to him, the one thing she did not have the courage to put into words lest she offended the man who, she felt, was best qualified to stand as Marie's friend in the hour of her need.

John Morlay went back to his rooms uneasy in mind. In the space of a few days the whole tenor of his life had been changed, his directions re-angled. He felt that Fate had spun the wheel a little unfairly without consulting him, and this he resented, but not for long. For his prow was set to the bright light on the rim of the horizon, which was Marie Fioli.

CHAPTER VII

Cheltenham lay behind Marie and there was a little pang in her heart, and a natural inclination towards tears, as that vital phase of her life receded with every revolution of the carriage wheels.

It was a different home-coming from the riotous end-of-term journey to Town, and she felt depressed, not because of the life she had left behind, but of that which lay ahead.

She sat alone in a corner of a first-class carriage, a bundle of newspapers by her side, and with no inclination to read the events of the previous day, or to ponder upon the beautiful ladies whose portraits and poses filled the illustrated pages of the weeklies.

As the train was running into Gloucester she took a letter from her bag and read it, half smiling, half frowning, at its unusual contents. John Morlay she remembered well enough. He was a type of man not likely to fade from the mind of susceptible girlhood. She had remembered him after that brief introduction in a crowded teashop. She remembered him more distinctly by reason of his fugitive appearance in Hall. She had wondered what had brought him there, and the letter partly explained.

Dear Countess Marie [it ran],

I have to break to you a piece of news (if Mrs. Carawood has not already broken it more gently than I can) which will either annoy or amuse you. I have received, with great satisfaction and no little trepidation, the appointment of guardian angel, escort, and official friend of the family, to your ladyship. I don't think it is right to say "your ladyship", because in England we very boorishly deny that courtesy to the foreign aristocracy, and I only employ the term to advertise my humility and sense of unworthiness.

I am to meet you at Paddington on your arrival, and I shall be hovering about you like an unquiet spirit during your stay at Ascot. Whither thou goest I shall go—within reasonable limits. The prospect may seem a little distressing to you, but I am the type of guardian angel who knows his place. I hope I am not going to be an awful nuisance, and I am depending upon you to tell me if I am ever in the way. I will chaperon, you to parties—being a staid and middle-aged man; I will, if necessary, and partners being deficient, which is extremely unlikely, dance with you, and to this end I am practising myself a new and perfectly ridiculous step in the secrecy of my office. You may imagine me, behind locked doors, pirouetting with a chair, to the

scandal of such of my faithful servants as observe my gyrations through the keyhole.

Let me also break it to you that I am a detective; and lest you be thrilled as well as startled, I will add with haste that I do not arrest people, am not interested in murders, robberies (except of a peculiar type), or deeds of violence. I am a commercial detective with a passion for mathematical formula, and my chief assistants, alas! no Baker Street doctor, but the multiplication-table and the rules of simple addition.

Mrs. Carawood thinks you ought to have a man to look after you, and has engaged me for the pleasant task. I am in a sense a hired servant. You may therefore call me John, as you would call your footman, but you need not call me Mr. Morlay, as though I were your butler. Of one thing you may be certain—that I shall not pry into your guilty past, nor examine your fingerprints, nor connect you in any way with the unsolved mysteries of years gone by.

Sincerely yours,

John Morlay.

She had read the letter many times. It amused her, as he intended it should, but it had not alarmed her. She knew something of Mrs. Carawood's peculiar nervousness where she was concerned. And John Morlay was rather nice. He was more than rather nice, he was very nice. He was rather good-looking too. Marie wondered whether, in the manner of other girls whose romances had been confided to her, she would fall in love with her guardian.

When the train drew into Paddington Marie's carriage stopped immediately opposite the place where John was standing. It had been raining, and he wore a short trench-coat that reached to his knees, and looked immensely tall.

"Here I am, on duty, and feeling very foolish," he greeted her as he took her hand with a little chuckle. "I've never felt quite so important in my life and never quite so self-conscious. In fact"—he looked down at her laughing face with great solemnity—"the only way I could bring myself to my duty was to pretend that you were a box of gold consigned to the Bank of England and on which the thieves in London had designs. The carriage waits, my lady," he added gravely, and her joyous laughter rubbed the last touch of nervousness from him.

"You have begun rather well, Mr. Morlay—or are you John?"

"John for the nonce," he said. "Butlers do not wait at railway stations. Shall I drive you straight to Pimlico, or would you like some tea?"

"I was going to suggest tea. I am a great eleven-o'clocker," she said. "We collegians had privileges."

She did not tell him that it was the privilege of drinking milk at eleven, but he knew that.

The car carried them to Hyde Park, where a refreshment kiosk had just opened, and they had their noonings under a big green tree.

"You're a great friend of Mrs. Carawood's, aren't you?" she asked.

"We are like brother and sister," said John solemnly.

"But seriously, you must be, or she would never have trusted me with you."

"I think she's a pretty good judge of character," said John, with a complacency that made her smile. "Honestly, Contessa—"

"Will you regard me as a parlourmaid and call me Marie?" she asked soberly. "They called me Moggy at school, but I don't think we've known each other long enough for that."

He shook his head.

"Marie let it be. And John I shall be. There is a Biblical touch about John which must appeal to a young student of divinity. And I'm sure you are a student of divinity—I have never met anybody who looked more like one."

In spite of the badinage it had been a nervous business for John. He was surprised at himself. In all the years of his life he had never been guilty of such flippancy. He remembered a staid and middle-aged City merchant who, when the Armistice had been proclaimed, had stood on his head before the Royal Exchange, and he felt rather as that gentleman must have felt when the enormity of his conduct was brought home to him. He told her about this acrobatic gentleman and she nodded.

"I feel like that now," she said. "The world is so terribly real, and there are so many things to be frightened at, that I can't realize that a week ago today at this very minute I was engaged in writing an essay upon William the Silent! It isn't an exact parallel," she went on quickly, "except that everything, including myself, is so unreal—but you are the most unreal of all!"

"Do you know Julian Lester?"

She looked at him quickly.

"Yes—why? Of course I know Julian Lester," she scoffed. "He introduced you to me. He is a cousin or something of a girl-friend of mine, and he is rather nice. Don't you think so?"

"Very," said John, without enthusiasm. "Does he write to you?"

If he had thought a moment he would never have dared to ask the question. He saw the big violet eyes open in surprise.

"Yes, of course he does." And then, with just a hint of coldness that made him wriggle: "Are you being Friend John or Detective Morlay?"

"I am asking you in my capacity of inquisitive busybody," he said gravely. "You see, Marie, I've got to know who are your friends and who aren't; otherwise, I shall be hitting the wrong man on the head with the large club which I am purchasing for the purpose and which I shall carry about over my shoulder from this day henceforth."

She was really beautiful, he thought. He had had no idea how lovely she was. The sunlight belonged to her; the zephyrs of summer were one with her joyous soul. He had never yet met her type, though he had seen many fair women in northern Italy who approached her colouring. For the next quarter of an hour he was content to sit in silence, listening to the growing volume of college gossip. She was full of her school, of this mistress and that, of dormitory adventures, and those important happenings which make up school life. It was with the greatest reluctance that he paid the bill and escorted her back to the car.

And then, as they came nearer to Penton Street, he noticed that she grew quieter, and a more serious note was in her voice.

"Do you really know Nanny very well?"

"Mrs. Carawood? No, I don't know her very well. I met her first on the day I came to Cheltenham."

The girl sighed.

"She's a dear, and she's been wonderful to me! Do you know, Mr.—John—I sometimes think that I am not so rich as people imagine me to be."

"What makes you say that?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know," she said vaguely. "Only once or twice Julian has told me—not exactly told me, you understand, but hinted—that I'm awfully rich. He gave me some advice about investments, and of course I know nothing about them. And then he suggested I should ask Nanny whether any of my money was in stocks—I forget the name of them."

"But why don't you think you're rich?"

"Because Nanny would have told me," said the girl quietly. "My own belief is that I have not a lira! And that all the good times I've had she has given me because she loves me."

Her voice shook a little, and John was silent.

"Does that worry you very much—being poor, I mean?"

She shook her head.

"Only in one way. I should like to have done something for her. She has worked so hard. This villa at Ascot is the maddest extravagance, but I dare not tell her so. I feel that if it were not for me she could sell her silly old shops and do no more work for the rest of her life."

"Did you suggest that to her?"

"Only once," admitted Marie; "and I think she was a wee bit hurt. I don't know why. I suppose it would make a big difference to me if I weren't rich."

"A very big difference," said John, and his tone was so emphatic that she looked round at him in surprise.

There was reason enough; for the first time in his life John Morlay was blushing.

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs. Carawood was an enigma, even to her business associates. Penton Street, although it was her headquarters, was by no means the best of her stores. She had an establishment near Hanover Square and another in Upper Regent Street and others in every important suburb of London.

She had started as a second-hand wardrobe dealer, but, except at one branch, that trade was a thing of the past with her. She catered for what they call in America the "Miss", and had as her principal clients thousands of working girls who, through the Carawood Stores, were able to dress fashionably at less than a quarter of the cost of their more affluent sisters. No style ever came into the West End that was not instantly repeated in Mrs. Carawood's stores. A sixteen-guinea party frock that lured shoppers in the region of Bond Street was available at three pounds, and even less, in Brixton. She had specialized in this class of client, and she made handsome profits and no bad debts. Having discovered her clientèle, she wisely refused to cater for an older generation.

The wholesalers knew her as a buyer who drove a hard bargain. Her assistant-managers knew her as one who scrutinized books with extraordinary rapidity and accepted no excuses. Nobody really knew her; even those who remembered her opening her first shop, identifying themselves with, and taking credit for, her subsequent success, could furnish no details about her life or her private personality.

She lived over her shop in Penton Street, though she might have enjoyed any of the luxuries which flatland has to offer. She was a great reader of exciting books and of those newspapers which offer the most lurid details of contemporary crime. There was that streak of romance in her which found no other expression. She was, as the boy Herman knew, a great dreamer, and would sit for hours at her desk in a sort of rapt trance, her lips moving to frame the words which only her mind heard. Herman, on such occasions, never interrupted her.

To this lank boy she was the very goddess of wisdom; he credited her with a genius which had no counterpart in history.

There was no time for dreaming now that Marie was back. Mrs. Carawood's schemes, the autumn fashions for misses, even the problem of the Lewisham branch, the profits of which had seriously fallen with the advent of a new manageress, were now matters of no importance.

The engagement of John Morlay had to be excused, but Marie made that easy.

"It's a grand idea," she said solemnly. "Would that other parents and guardians followed your shining example, Nanny!"

"He's a gentleman, and I trust him," said Mrs. Carawood, "and it gives me a feeling of comfort to know I can call upon him if..." She hesitated.

"Darling, if what?" smiled the girl. "If men desperate with love carry me off, or if bandits hold me to ransom?"

She saw a look in the woman's face which made her change her tone.

"Nobody is likely to—to be unpleasant to me, are they, Nanny?"

"No," said Mrs. Carawood shortly.

"I haven't a wicked enemy, or a long-lost uncle, or anything like that, have I?" bantered the girl. Mrs. Carawood's face went a dusky red.

"No, my lady, of course not," she said loudly. "Who put that idea in your head?"

"Nobody—I'm joking. Honestly, I don't mind Mr. Morlay; he's very nice—much nicer than Julian. Julian is very charming and silky, but he lacks something. In my sweet, girlish innocence I don't exactly know what it is, but I think it's the something we used to call 'pep' at college. It's very comforting to have a man like John Morlay around, a sort of father, brother, and kind uncle all rolled into one."

There was a long pause.

"Nanny, what was my father like?"

Mrs. Carawood started.

"Your father, my dear?". Her voice had grown husky. "Why—what a question to ask!"

Marie laughed softly.

"It's not unnatural, is it? I meant to ask you that last term. Have you got a photograph of him?"

Mrs. Carawood shook her head.

"No, I never saw him—he died before you were born, before I went to your dear mother's house."

Marie leaned over the back of a chair, looking out into sunlit Penton Street.

"I wonder what he was like," she mused. "I know it's unnatural of the modern child to wonder such things about their fathers, but I've discovered, Nanny, there's a streak of the Victorian in me."

The term puzzled Mrs. Carawood, and the girl explained.

"Queen Victoria was a good woman," said Mrs. Carawood, so sedately that Marie laughed.

"You're Victorian too—let's wear poke bonnets and go shopping!"

Then she came back to the subject of her father.

"It's queer to think that he may not have been able to speak English," she said. "Was he a Roman? I hope he was! I have been trying to picture what my ancestral home was like. It must have been a very cool, dark and gloomy casa, with stucco crumbling and all the rooms a little damp in the winter, and millions of coats of arms everywhere!"

"It was probably bigger than your little house at Ascot," said Mrs. Carawood.

She was distressed about something. The girl's instinct told her that behind the bright smile was a quiver of pain, and she was instantly penitent. If the truth be told, it was very rarely indeed that Marie Fioli ever gave a thought to her ancient family and their departed glories. She was very much a child of her generation, and her interests were normally modern.

Mrs. Carawood had an architect's drawing of the house at Ascot, and a little portfolio full of pages torn from illustrated catalogues which gave a fair idea of the furniture she had acquired for its embellishment.

Marie knew nothing of her guardian's reputation for reticence, or she might have realized how very little she herself knew about Mrs. Carawood. The

woman never spoke of her business activities, of the stores, of her early struggles, of profits or losses, or the worries incidental to the management of a chain of shops. Mrs. Carawood's desk behind the screen was always a model of neatness. The drawers, as Marie discovered when she went in search of notepaper, were locked. Never once had she discussed the girl's own affairs, or given her the slightest hint as to her financial position.

Marie had all the money she required, a separate banking-account, into which Mrs. Carawood paid a respectable sum every month.

Her attitude towards Marie was unfailingly affectionate. Only rarely did she become the servant and address the girl as "M'lady", with a certain pomposity which would, in other circumstances, have been amusing. Only once had Mrs. Carawood shown any sign of anger or disapproval, and it was so unique an experience that Marie was shocked. It was the evening of the day she had returned from Cheltenham. She had spent the afternoon shopping with her guardian, and had returned to the shop to spend the evening. The inevitable Herman, who slept on the premises, had been packed off to the pictures by his employer, and they were alone in the house together.

Mrs. Carawood had gone upstairs to Marie's room to unpack her boxes and review her wardrobe, and Marie, left to her own devices, had been writing letters to the friends she had left behind at Cheltenham. She heard a bell ring and went to the side door, although Mrs. Carawood had specifically warned her that in such an event she was to be called.

There was no light in the hall, and after a vain attempt to find the switch she opened the door. A man was standing there.

"Is that you, Mrs. Carawood?" he asked in a low voice. "He left this tonight, and said he wanted an answer in the morning. I'll call about eight."

"I'm not Mrs. Carawood," said Marie, "but I'll give her the message."

The man was taken aback for a moment.

"All right; be sure to give it to her, miss, and tell her what I said."

She closed the door and took the envelope into the sitting-room. It was addressed in an illiterate hand to "Mrs. Hoad", and in one corner was written the word "Urjent".

Mrs. Hoad? The man had evidently made a mistake. She went to the door and looked up and down the street, but he had disappeared. Perhaps there was an address inside. She looked at the letter irresolutely, and her finger was under the gummy flap when she heard a gasp and turned to meet the startled eyes of Mrs. Carawood.

"What's that?" asked the woman sharply.

She snatched the letter from Marie's hand, took one glance at the inscription, and stuffed the envelope into the pocket of her dress.

"Don't open letters, Marie—never do it again."

Her voice was harsh, almost threatening.

She turned without a word and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER IX

Inspector Pickles was a notorious dropper-in. Socially he was the world's least success. He never kept an appointment, even with his superiors. If he happened to be anywhere in the neighbourhood of a man on whom he had promised to call, he dropped in, usually at the most inconvenient moment.

That was not the case when he strolled into John Morlay's sitting-room one evening and found Mr. Morlay studying an Almanach de Gotha. Peas threw a contemptuous eye upon the little book, which contains a complete record of Continental nobility, drew up a chair, put his hat on the ground, and sat down.

"There's no sense in studying form," he said. "If you want to know what's going to win the Royal Hunt Cup I'll tell you—I had it from the owner. It was tried last week—a certainty."

Peas had one weakness: he was a follower of erratic and temperamental racehorses. The weakness was more moral than financial, for he was a shrewd judge of a horse, and made a comfortable income despite the rules and regulations which forbid police officers to bet on racehorses.

"This is a book of human form," said John, closing the volume, the Almanach de Gotha.

"Personally, I believe in Old Moore. He's a bit wrong sometimes in his predictions, but I've never known him to be a minute out with the changing of the moon."

Uninvited, he helped himself to a cigarette. "That fellow was nearly caught last night."

"Which fellow's this?" asked John, filling his pipe.

The fellow the newspapers call the Lone Cat—these newspapers have got some blood-and-thunder ideas, haven't they?"

"Oh, the burglar? There's probably a dozen of them operating."

Peas shook his head.

"There can only be three. One of them's inside and another's in hospital. We've got rid of all the other possibilities by the process of elimination."

"A grand expression," said John.

Peas blew four smoke-rings in rapid succession.

"It may be a woman," he said. "That would give the newspapers something to howl about—the Lone She-Cat."

"Why do you think it's a woman?" asked John curiously.

"He was nearly caught by the night watchman at Cratcher's in Bond Street," explained Peas. "The watchman was hiding, keeping him under observation, and when he jumped out unexpectedly and tried to grab the fellow, he screamed."

"Men scream."

Peas nodded.

"That's what I said. But the watchman swears he had some sort of perfume on him."

"Men have perfume," insisted John, and again Peas nodded.

"That's what I said," he repeated. "In fact, I said everything you've said or are likely to say. Anyway, the fellow got away—slid down a drainpipe. They thought he'd been disturbed without taking anything, but this morning they found that a showcase had been forced and a big, square sapphire taken."

"That's the end of that," said John, and Peas sighed heavily.

"The public don't understand," he explained. "They knew I'm on the job, and they must realize that if anybody could catch him I am the man. But what happens? There's articles in newspapers saying, What are the police doing?' They're printing lists of burglaries and the money the burglars have got away with. They're unsolved mysteries, according to the Press, but what's the truth? A man busts a shop in Bond Street today; you hear no more about him, but in three months' time he's pinched in Liverpool, gets a stretch, and nobody knows anything about it."

"What about the woman?" asked John.

Peas looked at him thoughtfully, pursed his lips as though he were indulging in an inaudible whistle, and then, most unexpectedly:

"Do you know Mrs. Carawood?"

John Morlay's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Mrs. Carawood? Yes. She's—well, in a sense she's a client of mine."

Peas nodded.

"Pretty rich woman, isn't she? I should imagine so."

John laughed.

"You don't suppose she is the cat-burglar?"

To his surprise, the other man did not reject the suggestion.

"The point is, she's got a lot of money—more money than you can make out of the old-clothes business. She's got a side-line, and I'd like to know what it is."

"What sort of a side-line do you suggest, if you reject the burglary theory?" asked John sarcastically.

"She goes to Antwerp about twice a year. That's a queer place for a wardrobe lady! On the other hand, it's not a queer place for anybody who's selling stones—"

"Rubbish!" John interrupted indignantly. "I don't know whether she goes to Antwerp br not, but if she does I am perfectly sure there's a good reason for it. It's a preposterous idea."

"It's not even an idea," said Peas oracularly; "it's merely a tentative inquiry into a possibility. A word thrown out, as it were—a question. Ever noticed a question-mark? It's a hook—you throw it out and you get something back. That's one of my own brain-waves. I've often thought of writing to the newspapers about it."

"They'd be delighted," said John, but sarcasm was wasted on Inspector Pickles.

"I'm a man of very considerable experience," he said. "I doubt if there's anybody at the Yard who knows quite as much about what I might term the inside of crime as I do. The worst matter I ever handled was a frightened little blonde girl, all timid and modest and blushing. She poisoned her brother, and got away with it; she poisoned her husband, and got away with it. If I'd been on the job a little earlier there'd have been less competition in the peroxide market but unfortunately they left the case in the hands of my so-called superior. She's now married to a rich Argentine, and does a lot of good work for the Young Women's Christian Association. That's life."

"What is?" asked John tartly.

"Everything," said Peas.

He walked to the wall and examined one of his host's pictures.

"Oil painting, and probably done by hand," he said.

He had said it forty or fifty times before. It was, as Morlay knew, his way of saying nothing. Presently he turned.

"This Carawood has got a string of stores through London. She lives very simply, as far as I can find out, with an illiterate boy she's sort of adopted. How did she come to get the Countess Fioli?"

"What do you mean—'come to get'?" asked John irritably. "She's the young lady's guardian; she was left in charge of her on the mother's death."

Again Peas pursed his lips.

"It's no business of mine," he said, "but it's all very odd and unusual. I like the young lady. I've seen her twice or three times—in fact, I saw you pick her up at Paddington—by which I do not mean 'pick up' in the common or colloquial sense. She's got a house at Ascot that cost a bit of money to buy, and will cost a bit more money to run."

And then, in a way which was peculiar to Peas, he switched back to an impersonal discussion of the cat-burglar.

"Ordinarily, cat-burglars do not alarm or disturb Scotland Yard; but what does irritate and distress them is the appearance of any unusual criminal in London—unusual in the sense that he cannot be identified or even associated with the known masters of his craft."

There was a certain sameness about the methods of this new man which enabled the police to associate one crime with another. His methods were unusual: he had neither look-out nor confederate, and invariably used a key where other men would have used a jemmy.

"Have you any kind of clue at all?" asked John.

Peas nodded.

"I've got one, and I'm working on it, but I've not put it on paper for other people to pinch the credit of it. If I'm right, the thing is so simple that nobody will guess how the criminal works until I step into the box and tell the tale. When I say 'simple' I mean 'elementary'."

He smiled, and Peas so rarely smiled that John Morlay stared at him in amazement.

"This bird doesn't climb, believe me! 'Cat-burglar' is an honorary degree."

Then abruptly he turned the conversation again. "Are you going to the party?"

"Which party!" asked John.

"The house-warming at Ascot. You'll be invited."

"How on earth do you know!"

"I know everything," said Peas.

John was busy the next morning. He had received by telephone a tentative suggestion that he should go with Mrs. Carawood and the girl to Ascot, and was staggered when he learned that the house-warming party had not been a figment of Peas' imagination. It was to be on the Saturday before Ascot week. Marie was going into residence right away. He made an appointment with her; she had some shopping to do on the following morning, and he spent a rather wearisome forenoon standing in the background whilst Mrs. Carawood and Marie bought china and plate and silver and the oddments which go to the making up of a well-ordered house.

He could not help noticing that expense was no object to Mrs. Carawood. She never quibbled about a price; the purchases she made were on the side of extravagance.

To his annoyance, Julian turned up, having trailed them from shop to shop. He had been, he said, to see his publisher. John remembered vaguely that he was writing a book on some mysterious subject, and had been so engaged for as long as he could remember.

If John Morlay was ill at ease on the shopping expedition, Julian was very much at home. He was a little precious; there was in him a touch of femininity which made the selection of beautiful things a real pleasure to him. John Morlay retreated further and further into the background, and finally took his leave in a huff, and was hurt when the girl made no attempt to persuade him to go on to lunch.

He himself lunched at a little club off St. James's Street, and by a coincidence found himself sitting at the same table as the very publisher Julian had interviewed that morning.

"Did Julian find those people? He was using my office telephone for half an hour this morning, and finally got 'em through your office. That fellow's an infernal nuisance."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said John, and then, remembering the book: "You have the privilege of issuing that stout volume of his t"

The publisher smiled.

"I'm not so sure that it will be a stout volume. It isn't even a slim one yet. He's a little bit too precious, is Julian—he has a passion for data, which he has spent years in collecting. He'll never get back a tenth of the money he has spent on it."

"What is it about the art of dressing?"

"I'm blessed if I know what it's about," was the surprising confession. "It started by being a History of English Castles. The last time I heard of it he was concentrating on dungeons, and showed an inclination to wander off into an authoritative volume on penal establishments. He promised me the book four years ago, and I haven't seen a page—he's so infernally secretive about it. Happily, he doesn't want any money, and there's no reason in the world why he should."

"He's a poor man, isn't he?" asked John curiously, and to his surprise the publisher shook his head.

"He's a very rich man—and he's as mean as he's rich. I honestly believe he only uses my office because he can get free telephone calls. He was in there about two months ago, when the American market broke. That's why I know that he's a rich man, because he couldn't lose thirty thousand pounds in one day and still go on as if nothing had happened, if he weren't rich. And he's not only rich, but he wants to be richer. He's going to marry some terrible swell with money—at least, he dropped a hint to that effect. Do you know who it is?"

"I know one terrible swell he isn't going to marry," said John grimly.

He had evidence of Julian's meanness on the Saturday week, when that elegant man called him up and asked him if he could drive him to Ascot. To do Julian justice, he made no secret of his thrift. Whilst they were driving down, he explained why he had begged a ride. He had engaged his chauffeur at a remarkably low wage on the understanding that he was not to be called upon to do Saturday or Sunday work.

"If I take him down to Ascot it would cost me the best part of two pounds," he said, "to sap nothing of petrol, oil, and wear and tear."

"You mean devil!" breathed John.

"Don't be absurd, my dear fellow. If you have a passion for throwing things away, pick up a few pebbles, preferably somebody else's pebbles, and throw them. Why throw money? A pound ought to earn its keep, and if it doesn't it has lost its raison d'être. You don't mind driving me down; it costs you not a cent extra, and you are, so to speak, helping forward the cause of economy. If I didn't save on little things I shouldn't be able to offer professional people like yourself big fees for your services. I could not afford to have prepared this inimitable volume."

"About dungeons?" suggested John.

Julian smiled.

"You've been talking to Kent, who is a man entirely without reticence. No, it's not on dungeons, but I think you'll find it fascinating. Kent tells me it

will not make any money for me—he is never tired of rubbing in that ghastly fact—but it will immortalize me. My name will probably live in history."

"You would achieve the same result if you got yourself hanged for a picturesque murder," said John.

Julian shook his head, accepting the suggestion in all seriousness.

"I don't know anybody well enough to murder," he said.

They waited some time for the level-crossing gates at Sunningdale to open. Julian came back to the subject of his commission.

"It is a pity you didn't take it on. I could have trusted you completely," he said. "Possibly there is nothing about Mrs. Carawood to find out. I sincerely hope not, for everybody's sake."

"What you hope is that there's plenty of money left?"

Julian nodded, unabashed.

"I don't want you to think that I'm marrying Marie only for her money," he began.

"You're not marrying her at all, my sweet friend," said John, a little shortly. "In the first place, she doesn't like you, and in the second place, I loathe you—keep to your literary pursuits."

Julian's smile was very complacent.

The little house at Ascot was very tiny indeed. If the white-panelled hall was spacious, the drawing-room and dining-room were the sufferers. Marie met him at the door, escorted him through the house, babbling incessantly. She was like a child with a new toy; had acquired some of the dignity of the chatelaine; dragged him into the kitchen, showed him the larder, the electric range, the cupboards, and the innumerable labour-saving gadgets which Mrs. Carawood had installed for her; led him up a winding stairway to an exquisite bedroom and a bathroom that was a dream.

"It's all too marvellous! I'm going to live here all the year round, and I'm having the most wonderful garden—"

"What else are you going to do besides live here?" asked John quietly.

The light left her eyes, and he hated himself.

"I don't know—I'm wondering about that. I was trying to talk to Nanny about it this morning. She doesn't want me to stay here at all, only for a few months in the summer; then I'm to go abroad. But I've got to do something, John. I'm going to buy a typewriter and learn to work it. Julian says he'll let me do his book, and he'll pay me for it—"

"You'll live riotously on whit Julian pays you," said John unkindly. "Hasn't Mrs. Carawood any scheme at all?"

She shook her head.

"No—she hates the idea of my doing any work at all. She says it's quite unnecessary."

There were french windows opening from the bedroom on to a tiny balcony. They strolled out here and looked down upon the little garden, and across, through a gap in the firs, to a wide stretch of common-land, with furry hills beyond and the golden skies of evening. There was quietness here, the sweet fragrance of pines, the scent of newly cut grass.

"You mustn't get satisfied with this," he said, after a long pause. "All this loveliness, I mean—just getting up in the morning, reading the newspapers and playing golf and tennis, going up to Town and being fitted, and coming back and going to bed. You're meant for something better than that."

She sighed quickly and nodded.

"I've thought of several things—" she began.

"Not nursing," said John sternly; "not cooling the fevered brow of pain, and not being on the committee of Mothers Help societies, or interesting yourself in Poor Brave Things."

"What can I do?" Her tone was a little impatient, resentful.

"Work," he said. "Let Mrs. Carawood take you into her business. Learn something about clothes."

"I suggested that; she was horrified. I honestly think she was upset about it. There's nothing for me to do—except get married." She looked at him quickly. "What do you say to that?"

Mrs. Carawood showed Julian into the room behind them at that moment, and saved him the embarrassment of replying.

Julian always did the right and obvious thing. He could grow ecstatic when ecstasy was called for. He was quietly and profoundly impressed. All he said about the house to Mrs. Carawood satisfied her. His attitude in the face of beautiful nature was one of rapt contemplation.

Julian had social excellences which had never before oppressed John Morlay. He was an exquisite in dress; his white dress-bows were invariably tied so perfectly, his linen was so amazingly modern, his white' dress-waistcoats always seemed a decade ahead of his contemporaries, that John invariably felt gauche and ill-dressed in his presence. Ordinarily this amused him. That night, for the first time, he felt at a disadvantage.

Julian had a line of conversation which matched his crystal and diamond shirt-studs, in that, whilst it was unobtrusive, it was yet vitally part of the occasion. He knew people; oddly interesting writers and painters; and, more fascinating still, he could give first-hand news and gossip about those disreputable appendages to society whose doings, wickednesses, and brilliancies were matters of hearsay.

John was silent for the greater part of the meal, and presently found himself talking to Mrs. Carawood. She was no great conversationalist, seemed more conscious than ever of her educational defects. John did most of the talking, and presently wore down his more brilliant companion and extended his audience to Marie.

One thing he was determined to discover, and that was the truth about the Antwerp trips of Mrs. Carawood. There might be a very simple explanation. Skilfully he turned the conversation to the late war, to Belgium, Brussels and the northern towns.

"Do you know Antwerp at all, Mrs. Carawood?"

She looked at him quickly, hesitated, then:

"Yes, I've been there."

"To Antwerp, Nanny?"

Evidently this was news to Marie.

"Yes, my dear—I have been—on business. A wholesale dressmaker has a store there. They copy the French models; they sell very cheaply."

"That seems a queer place to have a fashionable dressmaking establishment," said Julian.

"Why?" asked Mrs. Carawood coolly. "One of last year's best models was designed by a fisherman in Aberdeen."

Julian was startled to silence by this incongruous picture which she conjured. The conversation divided again. Head to head, Julian and the girl grew more and more confidential, and John Morlay found Mrs. Carawood less and less interesting.

Presently the girl leaned across the table.

"Nanny, can Julian give me a present?"

"A birthday present," murmured Julian. Mrs. Carawood half frowned.

"I don't see why you shouldn't."

Her voice was a little metallic. In her attitude John read a dislike of the young man, and his heart warmed towards her.

"It's a little ring—a dress ring," apologized Julian. "I saw one the other day in that place that was burgled in Bond Street—Cratcher's."

"Marie's birthday is three months past," said

Mrs. Carawood.

"She couldn't have worn it at school," protested Julian.

The elder woman looked at John as though seeking guidance.

"Well, I suppose so," she said. "I don't like you wearing jewellery...I suppose it's the sort of present that anybody could give you?" She hesitated. "I mean, it doesn't signify anything—"

"It doesn't mean I'm engaged, darling," laughed the girl, and then: "Yes, Julian, you have my permission to measure my finger." She stuck it out straight in front of her. "I have a weakness for emeralds."

Julian winced.

"This isn't exactly—um—a precious stone," he said. "It's one of those old Italian signet-rings—"

"Made of polished Aberdeen granite, to match the fishermen," said John viciously. "You can take it, Marie—it will be quite inexpensive."

Julian showed an unaccustomed asperity of tone.

"That is terribly amusing," he said.

CHAPTER X

Before they returned to Town that night, Mrs. Carawood took John aside and asked, a little anxiously, for criticisms. There were very few he could honestly offer. He thought the footman in grey cloth with silver appointments was a little excessive, and she admitted that she herself had thought he was "too much". It was almost impossible to fault this little house.

He left Julian reluctantly, and cursed the urgent cablegram from New York which had broken his week-end and sent him back to Town. He had promised to return on the Sunday morning, but his work kept him till late in the afternoon, and by the time he had finished it was, he decided, too late to go into the country.

To be at a loose end on a Sunday night in London is a dreadful experience. He called up Inspector Pickles, who was on duty at Scotland Yard, and, at his invitation, drove down to the Embankment and joined him. He found him in his shirt-sleeves, sitting at a table on which were spread out, like cards in a game of patience, half a hundred photographs. The majority of them were of men; they all bore a number, and most of the faces were singularly unpleasant to look upon, for they had been taken by prison photographers, who in some mysterious manner had got the worst out of their clients.

"Pretty lot, aren't they? They're the known 'cats'. Every man has had a conviction for burglary; some have had three. That fellow"—he pointed—"has had six. He's still inside."

"Are you still worrying about your Lone Cat?"

Peas nodded.

"Worrying partly about him and partly about the fences," he said; "the man who's handling this stuff must be in a pretty big line of business, and we don't know anything about him."

"You wouldn't, would you?"

"We should, indeed," said Peas emphatically. "Every big fence is known at Scotland Yard. We may not have enough evidence to convict them, and it may be to our advantage to leave them alone and not attempt to pinch them. There are quite a few who know we know them, but they've got an idea that

they're so clever, or so useful to the police, that they'll never be pinched, which is silly."

John Morlay knew very little about criminal work.

"What sort of people are these receivers of stolen property? I mean, what position do they occupy? Are they tradesmen—"

"There are a few jewellers," said Peas, "one or two of them with quite good shops and doing a regular straight trade. There are a few who run marine stores, but these are usually for the little hooks. I know two dealers in second-hand wardrobes—"

John's laugh interrupted him.

"She's a receiver now, is she?"

"Who, Mrs. Carawood? No, I wasn't thinking about her. By the way, we checked up her last Antwerp visit. She goes to buy clothes, mainly silks. We've got confirmation of this through the Customs."

He was gathering together the photographs one by one and fastening them into little packages with elastic bands.

"So she's no longer under suspicion?" bantered John.

"She's very much under suspicion," said Peas. "What's more, she's under my suspicion, which is worse than being on the books of the Yard. In fact, she's the most suspicious person I have met with for a long time."

He looked at his watch and pressed a bell on the table.

"In ten minutes I'll be off duty," he said. "Would you like to see how a real detective works—and when I say a 'real detective', I mean a master of the game?"

"In other words, you," suggested John.

"Who else?" asked Peas.

To the attendant who came in answer to the bell he handed the photographs, having deposited them in an envelope, and after a telephone conversation with an individual whom he addressed as Arty, and who, John

gathered, was the detective officer who was relieving him, he put on his jacket, fished his hat from a wastepaper-basket, and they went out into the warm dusk of the Thames Embankment.

"It's curious you should harp on this Carawood woman," he said, as they turned westwards. "I have made up my mind to clear up that little mystery tonight. I think the boy might tell me something."

He explained, unnecessarily, the composition of Mrs. Carawood's household.

"The boy seems honest enough," he said. "And this fellow Fenner, who's always hanging about there, seems a fairly respectable fellow. It's rum that a woman who is in charge of a young lady of title has no friends except in that class."

"Where are we going now?" asked John suspiciously.

"To Penton Street. I want to have a talk with that boy."

John shook his head.

"I'll go with you as far as the door," he said, "but I'm afraid I shan't be able to see how a great detective works, after all. I could not very well stand by silently and hear you question my client's servants."

"Anyway, I shan't get anything out of him," said Peas. "He isn't clever enough to make a fool of himself. But he might give me a hint. He knows a great deal more about that lady than he has ever told me."

"Have you spoken to him before?"

"Half a dozen times," said Peas.

It was news to John Morlay that the woman was an object of such interest to Scotland Yard. He knew something of the methods employed by that institution; he knew that it was quite a common occurrence for the Yard to spend a considerable amount of time and labour in the pursuit of inquiries which led nowhere, and which in the end did no more than establish the innocence of some suspected person.

It was dark when they got to Penton Street, a wilderness of a thoroughfare, entirely deserted at this hour of the night. Opposite the store they stopped.

"I think I'll leave you to make your inquiries, and walk home," said John. "I don't think you'll get a great deal out of the boy, and all that you hear will be to Mrs. Carawood's credit."

Peas was about to cross the road when a small motor-car came into the street, made for the shop, and drew up with a jerk. A woman stepped out. John Morlay recognized her instantly as Mrs. Carawood, and apparently she was alone.

"Got a car, has she, and drives it!" said Peas. "Astonishing woman, that!"

As she walked across the pavement the side door opened immediately, remained open for a while, and then Herman came out, closed the door carefully, and, getting into the car, drove it away.

"So much for your quiet little talk with Herman," said John.

He was puzzled by the sudden appearance of the woman he had left behind at Ascot, and who certainly had had no intention of coming to Town when he left. It was news to him, too, that she owned or drove a car. It must have been kept at some garage in the village. Even Marie had no knowledge of this possession.

"I wonder what brought her up from Ascot?" said Peas thoughtfully.

"It's not unusual for people to come back from the country on Sunday night," suggested John, but the detective shook his head.

He made no further comment, but switched the conversation, in that abrupt way of his, to the deterioration of the neighbourhood; once this had been almost a fashionable street, before the flat-makers and -dwellers had turned the mansions into tenements. He was an authority on Pimlico, knew all about its swampy origin, and the enterprising builder who had created this little corner of London within living memory.

There was no sign of Herman returning, a fact upon which Peas was remarking when they saw the side door of the shop open and a woman come out cautiously, looking left and right. It was probable that she did not see the two men, for the moon was full, flooding one side of the street with its queer, mysterious light, and they stood in the shadow; unless she expected to find them there, a cursory glance would not have detected them.

John was staring at her, his mouth wide open. A well-dressed woman had gone into that shop, and a shuffling scarecrow had emerged. Even in the bad light he could see she was almost in rags. An old bonnet was on her head, a bedraggled skirt swept the ground.

She moved quickly, turned the corner down a side street, and disappeared.

"What do you think of that?" asked Peas hollowly. "Does that beat the story-books, or doesn't it? She's got up like a rag-picker—did you notice it!"

John nodded.

"Are you curious, or am I going on this job alone?"

"I'll go with you," said John, who followed him quickly across the street and turned into the narrower thoroughfare.

She was in sight; they came nearer to her, and, partly by moonlight and partly by the more direct rays of the overhead electric standards, they could examine her costume more thoroughly. She wore an old dolman; the dragging skirt was too big for her; the bonnet was a monstrosity. She looked, as Peas had said, like one of those poor, vagrant creatures that one finds sleeping in odd corners at night.

Turning into the main road, she hailed a cab. The door banged, the cab moved on and was out of sight by the time Peas had found another. They picked her up near Hyde Park Corner, followed her along Piccadilly, through the Circus, and finally through the deserted City and over Tower Bridge. The cab went some way towards Rotherhithe and stopped, and Mrs. Carawood got out. The pursuing cab passed her, and, looking back through the little window in the hood, Peas saw her turn down a narrow lane. He stopped the cab, jumped out, and followed, reaching the end of the lane in time to see her disappear into a small house.

It would be unfair to describe the street as a slum. The houses were tiny, obviously in the occupation of working-class tenants. The door through which she had disappeared was No. 17, and this Peas noted for future reference.

Strolling back, he found that the cab which had brought Mrs. Carawood had turned round and was waiting some little distance away on the other side of the street. He noticed something else: a big limousine drawn up just behind where Mrs. Carawood had stopped. Peas strolled up to it.

"Whose car is this?" he asked.

"Sir George Horbin's," was the reply.

Sir George Horbin was a great physician, and a Harley Street specialist.

"What's he doing in this neighbourhood?" asked Peas.

"A case," said the chauffeur carelessly.

He suddenly threw away his cigarette, jumped out, and opened the door. A dapper man came up to the car, sprang in with the laconic instruction "Home", and the car drove off.

"They do themselves well down in Rotherhithe, don't they?" said Peas.

He looked round, trying to remember whether there was a hospital or infirmary in the neighbourhood, but saw nothing that bore the least resemblance to these public institutions.

As they walked along the street and crossed the entrance to the narrow lane, they saw Mrs. Carawood come out from No. 17. She stopped for a moment to talk to a man, and then came rapidly up towards the main street. The two men strolled on, stopping to watch her as she crossed the road and entered the cab. They followed her back to Penton Street and waited after she had entered the store.

They had not long to wait. Ten minutes passed, and the little car she had driven came back to the side door and Herman alighted. He opened the door with a key, and a few minutes later Mrs. Carawood came out. She had discarded her rags and was dressed as she had been when she arrived.

"The garage must be pretty close," said Peas. "The boy's been waiting there until she 'phoned him. I shouldn't think he knows much about this dressing up."

They watched the red light of the little machine till it disappeared from view.

"I don't think we'll talk to Herman tonight," said Peas. "I'm going over to Rotherhithe single-handed, and if I don't solve the mystery of the lady in rags I'll give up police work and write detective stories."

Early on the Tuesday morning John drove himself down to Ascot for breakfast. It was the opening of the race week; he was resplendent in top hat and morning coat, for Mrs. Carawood had bought a box for the meeting.

Until he reached the house John imagined himself to be well and fashionably dressed. One glance at the immaculate Julian put him in his place.

"Isn't he lovely?" said Marie. "I've been admiring him all the morning. Why he should dress that way for breakfast only Julian knows. There are hours to pass before racing."

"He's certainly pretty," agreed John, but Mr. Julian Lester was neither embarrassed nor abashed.

When they were alone he enlarged upon the perfection of the week-end. He had had Marie alone on the previous evening, and he thought an understanding had been reached.

"By 'understanding' do you mean an engagement?" asked John, cold at the thought.

"Not exactly that. By 'understanding' I merely mean that Marie and I take the same view of life."

"God forbid!" said John. And then, remembering the adventure of Sunday night: "Did Mrs. Carawood go to Town?"

"No, she went out to see some friends in the neighbourhood. I didn't ask her who—she is the sort of lady one doesn't cross-examine. She may have been doing a little—urn—business."

And then, taking the other by the arm, he led him across the lawn.

"Honestly, John, the situation is a little bit serious as regards Marie. Do you know, the poor child has not the slightest idea how her money is invested, or whether she has any at all. In fact, she's told me that she thought she hadn't got a bob and was dependent on the charity of this woman."

"In those words!" asked John.

Julian made a little grimace of impatience.

"Of course she didn't! I was merely giving you the gist of her statement."

"Why are you so keen about the money?" asked

John bluntly. "You're a rich man."

Julian Lester turned quickly.

"What do you mean—a rich man?" he demanded. "Who told you that? I am not rich, I am comparatively poor. Anybody who thinks I've got money is making a mistake."

His voice was tremulous; it was almost as though he regarded the very suggestion that he was wealthy as an insult.

"You're a weird devil," said John; "but I'm really not interested whether you're Croesus or Lazarus. What is your understanding with Marie?"

"Don't bully me, my dear chap. There is no understanding between Marie and me, except—well, we have certain tastes in common; we have—er—affinities."

John laughed hollowly.

"There's nothing comic about an affinity."

"There is if it's a comical affinity," said John rudely. "You were saying that the matter is serious. If it's so serious, why don't you go straight away to Mrs. Carawood and ask her what she means by sticking to Marie's money? You might even ask her how much it is, so that you'll know whether it is worth while pursuing your little scheme."

Julian sighed.

"All this is very vulgar and more or less unintelligent," he said. "I thought you were the sort of fellow who could help a man of the world in a crisis like this."

To John that week, which promised so much, was a rather dull and insipid affair. There was a beauty in Ascot, in the loveliness of perfectly dressed women, in the excitement of the races, but all these were watered down by the presence of Julian. Julian had a Royal Enclosure badge, and was the only member of the party possessed of this privilege. He knew almost

everybody who was worth knowing; pointed out to Marie the famous and the merely celebrated, and, wonder of wonders, secured for her a badge for that holy of holies on the second day of the meeting.

John Morlay had no inferiority complex. The social side of life had made no appeal to him, and he did not care whether he saw racing from the top of the six-shilling stand or from the Jockey Club Enclosure. He was not, however, only irritated, but for the moment thrown off his balance by this emphasis of his lowliness. He might, had he taken the trouble and made his application, have secured the little oblong pasteboard to pin to the lapel of his coat, for he was a member of a good club, had made his bow at several levées—he had twice been decorated during the war—and no obstacle would have been placed in his way.

Julian had a trick of making quite nice people feel that they were just outside the pale, and he never lost an opportunity, by oblique reference and cleverly designed tilts to the conversation, of emphasizing the fact that John was a commercial detective engaged, at some unknown sum, for the protection of Marie Fioli.

Julian was an ever-recurring problem to him; became almost interesting in the light of certain disclosures. So many people knew this man-about-town, but almost every acquaintance knew him from a different angle. He had well-defined sets of friends, and the circles of his acquaintances were so perfectly adjusted that they never impinged one upon the other. He knew the heavy industrial set; he had a place in a certain racing set; he had quite a secluded circle of friends in the House of Commons.

He had, too, an amazing knowledge of industrial conditions; could talk as glibly about falling imports as he could about the staying-quality of Santoi blood. John almost respected him. If he was an adventurer, he had adventured with the greatest thoroughness and with an amazing regard for detail. One mutual acquaintance told him that Julian had started without a penny in the world, and that the income from his father's estate had been largely fictitious, a fact more readily understandable since the exact character of his parentage was a minor mystery.

One curious little story about Julian fixed him definitely in John Morlay's mind. Though he was undoubtedly of Christian parentage, he had posed as a Jew for nearly a year, and had attended certain festivals, kept certain fasts, and behaved like an orthodox son of Israel.

"At the time," said John's informant, "he was running round with the da Costas, one of the richest Jewish families in Portugal."

So far as John could discover, this opportunism had brought very little grist to Julian's mill. His passion for money was common knowledge; he dreamed in millions and grudged spending in pennies. Any profession or occupation which brought big money instantly attracted him. He had been tested for film work and had been found wanting. He had written a play which nobody had produced.

"Altogether a rum bloke," said his friends.

He was so patently and frankly influenced by Marie's wealth rather than by her own natural sweetness that his attentions to her were impersonally inhuman, and John could find amusement in his artless gallantry when, on the Thursday night of that week, Marie expressed a view, which completely coincided with his own, and he could have hugged her for her intelligence.

"Julian has gone to Town. He's left me his present, but I'm not to open it till tomorrow morning—we're pretending it's my birthday."

"A present? Oh, you mean the granite slab?"

"You mustn't be rude about it. I'm sure it's beautiful, because Julian has such exquisite taste. Poor Nanny, she hates my having it, and if I wanted to please her I'd take the ring straight into the kitchen and throw it into the fire. But really, Julian is wonderful. He's so openly and unashamedly mean—and oh, John, he's so terribly interested in my financial position. We've discussed it until I've threatened to go to Nanny and get a balance sheet! It's wonderful to be loved for oneself alone."

They laughed at this.

"Do you think he loves anybody?" asked John. "I realize I'm being a cat, but do you?"

She shook her head.

"No. I'm sure if one were married to him he'd be awfully nice, and we'd have perfectly lovely dinners, because his taste in food is wonderful; and he wouldn't hit one or run away, except with somebody worth twice as much, and if I'm as rich as he hopes it's almost impossible to find the likely lady."

"Are you—fond of him at all?" asked John awkwardly.

"Of Julian? I adore him," she said extravagantly. "As a matter of fact, I've seen the stone. I admired it when we were walking down Bond Street. A little red bloodstone, with tiny gold markings. But naturally I'm going to be very surprised when I see it in the morning. It was the day before the burglary. Did they lose much?"

"I can give you exact particulars of their losses," said John promptly. "An oblong-shaped sapphire, held by four diamond claws. It was worth two thousand pounds. The underwriters are clients of mine."

"Tell me what it feels like to be a detective?" she asked, and was genuinely interested.

He laughed.

"You'd be bored if you knew how mundane my job was. I must introduce you to Peas. His other name is Pickles. There's a real detective for you! The best man at Scotland Yard—he admits it!"

CHAPTER XI

Mrs. Carawood seemed relieved at the departure of Julian, and was almost jovial at dinner. She had indulged in the rare luxury of a gamble, and had backed a horse on the advice of a friend.

"Who was that?" asked Marie, in surprise, and Mrs. Carawood smiled.

"Fenner came racing. He's an authority on everything, including horses."

"Was that the man in the red tie?"

"A socialist," she said grimly. "He believes in dividing everybody's property with him, but not his property with anybody else."

They were late going to bed; it was nearly one o'clock when John put out his light and got into bed. It was warm; clouds had come up during the evening, and occasional spots of rain had been falling since nightfall; and now, as he lay in bed, he heard the distant rumble of thunder.

He was a light sleeper, and as the storm broke over Ascot it needed less than the first crash of thunder to bring him wide awake. The room was lit at irregular intervals with the flicker of lightning. He pulled back the curtains and looked out. Rain was coming down with tropical intensity. A ribbon of light ran across the sky and almost immediately a blinding flash struck down, and he backed instinctively. It must have been very close, for the crash of thunder came almost simultaneously.

He looked at his watch; it was a quarter past two, and he was wide awake. In spite of the open window, the room was airless, and, turning the handle of the door, he pulled it wide open to allow the draught to cool the room. As he did so, he heard a cry. It was repeated—a cry of alarm, which came from the direction of Marie's room. He hesitated, not knowing what to do. She had probably been wakened by the storm and was frightened. Then he heard the fumbling of a knob and the door of Marie's room was flung open.

"John!...Nanny!...Who's that?"

"It is I," said John. "Is anything wrong—are you frightened?"

"Yes," she breathed, "but not of the storm—"

"Is anything wrong, darling?"

It was Mrs. Carawood's voice.

"Yes...somebody's been in my room."

John drew a dressing-gown around him, ran up to the top landing, where the girl was standing. As he did so she switched on the light, and he saw how white she was. The storm still rattled and crashed above them; the hiss of the rain was terrifying. But now none of the three was conscious of the lightning or thunder.

"I woke up suddenly." She was speaking in little gasps. "There was a man in my room...near my dressing-table. He had come over the balcony and through the windows...they were open. I cried out, 'Who's there?' and he seemed to vanish."

"Have you lost anything?" asked John.

She shook her head.

"I don't know," she said, and tried to smile. "A night's sleep, my peace of mind, and my faith in detectives."

He went into her room and turned on the light. As far as he could see, nothing had been disturbed. The costly little toilet set on her table was untouched. Marie came in behind him.

"The ring!" she said suddenly. "It's gone!"

She looked under the dressing-table and behind it, but the little red box which had held Julian's present had disappeared.

"Where did you put it?"

"There," she said, pointing to a corner of the dressing-table.

"Are you absolutely sure, darling?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I am very sure," she said quietly. "It was there at half past one."

"But you went to bed before twelve, Marie."

She glanced at Mrs. Carawood, then looked away.

"Yes, I know; but I didn't go to sleep."

She was unusually grave. It would take something more than the shock of finding a burglar in her room to account for her manner. She had recovered from that unpleasant surprise very quickly, and had been on the point of laughing at her fears when she had come back into the room. It was the loss of the ring which was worrying her, and why that should be the case John Morlay could not understand.

"You wouldn't recognize the man again?"

She shook her head.

He went out on to the balcony. A ladder had been raised against the railing and was still there. Mrs. Carawood, who followed him, pushed the ladder so that it fell on to the lawn.

"They must have been looking at this house for a long time. That ladder is kept at the back of the greenhouse," she said. "They knew just where to find it."

The effect of the burglary upon her was more profound than it was in the case of Marie.

"Why should they come here?" she asked. "They know there's no jewellery in the house, and that it's a waste of time—"

"Don't bother about it, darling. Let's go downstairs and make coffee. I think the storm is passing."

If it was, then it passed slowly. The house was shaking for half an hour as they sat in the little dining-room and sipped the coffee which Mrs. Carawood had made.

Marie had been curiously affected by the happening. It was difficult to raise a smile. She sat looking down at the polished table, her fingers lacing and unlacing, her brows gathered in a frown.

"I suppose Julian will be upset," said Mrs. Carawood, "though it wasn't a very expensive ring, if it's the one you were describing."

The girl gave a little sigh and looked up.

"I shall get it back," she said. "I've just decided that."

"I shouldn't be too sure of that," said John. "It is very difficult to recover stolen jewellery. I wonder if that bird has been anywhere else tonight?"

"I shall get it back." She nodded, and for the first time smiled. "I've got a—what is the word?—hunch! I think when the burglar sees that ring and reads the touching inscription, he will put it in an envelope and post it back to me, and when we come back from the races tomorrow there it will be on the hall-stand."

"Are you being clairvoyante?" he asked.

"I'm being sensible," she said; "and you don't know how difficult it is to be sensible!"

Dawn was breaking through the scattered storm-wrack when they went to their beds. John slept dreamlessly until the sound of pebbles falling on the floor of his bedroom woke him in time to see one of the small panes of the window crack into a large and picturesque star.

"I'm so sorry," said a voice below.

It was Marie.

"I've been shying stones through your window for ten minutes. Come down and be helpful."

It was twenty minutes before he joined her on the lawn below. The sun was shining; the sky was clear; there was the promise of a perfect day.

"Come and walk in the orchard."

There was an acre of land beyond the lawn where apple, plum, and pear trees grew thickly together.

"According to the gardener we grow these for the wasps," she said.

She slipped her arm through his and they paced through the long grass between the trees.

"I want you to do me a very big favour, John."

"It is done," he said promptly.

"Forget all that I said last night about the ring coming back. By the way, the lady at Mirfleet—that's three houses away—lost a valuable pearl necklace last night, so he didn't come only for my ring."

"Have the police been notified—" he began.

"Have the police been notified!" she scoffed. "Since seven o'clock there's been a procession of important-looking detectives, disguised as policemen in plain clothes, tramping across the lawn. They've almost left a trail. And your friend Peas—by the way, isn't his name Pickles?"

"Has he been here?"

"Whilst you slumbered I interviewed them," she said solemnly. "I gave them exact details, which they all wrote down in their books. It was whilst they were interviewing me that the robbery at Mirfleet was discovered, and I haven't seen them since."

"Who sent for the police?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know; Mrs. Carawood, I think. In fact, it must have been she. She didn't go to bed last night, and was down at five. She may have told a local policeman and he passed on the grim tidings. At any rate, this place has been like Scotland Yard since ten minutes past seven."

And then, seriously:

"I didn't tell them my theory—I mean, about the ring coming back. Will you promise not to?"

He laughed at this.

"Why, of course! It won't come back, because burglars aren't sentimental. If the man who took that ring can get fourpence for it he'll sell it; that is how burglars are made. If you really think it's coming back, you'd better not tell Julian it has been lost."

"I've already told him," she said quietly. "I rang him up. He was awfully nice about it."

"Did you tell him you thought it would come back?"

She shook her head.

"You're an odd girl."

"I wonder if I am?"

She released her arm and stood back from him, her hands behind her, watching him gravely.

"There's another favour you can do me," she said, after a while. "Can you persuade Mrs. Carawood to tell the servants not to call me 'my lady'? Poor darling. I know she's drilled them and instructed them, so that they can do nothing else, and I dare not hurt her feelings. But perhaps you could drop a hint—say it's never done at Ascot, or anything you can think of. Don't tell them the Italian aristocracy are not entitled to that form of address, because she'll fight you for it!"

"Do you like Julian really!"

She shook her bead.

"No, I don't. When I say I adore him, that is a figure of speech. One adores people and dogs and pictures and flowers without having any personal affection for them. They're cute or interesting, and so they become adorable."

"Do you like me!"

He asked the question bluntly, and felt more foolish than he had ever felt in his life. She nodded.

"Do you—um?"

"Do I adore you? No, I don't. You're one of the most unadorable men I've ever met."

"I'll ask you another question: do you believe in May and December marriages?"

She laughed for a long time; he thought she was never going to stop.

"No, John, but I think I have a weakness for April and July marriages. And don't call yourself December; it's a kind of vanity to pretend that you're old—and now we'll have breakfast."

He would have liked to continue the talk on this level of friendship, but she was most practically hungry.

After breakfast he strolled out to find Peas, and, after a long search, discovered him at the canteen of the police barracks. Opposite the grand-stand there is a neat little red building which for three hundred and sixty-one days in the year is empty; but for four days is packed tight with Metropolitan policemen who are drafted to the district to keep order, and assist in the control of traffic. Peas was drinking beer and eating large chunks of bread and cheese.

"They wanted me to go up to the officers' quarters," he said, "but the men are good enough for me. I'm naturally democratic. Every policeman to me is a comrade, and they respect me for it. They don't like people who give themselves airs."

"You're giving yourself so many airs at this moment that I wonder the other people can breathe," said John, and hooked him out into the courtyard.

Peas could give him little information. There had been a burglary; a very valuable pearl necklace had been stolen—and the ring.

"It beats me why he should break into your house," said Peas. "These burglars don't do things without a lot of careful reconnaissance work, and he must have known that there wasn't five hundred pounds' worth of jewellery in the house, nor, as far as I can gather, a hundred. The only theory I can raise is that he mistook your place for another one, and even that isn't feasible."

"Was it the same man, do you think?"

"Undoubtedly," said Peas. "We found exactly the same foot impressions on both lawns. The ground was pretty soft from the rain, and he left a couple of footmarks that are as plain as daylight. The only thing we know about him

is that he's got a small foot, almost like a woman's, and that he wears cotton gloves when he's working. He left one of them behind at the foot of the ladder, and as a clue it's about as useful as what somebody told the man next door. He worked with a car; we found the wheel tracks and oil drippings, and a witness who saw the car with lights burning pass by the side of the station road. They didn't take the number, and if they had it would have been no more use than housemaid's knee. It was probably a stolen car."

He looked curiously at John.

"Mrs. Carawood pretty well this morning?"

"I haven't seen her," said John. "She was up most of the night and went to bed again."

Peas nodded.

"She didn't tell you anything about her trip to Rotherhithe? And naturally you didn't ask her?"

"She said nothing. You don't like her?" said John.

"I like her more than I've liked a woman for a long time," was the surprising reply. "I've got an admiration for that lady."

"As a citizen or a criminal?" asked John flippantly, but Mr. Pickles would not compromise himself.

He had a little secret of his own, and it seemed to John that once or twice he was on the point of betraying his mystery. Pickles was so constituted that he could not exist without an audience, and an approving audience at that. He must have found it very difficult to keep that secret of his; nevertheless, he kept it.

They went to the racecourse to lunch, and watched an afternoon's sport which was more than ordinarily interesting to John, whose card had been marked by an owner friend, to his profit.

He had forgotten that little conversation of his with Marie in relation to the theft, until they were walking into the hall. She stood aside as the door opened, and then, with a little cry, ran in and took a packet from the hall-stand.

"When did this come?" she asked the servant.

"This afternoon, miss."

She tore open the paper cover; inside was a red leather case, which she snapped open.

Lying on a white velvet bed was a pretty bloodstone ring. He gazed at it in amazement.

"Well?" she said triumphantly.

"Is this the ring?" He was incredulous.

She nodded.

"My dear, your ring's come back?"

Mrs. Carawood had not realized the miracle.

"The ring came back, and here's the note. Written in pencil and in an illiterate hand, as I feared."

She read the message on the dirty sheet of paper:

Dear Miss. Very sorry to take your present.

Marie was looking at the ring, turning it from side to side.

"Aren't you going to wear it, darling?" asked Mrs. Carawood, as Marie slipped it back in its case.

"No, Nanny," she said quietly, "it doesn't go with my dress, and I shall never have a dress that it does go with. I don't think I ever intended wearing it."

John took the case in his hand and examined it. The ring he guessed to be worth from twenty to twenty-five pounds. It was a reproduction of an old Venetian jewel, a lovely piece of workmanship, pleasant to contemplate.

Then she began to laugh again, and this time there was a hint of hysteria in her amusement.

CHAPTER XII

John Morlay went back to Town that night feeling a little uneasy and baffled, as one who had caught a glimpse of a picture without seeing it long enough to understand subject or treatment.

Saturday and Sunday were busy days for him. He had a great deal of arrears of work to make up, and he was at his desk at eight o'clock on Monday morning when Mrs. Carawood was announced. He greeted her now as an old friend, pushed up his best chair for her, and was prepared to gossip pleasantly over his delightful holiday week.

She was restless, ill at ease; the hard-worn hands that lay on the table moved incessantly. Presently she got up and stood by the window, looking down into the square, seemingly dividing her attention between the world outside and the business which had brought her out so early that morning.

It was not an easy business to explain, he judged. He had met her in this state of uncertainty before. She fenced around and about the object of her visit, and John, who recognized the universal symptoms, and had come to know something about this remarkable woman, was prepared for a confidence which hitherto she had denied him.

"It's about Marie, as usual," she said. "I am very worried about her just now."

"Because of the burglary?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No. That was very unfortunate, but it's the sort of thing that might happen to anybody. Mr. Morlay, you're a terribly busy man, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am just now," he confessed, indicating the piles of correspondence which awaited his attention.

"You couldn't afford—I mean, I couldn't pay you enough to give your whole time to Marie?"

For a moment he was tempted to say that he was prepared to throw up every business interest he had to be with her.

"I don't trust men," she went on. "I know them too well. But I trust you. You're fond of her, aren't you?" Her keen eyes were searching his face.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I am very fond of her."

It required an effort in her to put the next question.

"Are you in love with her, or do you just imagine you are?"

He looked at her straightly.

"Yes, I love her. I'm old enough to know just how I feel."

She drew a quick breath.

"She likes you. I think she's very fond of you...I'd like nothing better...but there are all sorts of things to be considered. I've been lying awake half the night, worrying. Suppose she had no money—not a penny in the world!"

He shook his head.

"That would make no difference."

"Does the title mean anything to you?"

There was something that was half challenge and half defiance in her tone. John Morlay laughed.

"My dear Mrs. Carawood, this country, particularly just now, is filled with princesses and ci-devant duchesses. It's lovely for Marie to be a contessa, but it means no more to me than if she were just Miss Jones."

She sighed heavily.

"I believe you too."

Yet she was disappointed in him, a little chagrined, he felt, that he did not share her reverence for an ancient title.

"You're a gentleman; you mix with people of the world, and you think differently to me," she said. "I suppose that's how modern folks look at things—I'm old-fashioned. I haven't told Marie I was coming," she added

quickly, "and I'm not going to tell her what I've spoken to you about; but if—if you felt like that, and if she were willing, I don't think I should object."

He realized how much of an effort it cost her to make this statement, and wondered what had been the determining factor. Not the burglar; no attentions of Julian. Only a few days ago, it seemed, she had said emphatically that Marie was too young to marry, and now she was actually choosing a husband!

John found himself curiously agitated. When he spoke his voice trembled.

"It would be wonderful if she felt as you do," he said. "The question of money doesn't matter; I have sufficient."

She nodded quickly.

"I know—Mr. Morlay. I've been inquiring about you. I know all about your family; I can pretty well tell you how much money you have invested. I had to do that, and, as you know, there are agencies in London who do that kind of work. As soon as I decided that Marie ought to be married quickly..." She stopped.

"How quickly!" asked John.

Again that impatient sigh.

"I don't know. Soon, I think. Do you know Mr. Pickles? He's a detective—a real detective. You know what I mean, Mr. Morlay." She was confused. "A police officer."

"I know him very well."

"He has been making inquiries at my store—asking my boy questions. Do you happen to know why?"

John could answer in truth that he knew no reason.

"I don't think you should worry about that, Mrs. Carawood. The police are naturally inquisitive. They were rather keen to know why you went to Antwerp..."

He heard a little cry and looked up. She was standing by the window, and her face was the colour of chalk. He saw the rise and fall of her bosom,

thought she was going to faint, and leaped to his feet. She must have guessed what was in his mind, for she waved him away.

"What were you saying?" she asked huskily. "Why I went to Antwerp? Why, to buy dresses—that's easily proved. They can come round and see my invoices."

"What does it matter?" he asked.

She shook her head impatiently.

"It's nothing. I sometimes have these attacks."

She dropped into a chair, facing him. The hands she clasped on the desk were shaking. Her face was ghastly. He went to the filter in the corner of the room, poured out a paper cup of water, and brought it to her. She drank it eagerly and smiled her thanks.

"It's really nothing. Do you mind if I stay here a little while until I've quite recovered? Is there a back door out of these premises?"

"Yes," he said, surprised.

"I wonder if one of your clerks could bring a taxi there. I'll go home. I don't want to go out of the front, because I might collapse and make a scene. If it happens there, nobody can see me."

"Shall I get a doctor?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no. A taxi is my best doctor."

John sent one of his girl clerks in search of a cab, and gave her instructions to accompany the woman home. When he returned, she was standing by the open window, looking down into the square. The colour had come back to her dark face; the sick, sallow look had gone.

"I'm sorry I made a fool of myself, Mr. Morlay," she said. She had recovered some of her old brusqueness. "When a woman's past fifty she gets these funny swoons. When are you seeing Marie?"

"Tomorrow?" he suggested, and she nodded.

"She's coming to Town tomorrow. You can call and take her out to tea. Honestly, I don't know really how she feels about you, but she's got a nice feeling—I know that. She's very young, but she's older than most girls of her age, and clever. That's not the word I want...shrewd. She'll take your name, of course. In a way I'm sorry, but in another way I'm glad."

"Sorry to lose the title?" smiled John. "Well, you needn't worry about that. She'll be Lady Morlay one of these days."

He was the heir of his bachelor uncle, the third baronet of his name.

This was one piece of news that the agency had not discovered for Mrs. Carawood, and she brightened visibly, plied him with questions about the social position of baronets' wives, and seemed to regard him with a new kind of respect.

In the midst of her questions the clerk came to tell her the cab was ready, and she went blithely down the back stairs into the mews behind the building. John watched her driven away before he returned slowly to his room, and to the contemplation of a happiness which seemed too good to be true, too remote ever to be realized.

CHAPTER XIII

He took his lunch early; the clock was chiming the half-hour after twelve when he went out into Hanover Square. He did not at first notice the man who was standing on the kerb, and whom he passed before he realized he had seen him before. He looked back over his shoulder; the man was staring after him. Yes, there was no doubt about it. John turned back.

"Hullo, my friend! You're a long way from Ascot—didn't I see you in a certain garden a few weeks ago?"

The ex-convict looked sick and wan. His unshaven face seemed more drawn than it had been when John had met him last.

"This is a free country, ain't it? I've as much right here as I had at Ascot. You've got nothing against me. You can't pinch me for loitering...or under the Act...You can take me to the station and search me—you'll find nothing in my pockets unless you put it there."

He spoke rapidly, defiantly, yet with a vague suggestion of fear. There was something of the hunted beast about this man that touched John Morlay.

"I'm not going to pinch you or take you to the police station, or charge you or do anything so silly," he said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"If you mean money, no. I've got plenty of money, and got it honest. Did you come out of there?"

He pointed to the door of John Morlay's office.

"Yes."

"Do you live there?" he asked suspiciously.

"I work there; there are several other firms that have their offices in that building. There's a lawyer, an exporter, and, I believe, an accountant. Why?"

The man licked his colourless lips and looked furtively left and right.

"You didn't see a lady in there, did you? Well, a woman, a bit younger than me. Dressed up to the nines...dark-faced..."

He was peering at the other as he asked the question. John Morlay realized he was describing Mrs. Carawood, and instinct made him lie.

"No. Is she a friend of yours?"

"I don't know...Well, to tell you the truth, I ain't certain it's her, only she looks very much like her. I've never seen anybody so much alike. She was standing upstairs by that window up there." He pointed to the open window of John's room. "I just happened to see her, and she saw me, too, and drew back."

Now the mystery of Mrs. Carawood's sudden terror and agitation was solved. It was not the reference to Antwerp; she had seen this man.

"I see her go through the door, and I said to myself: 'She looks like so-and-so,'" the man went on, "and I thought I'd hang around till she come out, and then I looked up and saw her."

"If that was the room. I can put your doubts at rest," said John. "It is my office, and the lady who was standing by the window was the Duchess of Crelbourne."

"A duchess, eh? A dark-faced woman...lady, I mean?"

John nodded.

"Yes; I've known her for years."

The man scratched his chin.

"Then I'm wasting me time. It's funny...I could have sworn it was somebody..."

He humped his shoulders, and without a farewell went shuffling on.

He had money, but not plenty of money; money to keep body and soul together, not money for the brandies that were more than food to him. He could have lived comfortably and quietly on his allowance, but quietness was not his idea of comfort. The old methods had changed since he had gone inside. It wasn't so easy to get into a house and away with a few odd scraps of silver as it had been in the early 'nineties. He had spent the last two or three days wandering about London, looking for easy cribs. A new science of thieving had been introduced; even the slang and the argot of the

new profession were strange to him. There were active young men who called themselves dancers, and whose graft was to get into first-floor flats and get out quickly with such overcoats, wraps, and movables as could be whisked away in half a minute. In his young days he could have climbed as well as the best of them, but now that was impossible. The doctor had said that any minute his heart would go "phut", and he carried in his pocket a precious life-saving phial which he had not yet been obliged to use.

He hated the world; hated most the woman he thought he had recognized. A duchess, eh? He had never seen a duchess before. She looked very much like anybody who wasn't a duchess...

John had a very thoughtful lunch, and was in half a mind to go on to Penton Street and interview Mrs. Carawood. Why had she been afraid of this shabby convict? What association was there between them that the very sight of him struck terror to her heart?

He wished he could confide in Pickles; but Pickles was dangerous: you never knew how far your confidences would go with him. He was absolutely unscrupulous, would violate any oaths of secrecy and vows of silence if by such violation he could do his job a little better or a little more easily.

Julian came in just as he was finishing lunch. Mr. Lester was a member of the club, which, however, received very little of his patronage. It was just a shade too bourgeois for Julian's refined taste, and the spirit of adventure was entirely absent. There were no bloated capitalists willing to engage their money in interesting if uncommercial propositions. It was a club of the well off rather than the rich, but the food was extraordinarily cheap, and when Julian was not the guest of somebody, which was very rare, and had to pay for his own luncheon, he came here.

As he caught sight of John he crossed the dining-room with long strides.

"I say, what an awful thing to happen to poor Marie! A burglar! And can you imagine the beggar returning the ring? What is coming over the criminal classes?"

"I'm not an authority upon the criminal classes," said John; "and if you're sitting at this table with the idea of enjoying a tête-à-tête you're going to weep into your serviette, for I'm leaving in a few minutes."

"Churlish," murmured Julian.

He was his bright, debonair self, wore a carnation in the lapel of his morning coat, and irradiated cheerfulness. He confided that he was going to Wolverhampton that afternoon to get material for his book.

"What on earth can you find in Wolverhampton that can appeal to your arty-crafty mind?" asked John in astonishment.

"You're very rude; I haven't an arty-crafty mind. I've a terribly well-trained mind and a selective mind and an educated taste."

"In spite of which," said John, "I don't see what Wolverhampton has to offer. I've nothing to say against Wolverhampton; I have some very good clients there; but it seems a very strange place for you to select. What do you collect—engine boilers?"

Mr. Lester evaded the question. He wanted to talk about Marie, but received no encouragement. He was most anxious to know what impression his present had made.

"It caused a sensation," said John. "People came out of the Royal Enclosure and stood in queues for hours just to see it. Never have fifteen pounds' worth of synthetic platinum and a petrified gumdrop created such an impression."

"Twenty-five pounds," said Julian proudly. "It is vulgar to sneer at a man because he cannot afford to make valuable presents. It isn't the gift—"

"It's the spirit," interrupted John. "Why are you so original?"

Mr. Julian Lester was really not annoyed. He was genuinely imperturbable, having that sense of superiority which is particularly enjoyable. The day had gone well with him: he had bought a fairly large number of shares, and this at a moment when the market was painfully depressed, and in less than a week those shares had shown him some fifty per cent profit.

He carried at the end of his watch-guard a small, gold-covered book, in which from day to day he jotted down with complete accuracy the state of his bank balance. On the gold cover was engraved "Five hundred thousand". It was his watchword, his bright, beckoning beacon, his goal, the summit and apex of his endeavour. That five hundred thousand dominated almost every movement, every action, and every thought of his life. When those figures were engraved his bank balance stood at less than a hundred pounds. The book itself had been a present; the engraving had been done for

nothing by a jeweller friend. Even the refill within the covers advertised the excellence of a soda-water and could be had for the asking. Sometimes the balance was high, sometimes it was low; but even as it varied, rising and falling, the upward curve was maintained. There had been a terrible dip in the days of the big Wall Street slump, but even this had been liquidated.

Julian had started with nothing. When the half-million, total was reached he would retire from the field of endeavour. He had many qualities of body and mind which made his goal possible of achievement. There was always a chance of the half-witted heiress, the favourite dream of every spendthrift, and no less a favourite with the thrifty Julian, though he had long since abandoned all hopes of rescuing the millionaire's daughter from a watery grave. It was characteristic of him that to support this dream he had learned to swim.

Complacent as he was, he was quick to recognize defeat, which he invariably accepted with philosophy. Marie Fioli did not at the moment represent failure, but there was a very big question-mark against her fortune, and until that matter was settled one way or the other his plans were compromised.

Julian never took an unnecessary risk or made an unnecessary effort. Whilst Marie was worth while he would continue, hoping for the best—the best being something which would push up the total in his little gold book to within reach of the magical figures. He was not a fool; five hundred thousand pounds meant there or thereabouts. It might be a little less or a little more, but it had to be near enough to shake hands with half a million.

Nobody knew Julian thoroughly. Not three people in England had ever heard of the beautiful little villa near Florence which he had bought a year before, and which he had designed as the scene of his retirement. He did not dream in palaces but in revenues. His idea of enough was more than twice enough.

His dreams might not come true; they might end disastrously. He faced that possibility with the greatest courage, and developed a method of insurance against failure. It was an expensive method, and involved the purchase of a little house on the Solent, and a course of study which was all the more tiresome because Julian's heart was not in it.

But he was thorough—a rigorous, mirthless taskmaster to himself. He was—though he was not conscious of this fact—the cleverest man of his type that Europe had produced in a decade.

He went up to Wolverhampton with his writing-pad and his expensive little camera. He developed and printed his own photographs. Julian's most profitable sideline was very simply worked. The monumental tome which was yet to be written, and would never be published, was called The Art of the Locksmith. He had studied his subject most minutely. He had the entrée to every great factory in Britain, and the confidence of managers who were rarely confidential with anybody. But he was a writing gentleman, tremendously interested in their craft, knew almost as much about it as they, was ready to be surprised and astonished. He learned the mysteries of every new locking arrangement, photographed keys, and sometimes was even allowed to take casts of them. Sometimes he took impressions when he was not allowed, but only he knew this.

Some long time after, Julian boasted that he could have opened every door in the Midland and Southern Bank, including the new burglar-proof, fireproof, and every-else-proof strong-room, photographs of which appeared in the illustrated newspapers.

Nobody suspected Julian of being athletic, yet he could climb up a rainpipe with the agility of a monkey. He had a knowledge of precious stones which the oldest inhabitant of Hatton Garden might have envied. He could take a flawless blue-white diamond and with a silk handkerchief wipe off the almost invisible and certainly indelible inkstains at each of its corners and restore it to its natural yellowness. He could look across the room and price the ring on a woman's finger, and detect the flaws in a seemingly flawless necklace of pearls.

He knew, too, that pearls had an identity, that, even separated from celebrated necklaces, they could be recognized by the experienced dealer. He never touched pearls. He had taught himself to cut a diamond, cleave and polish it, and so change its shape that the woman who had worn it for years would not have recognized it.

Nevertheless, he preferred the more gentle method of acquiring a sufficiency; a method which would make the little house on the Solent and the painfully 'expensive motor-boat quite unnecessary instruments of transit.

The uncertainty about Marie's fortune was very distressing. That had to be cleared up speedily; and as soon as he had got back to Town and developed the photographs he had taken, and filed them for future reference, he set himself the task of reducing Marie Fioli's wealth to terms of reality.

Julian had an apartment in Bedford Square. He called it "an apartment" in the American fashion, though it was little more than a self-contained flat. There was a modest luxury in its appointments. That parent of his to whom he invariably referred as his "lamented father" had been a traveller, and had acquired, in the course of his wanderings, much that was treasurable. There were rich cabinets from the Orient, silken carpets from Ispahan, rare embroideries from China, and, more to the point, many precious mineral specimens which Julian kept in a glass-sided case, and which had been, on many occasions, an excuse for the invitation of people who were likely to be of service to him.

One o'clock was striking when he let himself into the building where his rooms were situated. Mounting the dimly lighted stairway, he paused on the second landing, took out a key, and opened the door. All his movements were naturally noiseless, and, save for the soft crack of the door as it parted from the lintel, he made no sound.

That crack, however, had warned somebody. As he pushed open the portal he saw for the fraction of a second the gleam of a light through the half-opened door of his bedroom, facing him as he entered. Only for an infinitesimal space of time did the light show and then there was darkness.

Julian Lester had many faults, but lack of courage was not one of them. He closed the door and softly shot the bolt, then, turning to the left, went into his study and switched on the light. From the drawer of his desk he took an automatic pistol, and, going back to the tiny hall, lit its one lamp. The bedroom door was closed, but he knew it could not be locked and, turning the handle, flung it open as his fingers groped for the light switch.

"Put up your hands, my friend."

The white-faced man who crouched back against the wall before the menace of the levelled gun blinked at the light as it came on, but made no attempt either to move or to raise his hands.

"Can't put up my hands, governor," he said huskily. "Gotta bad heart..."

He looked old, terribly old, with his lined and furrowed face, his deep-set eyes and their shaggy, overhanging grey brows. His face twitched spasmodically as he stared incuriously into the muzzle of the weapon.

"It's a cop! I'm not making any trouble," he said. "You couldn't give me a chance, could you, mister? I've only just come out of Dartmoor from a lifer...you don't want to send an old lag back to that place, do you, mister?"

His voice was a whine of supplication, and Julian looked at him in disgust. His clothes were old and grimy; he wore odd boots—there was something about him that momentarily revolted the young man.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

The open bedroom window made the question unnecessary. The man gabbled a glib explanation, and Julian listened coldly. He had all the first-class professional's contempt for the bad amateur. He made the burglar march before him to his little drawing-room, but nothing had been touched, and the probability was that the two had arrived almost simultaneously, the burglar through the window and Julian through the door.

"I'm starving—" began the burglar.

"What is your name? I suppose it's a ridiculous question to ask."

"Smith," said the other, and Julian smiled crookedly.

His first impulse was to send for the police. But the novelty of the situation tickled him. It was his first experience with a burglar, and Julian had something of the cat in his nature.

He sent the man before him into the little kitchenette. His daily help had left a light supper for her master, but Julian had supped well and cheaply with a chance-met friend.

"Sit down and eat," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

The man hesitated and sat down. For a starving man he ate sparingly, and there was obviously little truth in the story of his starvation.

Julian wondered what John Morlay would do in the circumstances. Of course he would send for the police and have the wretched man removed instantly. Julian guessed that he might do something of the same kind at the conclusion of the interview, but he was not quite sure yet.

"Did a 'lifer', did you? That means twenty years, doesn't it?" he asked.

Smith nodded.

"What crime did you commit?"

The man looked at him for a moment from under his shaggy brows, and then:

"Murder," he said, with a cold-blooded calmness which made Julian shiver. "I was doing a burglary and shot a policeman—by accident," Smith went on rapidly, seeing the bad impression he had created. "A lot of liars took the witness-stand and swore my life away. They'd have hung me, too, only somebody got up a petition."

"Ugh!" said Julian with a shudder.

And now his mind was made up.

"Finish your meal and get out of here," he said curtly.

Apparently the man was relieved at this end to his adventure, for he sprang up from his seat with alacrity.

"I..." he began, and then Julian, watching him, saw his face become contorted with pain. The white skin grew dark and red, and then a queer blue, which seemed to find its deepest tint about his lips. Frantically he groped in his pockets and brought out a small phial, nipped out the cork with his chattering teeth, and, pressing the neck of the bottle to his blue lips, swallowed before he collapsed again into his chair.

Julian looked at him in amazement and no little fear. Presently the unhealthy white came back to the cheeks.

"Heart," gasped the man. "I get like that at times. I have to carry this stuff around or I'd croak."

He found the cork, jammed it into the half-empty bottle, and put it back into his pocket with trembling fingers.

"I'd like to do something for you, sir," he said. "You're the first man that's ever shown me a kindness."

It was the old lag's conventional compliment, calculated to soften a heart of stone, and the inexperienced Julian, who knew little of convict ethics, swallowed the bait and felt a warm glow of complacency.

"If you would go straight, there are plenty of people who would gladly help you."

The burglar shook his head.

"You think so, sir, but it ain't the case," he said. "They're always down on an old lag. Give me a little honest work to do..."

He went on, but Julian was not listening. Of a sudden there was born in his mind an interesting scheme. A man like this might be useful in certain emergencies. At worst he could be a valuable cover for some work Julian had in hand.

"Where are you living? Where can I get in touch with you?"

The man told him eagerly, and Julian wrote down the address on the back of one of his cards, and then, putting his hand in his pocket:

"Here's ten shillings for you. I may put work in your way. Come and see me—no, don't do that! I will send for you."

He ushered his visitor not only from the room but from the building.

On the whole Julian was rather pleased with himself. He had performed an act of humanity, and it had cost him nothing but ten shillings and a meal, which would have been wasted anyway. In the night he had some misgivings, and, getting out of bed, examined the drawing-room cabinets carefully. But nothing had been taken, and he went back to bed fortified in his rectitude.

He was a man of affairs, was on several fashionable committees, one of which was the Help League, which attended to the needs of the poor and offered them the matured advice of worldly men and women in moments of crisis. It had not been long enough in existence for the poor to realize that attached to the advice was no pecuniary benefit, and for the moment there were dozens of "cases" distributed among the committee for help and judgment. Julian spent the hour before lunch deeply engaged in the woes of mothers of families whose husbands were in prison, and in a spirit of benevolence (he had offered very good advice indeed) he went to lunch with the secretary of the association.

His own business brought him back to Bedford Square at three o'clock. A little sharp-faced man was pacing up and down in front of the house awaiting his return. Julian greeted him with a nod and led the way up to his rooms.

"Well, Martin?" he asked. "Have you any further news for me?"

"Yes, sir," said the man, producing a small notebook. "I called at the shop and made friends with the boy Herman."

He proceeded to give further details of no great importance. Julian left little to chance and believed in having two strings to his bow. This representative of a well-advertised inquiry agency had been employed long before he had carried his suggestion to John Morlay.

"Very good. You had better keep at the boy and see what you can find. You understand that I want to know as much about Mrs. Carawood—how she began, where her money came from, and suchlike—as you can learn. In addition to the fees I am paying your agency I will give you a very handsome present for yourself if you can find these things out."

"You can trust me, sir," said Martin optimistically. "Before a week's out I'll be twisting that boy round my finger."

"I hope so," said Julian dryly. He had his own views about the tractability of the bespectacled Herman.

This fellow, he thought, would probably be as useful as John, and, considering the matter, he was rather glad that the representative of Morlay Brothers was out of the case.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Carawood was making a tour of her shops. From the deeps, somewhere behind or beneath the store in Penton Street, came the sound of a voice singing in a nasal falsetto. The delivery was spasmodic, keeping time to the "huk-huk" of a handsaw.

"Love, love, love can nev-er die,
Love, love, love can ne-ver die,
Tum, Tum, Tumpti-umpti-i,
Love can never die."
From time to time Herman turned his head in the direction of the music, a pathetic look upon his face. But the song went on.

"Why don't you give the saw a chance!" he demanded truculently.

"I'm surprised you don't like my singin'," said Mr. Fenner mildly. "I'm supposed to be a bit 'armonic."

"Who supposes that besides you?" asked the youth.

Mr. Fenner tut-tutted.

"You don't know what 'armonic means, do you?" he asked, in the tone of superiority which he invariably adopted when he was informative.

Herman suggested it meant a certain wheeziness of chest, and said so. Mr. Fenner closed his eyes in patient resignation.

"'Armonic," he said, with cold deliberation, "means 'armony. 'Armony means music, hence the word 'armonium."

Herman scratched his head. Harmonium had a familiar sound. There was some evil-smelling stuff in a bottle which could be and was used for the purpose of removing stains from ancient dresses. It made his eyes water, but never made him sing. Mr. Fenner was always using words which were more than Greek to this youth, for Herman had spent the early days of his childhood dodging school, and there were times when he had listened, dazed, to Mr. Fenner's eloquence without understanding a single sentence.

Fenner wiped his hands on his apron.

"Mrs. Carawood gone out?" he asked.

There was a hint of grievance in his tone. He had taken a holiday from work to carry out a number of minor repairs, the necessity for which he alone could discover.

"She's gone round to one of the other shops," said Herman, resuming his brushing. "Have you finished the door?"

Fenner nodded.

"Very nearly. Just got to plane it down a bit and put on a dab of varnish."

He looked speculatively at the busy Herman.

"Here, Comrade."

"Yuh?" said Herman, not turning his head.

"There ain't any other job I could do, is there? I've got the whole of the day to myself and I'd like to keep myself occupied. If I ask Mrs. Carawood she'll say there's nothing."

"Then I don't suppose there is nothing," said Herman, "if Mrs. Carawood says so. Are you thinking of livin' here?" he demanded.

"No sauce, Comrade," warned Fenner. "Come and see the door."

Herman looked into the store. The girl assistant had gone out to lunch.

"I can't leave the shop," he said.

"There's a bell on the door, ain't there?"

Mr. Fenner was insistent. He needed moral support in the diabolical subterfuge he had planned. This was no less than a scheme to take a door from its hinges on the excuse that it needed re-hanging (which in truth it did not) for he found the only real happiness that had come to his life .under the roof of this dark-faced woman who repelled most people, but to him was the epitome of beauty and goodness.

Herman, however, had an excuse for not accompanying the carpenter. Even as he turned reluctantly the door opened and a man walked briskly in.

CHAPTER XV

Herman came slowly back into the shop.

"Hullo!" he said ungraciously.

"Good morning, Herman."

"Not so much of the 'Herman'," said the youth, red of face. "Do you want to buy a dress, because there's nobody here to sell it."

"My dear fellow—" began Mr. Martin, the inquiry agent.

"Don't you 'dear fellow' me," replied Herman loudly.

He looked round. Fenner had discreetly disappeared.

"And don't try to sell me any safes to keep my money in, because I've got no money. And don't ask me whether Mrs. Carawood wants to buy a safe, because I've told you she doesn't want to buy a safe."

Martin smiled broadly.

"She's just the lady who does want to buy a safe," he said. "Don't you see how dangerous it is for a lady to keep her money in a box under her bed?"

"I didn't say that," said Herman, redder and louder still. His glare was ferocious. For a second Martin thought he was contemplating some violent assault.

"I merely come as a business man," he began, in a tone designed to mollify and disarm, "to offer Mrs. Carawood a safe for keeping her valuables on easy terms."

"She doesn't get any valuables on easy terms," retorted Herman violently. "She earns all the money she gets."

He walked to the door and flung it open.

"You come here spyin' and nosin' round, trying to kid me to give you information. You're a burglar—that's what you are. For tuppence I'd send for the police."

"I'd like to see Mrs. Carawood."

Herman pointed majestically to the street.

"Wait for her outside," he said.

It was two days since Mr. Julian Lester's new agent had strolled into the shop, curiously enough at the hour when both Mrs. Carawood and her woman assistant were out, and by artful suggestions and cunning questions had discovered certain intimate particulars regarding that lady's methods of business. She had a banking account: he knew that; and he had even discovered the extent of her balance. More to his purpose, he had learned, through the inadvertent betrayal of the youth, of the big black box under the bed, a box which was kept locked, and the key of which never left Mrs. Carawood's possession. For two days Herman had lived in an agony of remorse, sensing instinctively the extent of his betrayal; not daring to tell the woman he loved better than life that he had been found wanting. And now the remorse which was within him had concentrated into a fury of insane rage. Herman looked round for a long-handled brush and advanced towards the Judas. Mr. Martin did not wait for proof of his unpopularity.

He had withheld the news from Julian, but now there was no need for further mystery. He could not gain more information from this source, and he hurried to. Bedford Square and met the young man as he was coming out. Julian turned back with his agent.

"Well, what is your news?"

With some elaboration the detective told him all he had learned and much that he had guessed.

"She's got nearly twenty thousand pounds cash at the bank, and a turnover of a couple of thousand a week. I believe she's got shares at her bank, but so far as I can find out she has no documents of any kind."

"They're not at the bank?" asked Julian.

"No, sir, they are in the box. The boy wasn't so easy as I thought he'd be, but he let it out by accident. I pretended I was selling a line of safes, and he spilt it without trouble. It's a black boa—I tried to get him to let me see it, but he wouldn't fall so far. It has two locks, and she carries the keys at the end of a chain which she wears round her neck. The bedroom door is always locked,

and the box itself is seldom opened, except when the young lady comes to Town."

"Did he tell you that?" asked Julian quickly.

The man hesitated.

"He didn't exactly tell me that, but I had to piece together the bits and pieces, and that is what I make out. There is one thing I wanted to say, sir: I don't think I'd better be seen with you. When we were talking together yesterday in the street I saw Mr. Morlay pass and I'm sure he saw us."

"Probably," smiled Julian; "but he already knows that I am making inquiries."

Mr. Martin was curious; it was his business to be curious.

"Excuse me, sir; you haven't told me very much about Mrs. Carawood. What is it you want to find? It would be a much easier job for me if I knew what you were after...I mean, if I saw your hand."

"My hand?" Julian laughed. "Oh, you mean if I took you entirely into my confidence?"

"I don't know what you think the woman has been doing," Martin went on, "but the only fact I have really discovered is that she keeps her valuables in a box under the bed. You couldn't get her convicted for that."

"I suppose not," said Julian, and then, after a moment: "I'll take you this much into my confidence, Martin. I have reason to believe that this woman is hiding certain vital facts concerning a—er—young lady, the Countess Marie Fioli. The Countess is, I believe, a very rich lady, though she is ignorant of the fact. It is very necessary for me that I should know her"—he paused again, and added—"financial position."

Martin understood.

"I see, sir."

"That's the long and the short of it," Julian went on. "For certain reasons I cannot afford to wait or to make leisurely inquiries. I have to come to a decision quickly—"

"I get you, sir. You want to know whether there's another man who doesn't care whether she's rich or poor."

It was a tactless thing to say, but Julian was not easily perturbed. This association with private inquiry agents was distasteful to him; but the situation was critical, and he was prepared to sacrifice a great deal to gain immediate information. Here might be the opportunity of his life. Despite his many grievous sins, he was not a bad man; he was not essentially a good one.

He liked Marie as much as he was capable of liking anybody, and if he married her he would deal with her kindly and considerately: would manage her affairs with the most scrupulous honesty, and, secure in the possession of a competence, would find some other mission to occupy his spare moments.

He sent the man away with a modest sum on account and, passing into his bedroom, re-brushed his hair, rearranged his tie, and examined himself critically in the cheval glass. Marie was in Town, and good impressions must be maintained.

He wondered, as he travelled towards Pimlico, whether there had been anything in his bantering suggestion that John Morlay was in love with the girl. It had been a shot at a venture; he hardly believed it possible that people could be in love in the old story-book fashion, and certainly John was not the kind of man who would be likely to succumb to the fascinations of a pretty face. The girl's fortune meant nothing to Morlay. Of that he was convinced, for John was well to do, had inherited a considerable sum from his father, while the profits from his business were notoriously large.

Julian dismissed the possibility without a second thought. When he reached the shop in Penton Street he found Herman still ruffled from his encounter, but for him the youth had a seraphic smile.

"No, sir, Mrs. Carawood's out."

"Has she gone to Ascot to bring the Countess to Town?"

"No, sir," was the reply. "Mr. Morlay has gone to bring m'lady. He's engaged to her."

"Engaged—Mr. Morlay?" He was incredulous.

"Do you mean Mr. John Morlay?"

Herman nodded vigorously.

"Yes, sir—a very nice gentleman."

"But why on earth—" began Julian, and then checked himself.

The news was indeed overpowering. John Morlay had given an impression of pure disinterestedness, had spoken of Marie as a babe, and had been, in a sense, slighting in his reference to her. Julian Lester was wise enough not to pursue his inquiries, for Herman's diplomacy was patent.

"Do you mean that Mr. Morlay is engaged to be married to the Countess?"

Herman laughed scornfully.

"Married—good lord, no! He's engaged to look after her.'"

"Phew!" said Julian, and in his relief could forgive the ignorance of this youth.

If Herman would not talk of Mrs. Carawood he was voluble on the subject of m'lady. And he was not difficult to draw out.

"Know my lady? I should say I did! Why, Mrs. Carawood brought her up in this shop when she was a little baby and I was a kid running errands. That was before Mrs. Carawood had all these stores. Everybody round this neighbourhood knows m'lady," he added surprisingly. "She's one of the best-known young ladies in London."

Julian wondered exactly what plans were being made for Marie's town life, and asked questions.

"M'lady's going to have an apartment of her own, and a maid of her own too. But she always comes here when she's in London."

"She is very rich, isn't she?" asked Julian carelessly, and Herman frowned.

"That I can't tell you, sir. I don't see how you can be a countess without being rich," he added.

It was at that moment that Mrs. Carawood came in, looking unusually pretty in her rather youthful hat and the bright-green coat, which she almost immediately took off. In her less worried moments she had an acrid humour of her own which never found expression except in the familiar environment of her own store.

She seemed more real to Julian in this store, where she had a trick of calling him "sir", than in the house at Ascot, where she addressed him by his Christian name. That she was a woman of the people it did not need any great amount of acumen to discover. There was the slightest Cockney twang in her tone, and her manner had something of the sparrow's pertness.

"Good morning, sir." She looked inquiringly at Julian. "Did you come to see Marie about the ring? It was returned."

"I know that," said Julian. "I came to see Marie." She looked at him suspiciously—resentfully, he thought.

"I wanted to have a little chat with you about her. I was thinking the matter over this morning, and I said to myself: 'It will pay you to tell Mrs. Carawood exactly how you feel towards her little girl.' Now that she's left school, Mrs. Carawood, what are you going to do with her?"

Again the steady glance.

"Me do with her, sir? I can only advise my lady. She is a great person and can do as she likes, you know. It will be different now she's a woman. And young ladies aren't very anxious to take the advice of their old nurses."

"But suppose she did take your advice, what would it be?"

She eyed him steadily for a moment, and then:

"I should advise her to marry somebody she loved, sir, and not somebody who was after her for her money."

She had given him an opportunity which he was too clever a strategist to lose.

"But how can they be 'after her money', Mrs. Carawood? Nobody knows that she has any money."

"I know," she said.

"A few thousand perhaps," he suggested offhandedly, "but that would hardly influence a fortune-hunter."

"Few or many, she marries the right man," she said. "I think I said that when you were at Ascot, Mr. Lester. The right man is the one who doesn't want to know how much easy money is coming his way. And now, if you will excuse me..."

Julian found himself dismissed, and enjoyed the experience.

CHAPTER XVI

Mrs. Carawood was admittedly a very difficult woman to deal with. She accepted favours from none; drove hard bargains relentlessly; and had a reputation among wholesalers in London which many a more important buyer might have envied.

No sooner was Julian out of the way than, after a few minutes' deep and evidently unpleasant thought, she asked Herman:

"Is Mr. Fenner gone?"

"No, ma'am, he's downstairs, working on the door."

"Bless my life! The man has taken long enough to build a house," said Mrs. Carawood.

Summoned from the lower regions, Mr. Fenner presented himself.

"Have you finished that door, Fenner?"

"Yes, Mrs. Carawood, just done it."

"Good!" She unlocked a drawer of her desk and took out a small cash-box. "Now you must be paid for your trouble. How much do you charge me?"

Mr. Fenner closed his eyes.

"There's friendship and there's business," he began oracularly. "There's people that's grasping, there's people that's generous—"

"You'll not be either grasping or generous with me, Fenner," interrupted Mrs. Carawood, sitting back in her chair and regarding him with a friendly eye. "How much do I pay you?"

"For fixing a door?" said Fenner indignantly. "For a mere dab of varnish, so to speak—"

"Don't be a fool, Fenner. I'd have had to pay somebody else, and I'm not going to make use of my friends. And hurry up, because m'lady may be back at any moment."

"What are friends for?" demanded Mr. Fenner, in his best platform manner. "They're to be used as and when required."

He nodded to the wooden partition behind which the woman was sitting.

"What about me putting up a little room instead of that screen?"

She laid down her pen with a sigh.

"Fenner, you don't suppose I'm going to let you work for me for nothing, do you? Herman!"

Herman had strolled into the store.

"Mrs. Carawood is calling you, Comrade," said Fenner, ever ready to help.

"I wish you'd get out of the habit of calling Herman comrade," said Mrs. Carawood sharply.

"Ain't we all comrades?" protested Fenner. "I was addressing a meeting of the proletariat last night, and I says to them—" He saw the look of distrust in her face and was chilled.

"Proletariat!" she said scornfully. "Have you been amongst that kind of people again?"

He could do no more than make a gesture of protest and feel nervously at his bright-red necktie, for, however short Mr. Fenner might be on the principles of socialism, he was scrupulous in the observance of its outer forms. He was a socialist largely because the science offered him a platform and an opportunity of hearing himself speak. He would have been as vehement a reactionary had capitalism given him similar opportunities.

At this point Herman supplied a piece of information.

"M'lady's coming back today, Mr. Fenner." Fenner made a sound of disparagement.

"I wish she wasn't 'M'lady'. That's what I wish. Oh, these class distinctions!" And, oblivious of Mrs. Carawood's glare, he went on: "Men an' women was born equal. Was Adam a lord? Was Eve a duchess? Was—"

He caught the woman's eye and wilted.

"One of these days I'll throw something at you, Fenner!"

"It's artificial, Comrade," said Fenner feebly. "It strikes at the very root of social brotherhood! I was only telling the proletariat up at our branch last night that to get rid of class distinctions you've got to get rid of class privileges, you've got to get rid of titles, you've got to get rid of money?"

"Do you ever get tired of hearing yourself make speeches, Fenner?" she rasped.

"No, Comrade, I can't say that I do," he admitted.

"Of course you don't," she said scornfully. "And as to m'lady giving up her title, wasn't she born with it? It's like asking you to give up the use of your tongue. Anyway, you needn't be around, Fenner, when she's here."

Mr. Fenner retired to his last ditch.

"Titles don't mean nothing to me. They're all part of the capitalistic system. Armies—bah! Navies—bah! I hate the sight of a uniform." He adjusted his red necktie savagely. "Fancy a grownup man labelling himself! It's sickening! But, believe me, Mrs. Carawood, the proletariat ain't fools!"

"I don't know 'em," said the woman, "but I bet there's as big fools in that crowd as there is in any other."

He still lingered, made certain warning gestures to Herman, who retired under the impression that Mr. Fenner wished to discuss money matters. Fenner cleared his throat.

"What are you doing, ordering my boy about?"

"A personal matter, Comrade," he said huskily, and sat down near the suspicious woman. "Mrs. Carawood, for ten years I've known you."

She lifted a warning hand, but he went on.

"I've got to say it. Ten years I've known you. And in that time have I been drunk? Have I misconducted myself? No, I've been faithful and true. I don't want your money.. Money is repugnant to me—it's capital. Besides, I've got a bit saved of my own."

She rose slowly, that smile on her lips which softened every hard line of her face.

"You're not a bad fellow, though you do talk a lot. But I'm not marrying any more."

"You're young, in a manner of speaking, Mrs. Carawood," he pleaded; "and you've neither chick nor child."

"And I don't want any," she said. "It's no use. I like you; you're a straight, decent man. I don't mind your being a socialist because I don't know what it means."

"I could explain in ten minutes," he said eagerly.

"You've been explaining for ten years, and the only thing I know about it is that it turns your tie red."

He picked up a paper-covered book from the desk. "What's that, Mrs. Carawood?"

She turned and snatched the book from his hand. "Keep your hands off what don't concern you, Fenner," she said sharply.

But Mr. Fenner had seen the title.

"'Only a Shop Girl: A stirring story of love and sacrifice.' You like them kind of tales, Mrs. Carawood?"

"Read 'em ever since I was a girl," she said briskly.

"There's art and taste in 'em, I admit. Mind you, there's nothing like reading to improve your mind," he said, with a certain complacent carelessness. "I've read several bits by 'Erbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill. Philosophy—very good, very neat. You don't read that kind of book, Mrs. Carawood?"

"No—I don't even read these for myself; Herman likes to hear 'em. He can't read."

Mr. Fenner was shocked.

"Terrible thing, lack of education. Your young lady, now—Cheltenham Girls' School, wasn't it t"

"College—Ladies' College."

"Ah! Class again. Tut, tut—what's ladies but women t What's women but units in the conglomerate mass of the proletariat? She's highly educated—speak French?"

"French! She can talk German and sing Italian."

"All high-class singing seems Italian to me," he confessed. "And Oxford University too—what's girls coming tot Giving 'em a little too much scope, don't you think t"

"Aren't they proletariats too?" she sneered. For a second he was taken aback.

"True, true. I believe in women having the same chance as men—if they can get it."

Daringly he took down one of the books from the shelf.

"The Temptations of the Duchess. You was always a bit romantic, I'm thinking, Mrs. Carawood."

He was touching her now on a very tender point, did he but know it. All the colour and beauty of life were stored in those thin volumes.

"I was. There have been times, Fenner, when I wanted to get out of the clothing business and walk in marble halls, so to speak."

"I know," said Mr. Fenner. "It's the feelin' that drives people to the pictures."

She took him by the shoulders gently and pushed him into the middle of the shop.

"I like to see you now and again, Fenner, but don't you ever do any work? You're wasting your time, and I hate to see a man wasting time."

Here he had an explanation to offer, and one which was, by all tests, satisfactory. His employer was ill. Mrs. Carawood knew the old man. He had a yard in Penton Street. A sour old gentleman with an acid tongue. She was concerned to hear of his sickness.

"I've worked for him, man and boy, sixteen years. Somehow, I haven't got the heart to go into the yard now he's away. A great old pal of mine, he is. 'Tom,' he says to me about a week ago—he always calls me Tom—Tom,' he says, 'you've been trying fourteen years to convert me, an one of these days I'll convert you. Tom,' he says, 'I don't know much about socialism and I ain't likely to while you're its mouthpiece. There's many a good religion spoilt by bad preachers.' I don't know what he meant."

"Maybe he thought your arguments were silly," suggested the woman, looking for the twentieth time at the clock on the wall.

"He couldn't have meant that—he wasn't delirious then," said Mr. Fenner.

She was not listening to him—Marie was coming through the shop.

CHAPTER XVII

John Morlay sat down to take account of himself. For three days his duty had been light, and there had been little or no call for his attendance on his lovely charge. A normal man, he told himself, would have welcomed the respite, for his work at that moment was heavy. There were callers to be interviewed, accounts to be investigated, the movements of a long-firm swindler to be traced; and if some madness had not come to him he would have learned with relief from day to day that Marie's time had been fully mapped out.

Yet he was irritated, and every ring of the telephone bell made his heart jump. He had certainly spent one happy evening with Marie, when he had escorted her to a theatre. What the play was about he never remembered, but there was music in it and dancing-girls, and somebody sang a song which most of the street boys were whistling.

Moreover—and this symptom alarmed him—he had found himself at extraordinary hours wandering along Penton Street. Once, at five o'clock in the morning, he had passed under her window, and the mere fact that he did not feel unutterably foolish was discreditable to his innate sense of humour. He always had an excuse to himself for these excursions. A long-forgotten suggestion of his doctor that he should take a good walk before breakfast was one, but there was no reason in the world why he should be standing on the opposite side of the street, looking at the light in her window, when the clock was striking twelve on the second night after her return from Ascot.

Here, however, his sense of humour triumphed, and he went back to his flat, chuckling irritably at himself. He wondered what the dead-and-gone Morlays, those sedate and dignified men, would have thought of their descendant. They were men whose love-affairs had run a smooth and conventional course, and in his most extravagant moment he could not imagine either Uncle Percival or Uncle Jackson mooning like a love-sick calf before an old-clothes shop.

He had made three calls in the hope of catching a glimpse of her, but on each occasion she was out. Once she had gone with Mrs. Carawood to a concert; once, he learned, to his intense annoyance, that Julian Lester had taken her to his cousin's to tea. He had begun to loathe Julian with a ferocity beyond understanding. He was little less than obscene in his sordid pursuit of the girl.

John Morlay was sitting with his head in his hands, his work neglected, when the aged clerk announced a visitor.

"A monk?" said John, in amazement. "What the dickens does he want? Show him in."

As the visitor came through the door he had a dim idea that he had met this grey-bearded figure in the rough habit of a religious order, a rope girdle about his waist, his head and his feet bare save for sandals. And then he remembered.

"Father Benito, isn't it?" he said, as he offered his hand.

"This is indeed fame," said the Father dryly. "No, Mr. Morlay, I won't sit down, if you will forgive my distracting habit of restlessness—I will not keep you long."

Father Benito was a member of the Franciscan Order, whose sermons had attracted large and fashionable audiences to a Franciscan church in Mayfair. His attacks on certain sections of society had made him famous, as John reminded him. The Father made a little face, and his kindly eyes were filled with laughter.

"That's one of the penalties of sincerity," he said. "One gets talked about. In this world of sham and make-believe the sincere must inevitably be conspicuous. And before I go any further, Mr. Morlay, I want to tell you that I haven't come in the exercise of my mission, but on a personal affair. I spoke to Sir John Calder last evening, and he suggested that you were the man who could best advise me."

John smiled.

"I never expected to find a Franciscan among my clients," he said.

For a second the Father said nothing, and then he asked a question that took the detective by surprise.

"Do you know the Countess Marie Fioli?" he asked.

John stared at him.

"Why, yes, I know her fairly well."

"Do you know Mrs. Carawood, her—guardian?"

John nodded, wondering what was coming next. Father Benito pondered for a while.

"The business which has brought me here is rather a delicate one. I am, as you realize, in the world and yet out of it. Matters which might seem of the highest importance to the average man mean nothing whatever to me. Nevertheless, my vows do not release me from a certain obligation to society. I am troubled and worried more than I thought was possible by this—" He seemed at a loss for words to describe the cause of his disquiet.

"Are you worried about Countess Marie?"

"Yes, in a sense," said Father Benito, after a pause. And then he made a statement which brought John Morlay to his feet, wide-eyed.

"You don't mean that!"

Father Benito nodded.

"It is incredible! And yet, of course, I must accept your word. You are sure?"

Forgetful of his restlessness, the Reverend Father pulled a chair up to the desk, and for half an hour he spoke with scarcely an interruption from John. Once the telephone bell rang, and John Morlay went out of the room and instructed his assistant to put through no further calls. For the rest of the time the men talked in a low tone, and in the end John accompanied the robed figure to the door.

"I will put the matter into your hands and be guided entirely by you," said Father Benito at parting. "I feel you ought to know this. I am glad I have told you—happier because I feel that the girl's interests are safe in your hands. That is the thing that was worrying me—the possibility that poor little Marie might, through no fault of her own, be irretrievably hurt. I should not have forgiven myself if that had happened."

All that afternoon John Morlay struggled with the new problem which had been set him; a problem which, a week before, would have been dismissed after a second's thought; and, at the end of his self-examination, he reached only one conclusion—that, whoever was hurt, Marie must be saved.

His mind was occupied by the thoughts of her when the telephone bell rang and her fresh voice hailed him.

"Guardian angel, I want you to take me out to tea."

He almost flew down the stairs to obey her summons.

CHAPTER XVIII

Mr. Fenner, that patient swain, was beginning to feel some misgivings. He called in at the shop one afternoon, primarily to give news (which had not been sought) of the condition of his employer, who had been sinking rapidly for many days but still retained 'a tenacious hold on life.

"Change and decay," said Mr. Fenner gloomily. "If the old man pops off I'll have to find another job. I couldn't stand the yard after he'd left for better or worse, as the saying goes. It's very hard, Herman," he said, sitting down.

"Have a cushion, Mr. Fenner," said the sympathetic but mistaken Herman.

"I'm not referring to the seat. And, Herman, don't call me 'mister'. 'Comrade's' quite good enough for me."

Herman thought it was a bit familiar.

"A lot of people don't like it," said Mr. Fenner, and the recollection of the unpopularity of the title seemed to afford him a certain satisfaction. "Personally, I prefer it. My old governor—"

"Does he call you 'Comrade'?" asked the interested Herman.

"Only when he wants to be nasty," said Mr. Fenner. "He's not a bad old boy. As a member of the employing classes, of course, he's out with the washin', but as a human being I respect him; I must admit it. That's the curse of political strife, Herman; you've got to have two ideas about a person."

He was glancing steadily at his own reflection in a long panel mirror which faced him.

"Would you call me a good-looking man, Comrade?" he asked, eying himself thoughtfully.

"You?" Herman was incredulous.

"Yes, me."

The youth looked at him suspiciously.

"Is this a catch?" he asked.

"No, I'm asking you, comrade to comrade," said Mr. Fenner with some asperity.

Herman shook his head.

"I don't know. You never struck me as being good-looking—I'm talking about your face."

"Well, there's nothing else to talk about, is there?" snapped Mr. Fenner. And then, in a milder tone: "Would you call me—well—say, intellectual-looking?"

"What's that?" asked Herman puzzled.

"Do I look as if I was brainy?"

But here again Herman could not help him. He did not know how brainy people looked. Mr. Fenner mastered his annoyance.

"Good Gawd! You've seen the picture-papers, haven't you!"

"I only look at the murderers," said Herman simply. "Mr. Fen—I mean Comrade—do you know, I could commit a murder? I could! If anybody did anything to Mrs. Carawood I'd murder 'cm! And stand by and see 'em roll all over the floor in agony!"

The socialist carpenter listened aghast at the bloodthirsty picture.

"You never would have the heart, Comrade," he said in a hushed tone. "Mind you," he added, after reflection, "I'd go a long way in the same direction for Mrs. Carawood."

"Or m'lady?" suggested Herman.

This required deliberation. M'lady was different. She did not evoke the same emotions in the tender bosom of this public man.

There came an interruption to this exchange of confidences. The door opened slowly and an immaculate young man stepped in, closed the door behind him, and nodded with a smile to the girl attendant. Julian Lester had reached a momentous decision.

The appearance on the scene of John had upset his calculations. If, a week before, he could not afford to wait, still less could he afford now, for when

Marie had referred to the representative of Morlay Brothers there had been something in her voice which the shrewd young man had accurately diagnosed.

Mrs. Carawood made her appearance. She had seen, from her sitting-room window, Julian alight from his taxicab. Mr. Fenner watched their meeting with a jealous eye.

"Who is this guy?" he asked, agitated. "He seems very familiar!"

Oblivious of the passions he had aroused, and only dimly conscious of the figure which flung itself out of the shop through the side entrance leading to the much-repaired door, Julian came straight to the point.

"No, Marie's not in, Mr, Lester. She has gone out with Mr. Morlay."

"Indeed!" He stroked his moustache thoughtfully. "I never seem to see her these days."

"You're very interested in her," said Mrs. Carawood, her cold eyes upon him.

"Naturally. She is a very romantic figure."

"I don't know about romantic—" began Mrs. Carawood.

"Of course she's romantic," said Julian, almost brusquely. "It is romantic that a member of a great Italian family should have been brought up by an Englishwoman who has been both nurse and guardian to her. If I understand aright, she has been in your charge ever since she was a few days old?"

"That is so, sir."

"And her mother made you her guardian?"

She recognized his hostility. She would have been a dull woman if she had not. It came as a shock to her. She had been friendly with him, guessing just how far he would go to serve his own interests. That he should ever throw off that amiable mask was unthinkable. But Julian was in the position when the mask had to go.

"Marie has been very strange lately," he said.

"I don't know whether she has been prejudiced against me, or whether something has happened that I know nothing about. I decided to come to you direct. You are her guardian?"

His tone and manner were that of a cross-examining counsel.

"Yes, her mother made me her guardian," she said slowly and deliberately.

"You have some sort of deed? Some documents, I suppose?...There was a will P"

Mrs. Carawood did not answer.

"There was a will? You have a copy of her mother's will perhaps?"

"I have no copy of her mother's will." She found her voice at last. "No documents—nothing. She gave her into my charge and asked me to look after her because she had no other relation in the world."

He saw her suddenly look over his shoulder, and in another minute she had dashed past him and was opening the door to Marie. The girl was helpless with laughter. John Morlay, who followed her into the store, seemed to be the cause, for he carried in his hand, and with no apparent sense of loss of dignity, a ridiculous doll she had reserved for the ornamentation of her room at Ascot.

Julian watched them, heard snatches of her narrative. They had been to a thé dansant, and John Morlay danced like a perfect angel. The doll, had been presented to her by the manager of the club, who was also a perfect angel.

It was not the atmosphere for revelations, and a man with a thinner skin than Julian Lester would have postponed his dénouement. But he had a duty to perform, was piqued by the consciousness of his loss, and, in some indefinable way, blamed the dark-faced woman for his discomfiture. Marie came towards him.

"Why, Julian, I haven't seen you for days!"

She was very prim and politely friendly.

"It seems years," he said, taking her hand with a smile. "Where is the ring?"

He saw her chin go up.

"It is at Ascot."

"Did you like it?"

"I wrote and told you so," she said.

Julian glanced down at the doll.

"Shades of Morlay Brothers!" he said ironically. "I wonder they don't turn in their graves."

"The last and the most severe of them was cremated," said John.

Then he took the other's arm and walked him to a quiet corner of the shop.

"A week or so ago you did me the honour to ask me to act for you," he said. "I observe that you have an excellent substitute."

"What do you mean?" asked Julian, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Yesterday I saw you talking in Oxford Street with Martin of the Universal Agency."

Julian Lester laughed.

"Why, John, you really are a detective!—"

"I only want to tell you this," said John, choosing his words carefully: "in all the circumstances, your interest in Mrs. Carawood and in Marie strikes me as rather bordering on the er—"

Julian supplied the word.

"Impertinent?" he asked.

"I didn't want to use that word," said John. "Now, I'm a blunt sort of fellow, Julian, and you'll have to forgive me if I'm a little plain-spoken at this moment. What do you really expect to discover about Mrs. Carawood?"

"I will be equally frank." Julian glanced round; the girl was behind the screen with Mrs. Carawood and out of hearing. "I expect to find that Mrs.

Carawood has defrauded, or is defrauding, or is in a position to defraud, Marie. I will go further and say that I have searched Somerset House for a trace of the will, and I have not been successful. The Fiolis are an eccentric family. They lost a lot of money in a bank smash fifty years ago, and it was a known fact that they distrusted banks and carried their money in bulk. My suggestion is that when Marie's mother died, she handed over to Mrs. Carawood a very large sum. The sole object and intention of my investigations has been to discover where that money is kept, and the extent of the fortune. I have another object, and that is to force Mrs. Carawood to give an account of her stewardship."

John nodded.

"Is that necessary—now?" he asked, and the face of the other flushed. There was no need for John Morlay to be more explicit. "Do you still think that there is a possibility of Marie accepting you, supposing you offered yourself as a possible husband?"

Julian was thrown off his balance for a moment. "Is she likely to accept you?" he asked crudely. "Is that what you mean—that you have, to use a vulgar term, cut me out? Perhaps you're right. But, even if that is so, the principle which guides me remains unchanged. You may consider me as a disinterested person working in your interests—is that a very convincing view?"

John shook his head.

"It doesn't convince me," he said.

Julian laughed.

"Then let me act in Marie's interests; and in Marie's interests I'm going to have the truth."

"And where will you find the truth?"

The answer was dramatic. Herman came staggering into the shop at that moment with a big black box, and laid it on the table. Julian gasped, for he recognized it from its description, even to its two brass locks.

CHAPTER XIX

Marie beckoned the two men.

"Come and look," she said. "Nanny is going to expose the awful little creature I was when I was so high!"

Mrs. Carawood murmured something that they could not hear.

As the two heads, golden and black, bent over the opened box, John Morlay felt his heart beat a little quicker, and a lump came into his throat.

He took the photograph that the woman held out to him. It was a picture of a beautiful child, obviously Marie in her babyhood days.

"That's when she was four. And that one is when she was thirteen." She handed him another.

Julian's eyes never left her.

"One moment, Mrs. Carawood," he said.

John turned at the sound of his voice; it held a note of hardness which was ominous.

"Perhaps you will now tell us, and tell John, who, I think, will be specially interested, what else is in that box?"

The lid slammed down with a crash. John Morlay's eyes caught his and held them.

"This is not the time, Julian," he said in a low voice.

"Pardon me, this is an excellent time," said Julian firmly. "A few days ago an agent of mine, whom, frankly, I engaged for the purpose, searched the Bournemouth Herald and found this paragraph printed twenty years ago."

He took a case from his pocket, opened it, and extracted a newspaper cutting, which he read.

"The Countess Fioli, who recently died at her home in Westgate Gardens, was reported to be extremely wealthy. The Countess, who never had a banking-account, was believed to have kept very large sums of money in the house—money which up to now has not been traced or discovered."
"Well," demanded John coldly, "what does that prove!"

"It explains why Mrs. Carawood became suddenly affluent, could afford to become the proprietress of a number of very expensive stores."

The woman had been listening, white-faced, shaking, but now she found her tongue.

"It's a lie!" she cried hoarsely. "I worked for every penny I've had!"

For a second Marie did not understand the purport of the accusation; but now she was at her nurse's side.

"How dare you!" she gasped in a low voice, her eyes burning.

"I understand your anger," Julian was not outwardly ruffled. "It does you credit, Marie. But where is the money? And where is the will—if there is a will? There!"—he pointed to the box—"you have a packet of documents relating to the Countess Marie. Let me see them."

Mrs. Carawood shook her head slowly, and her voice was a whisper.

"You shan't see them!" she said. "You shan't! You shan't!" And then she fell swooning forward on the box.

Mr. Julian Lester's fortitude had supported him in many very trying circumstances. He had need of all his self-faith to sustain his present unpopularity. Yet it was neither the few scathing sentences that John Morlay had flung at him on parting, nor the howling tempest of youthful rage which might have expressed itself in serious damage to his person, had not John providentially checked the savage Herman, which disturbed him.

He was oppressed by his helplessness in the first place, and by a sense of the injustice which had been done to him in the second. He was perfectly convinced that he was right and that everybody else was wrong. Yet, instead of being hailed as the disinterested friend of Marie, and one whose only desire was to help her, and bring to an end the machinations of a designing woman, he had been greeted with obloquy and subjected to the vilest abuse.

He was perfectly sure that he was justified in the conclusions he had reached, but the sensation of helplessness only came to him after he had consulted his lawyer. Julian had many useful friends: he knew doctors, from whom, when he mentioned carelessly his various mild ailments, he could receive treatment; lawyers who, in the comradeship which the atmosphere of a comfortable club engenders, would give him advice which, had it been

offered in their own musty offices, would have cost him money. One of these, a great authority upon the law of inheritance, had raised a blank wall against further investigation.

"You have no standing, my dear fellow. You are not even related to the girl, and if you went into court to ask for an order you would be very promptly hoofed out!"

"But suppose I were engaged to her?"

"That wouldn't give you any right at all. If you were married to her that would be quite a different matter."

There was, he explained, a very tedious and expensive process of law by which Mrs. Carawood's title to guardianship might be examined; but when he mentioned a figure as the approximate cost Julian shivered.

"No," said his comfortless friend, "you can't even get an order to view the contents of the box. My advice to you," he added humorously, "is to get into touch with one of the correspondence schools, take six lessons in burglary, buy a jemmy, and make your investigations unofficially."

CHAPTER XX

It was a very remarkable suggestion, because, at the back of Julian's mind lurked the figure of a lined old man whose address he had inscribed in his book—the old burglar he had found in his flat one night.

At first, when he reviewed the possibilities, he dismissed this as altogether too absurd for thought. But slowly and insidiously the idea returned. It was not a job that he would undertake himself. Julian never risked watch-dog or armed guard, and Herman had the character of both. No, for the first time he would employ an assistant. Such things had been done before, and he could pay the man well enough to be satisfied that there was no risk of betrayal. His busy mind went over all contingencies, and the more he thought of the scheme the more certain he was that it had advantages which no alternative plan could offer.

He scribbled a note, went out himself to the district messengers' office and despatched it. He must take his chance of the letter falling into wrong hands, and, anyway, he was committed to nothing that could possibly be injurious to himself. With this comforting thought he settled down to wait for a reply.

There was plenty to occupy his evening. The West Canadian Bank had been "smashed", presumably by an expert crew, who had got away with nearly a quarter of a million in bill currency. Julian read enviously. This was big work—real work. Those men were masters. He read the details carefully. The robbery was three days old before news of it was allowed to leak out.

At nine o'clock a bell tinkled, and, laying down his paper, he opened the door and was met by the smirk of the evil-looking Mr. Smith.

"Come in," he said, and, cap in hand, the man followed him into his little study. "Sit down."

Julian pointed to a seat which was remote from the desk, as though the atmosphere which the man brought with him was in itself contaminating. "Well, how are you doing!"

"Starving, sir," growled the man. "You can't get honest work with them 'busies' tailing you up all the time."

"Busies? Oh, you mean detectives? Do they follow you around?"

"That they do, sir," said Smith glibly. "The moment you get work they come and tell your boss that you're an old lag, and then you're out on the street again."

It was one of the fictions which had deceived cleverer men than Julian, but he was not impressed. His work on the Help Committee had brought him into touch with many of the lower world, and he had learned how far from the truth it was that the police hampered even the oldest of lags in securing employment.

"I've got a little job for you," said Julian.

He spoke the words really before he had made up his mind to commit himself to the dangerous course he had planned.

The man's face fell momentarily.

"I'm a bit too old for hard work," he protested. "I've spent the best years of my life in gaol, mister. You can't expect me—"

"I think this is a job which you might do without any great exertion," said Julian slowly. "There is a hundred pounds for you, and it will take you less than an hour."

He saw a gleam of interest come into the burglar's eyes.

"You understand," said Julian, "that what I am going to tell you has nothing to do with me. It concerns a friend of mine who has been blackmailed."

The man nodded.

"Put the black on you, have they!" said the man, interested. "Well, any gentleman can get into that kind of trouble. I'll help you if I can, sir—"

"It is not I, I tell you; it is a dear friend of mine. I am not even sure that his statement is accurate. He may be fooling me; there may be nothing in it. But, according to his statement, a woman named Carawood has letters which are likely seriously to damage him, especially just now, when he is contemplating marriage."

"Where does she live?" asked Smith.

"The address is Forty-seven Penton Street. Will you write that down?"

He pushed a pencil and paper towards the man, and he wrote with much labour.

"That's in Pimlico. Is it a house?"

"It's a shop," said Julian; "a second-hand clothing stores. According to my information, these letters are kept in a black box under the woman's bed."

"That's easy," said the other contemptuously. "Does she keep a dog? It wouldn't matter if she did, though. What men has she got sleeping in the house?"

"Nobody but a boy. She herself...well, we could arrange that she would be out on the evening—I suggest next Thursday—and the boy would give you no trouble, because I seem to remember Mrs. Carawood telling me that he went to bed very early. He sleeps at the top of the house. Mrs. Carawood's room is on the first floor; so far as I can gather, the door on the left when you reach the landing. The box has two locks—"

"Locks! Locks are nothing!" interrupted Smith. "It's easy, I tell you, governor. If it had been in a safe it might have been an all-night job. But a box! What letters am I to bring?"

"Bring all the documents you find. Put them in a bag and leave them outside my door, and then go away. I will give you fifty pounds before you start and fifty pounds after the job is finished. You will find the money under the mat outside my door, and here is a key to the outer door. Please understand that I shall be watching for your arrival, and if you come without the bag there will be no money there for you."

The man looked at him keenly.

"You're taking a bit of a risk, ain't you, mister?" he asked.

Julian did not want to be reminded of the risk he was taking. He was already framing in his mind an alibi and an excuse. If the worst came to the worst, his word would balance the word of a convicted murderer, he thought. And it was worth the danger. Though he himself might gain no material advantage from possessing this information, he would have justified himself in the eyes of Marie.

"I am taking the risk for a friend," he said gravely; "but I am trusting you not to betray me."

Mr. Smith protested his loyalty with great vehemence.

And here came the peculiar kink of Fate that determined the future career of Julian Lester. He was pouring out a drink for the man, and Smith grew garrulous and friendly at the sight of refreshment.

"Not whisky...brandy, sir—God bless you and thank you! Yes, you can trust me on this job—I've been a good man in me day. Lord, if I only had me health and strength and a couple of good pals!"

"What would you do?" asked Julian.

"I'd have hundreds of thousands this day week." Smith was speaking with great earnestness. Evidently he believed what he was saying.

"Hundreds of thousands—rubbish!"

"It ain't rubbish—it's gospel. It's the sort of thing you wait for for years and it never comes along—a fortune."

"How do you know about it?"

He handed a cigar to the man, but Smith would not smoke.

"It's me 'eart," he said. "Why, a week ago I was nearly dead. A specialist come to see me from the West End. You don't believe that, but it's true. Ask anybody in the lane where I live."

"What about the money?"

Smith had a curious story to tell. He had been in Hanover Square, watching somebody...a woman. She hadn't been the woman he thought she was, but a duchess.

"A busy told me—the busy had an office in the building he wasn't a real busy, but a sort of private detective—"

Julian sat bolt upright in his chair.

"A man named Morlay?"

"That's right...I saw the name painted on the side of the door—Morlay Brothers."

"Well?"

After Mr. Morlay had left him he was standing staring into the hall of the building when a car drove up and two men got out, carrying between them a heavy leather bag. They went in and up the elevator, but not before he had recognized one of them—Harry the Valet. They had occupied adjoining cells and worked in the same shop at Dartmoor. And Harry the Valet had told him about a big bust they were going to do. Harry was an American and the greatest bank-smasher in the world.

"The moment I see him I knew they'd done the job," said Smith. "That's their way—they take a respectable office weeks before, and practically live there after the bust. I'm glad Harry didn't know me—I'd 'a' been dead by now."

Julian listened breathlessly. Smith knew nothing of the Canadian Bank robbery had not read the newspapers.

"Harry told me you can always hire a furnished office with a safe. Sometimes they'll buy up an old business for the sake of the name. That's what they've done there. In a month, when everything's blown over, they'll skip. It's a joke, eh?...The police lookin' for them everywhere and there they are under their noses! If I was young I'd have that stuff."

Julian's brain reeled. He almost forgot the mission on which he had sent the man as soon as he was out of the house.

CHAPTER XXI

"Can I see you very early?"

It was Marie's voice on the telephone. John Morlay had got up from his breakfast wondering who would call him at half past seven in the morning.

"Good lord! Aren't you sleeping?"

"I want to see Julian," she said.

"You're the only person in the world who has that passionate desire. 'Why bother?"

"Nanny's had a terrible night." Her voice was shaking. He guessed that she had not had a great amount of sleep.

"But surely Julian isn't going to help you, darling?" he said. "If you like, I'll call on you."

"I want to see him," she insisted. "I'm going to stop this persecution of Nanny."

He hesitated, and she asked, with a touch of impatience in her voice, if he was still there.

"Darling, I'll fix it for you to see Julian. You want me to go with you, of course?"

"Only to his rooms. I want to see him alone," she answered surprisingly.

They met by appointment at the end of Penton Street. Mrs. Carawood had gone to sleep, Marie told him, and he thought that she looked as if she would be all the better if she followed her guardian's example.

"I feel very inadequate about Julian," he said ruefully. "The moment called for a display of violence on my part, and I was a little inept."

"I am glad you were," she said.

He was surprised that she had no word of abuse for the man who had caused Mrs. Carawood such pain. She spoke of him very calmly, almost dispassionately.

"In a way I'm rather sorry for him, but I've got to make it clear that his interest in me and in my affairs has got to drop."

"You'll find Julian rather a limpet."

She shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said, with such confidence that he was startled.

As they drove along, she asked suddenly:

"How long is it since I left school f It seems a thousand years. And that little house at Ascot is a mansion that has been in the family for generations!"

He asked her a question about Julian, and she reassured him.

"No, he has never made love to me. In some ways he's been terribly nice. He hasn't even disguised the real object of his interest. He has not held my hand or tried to kiss me or done anything that you could possibly object to in your capacity of guardian angel."

It was agreed that John should wait on the landing outside Julian's flat whilst she went in to interview him; but Julian upset this plan when, attired in a flaming dressing-gown, he opened the door himself and invited them in with a cordiality that was staggering.

"I know I've been a beast, but that doesn't matter. Come inside, and I'll make amends—step in, Morlay!"

He closed the door on them.

"If you've come to demand an apology, it is given before you ask! I was led astray by my reverence for capital, and even as late as last night I was still concerned with the question as to whether you were a wealthy heiress or the pitiful victim of a bad woman's machinations."

"That sounds like a scene title," said John, admiring the man in spite of himself.

"It is," admitted Julian unblushingly. "I have an extraordinary memory for phrases."

He led them into the cosy sitting-room where, the night before, he had interviewed Mr. Smith. The windows were open; the sunlight streamed through; it seemed as though the apartment had taken on something of his own gaiety.

"You're devilishly cheerful," said John.

Marie thought so, too, and wondered whether he would be as happy when the interview had finished.

"Why shouldn't I be? Life is opening up for me. By the way, John, are there any vacancies in that office building of yours?"

John Morlay was staggered by the question.

"Are you going into business?"

"I thought of finding a quiet place where I could write," said Julian.

"A couple of months ago you could have had an upstairs suite. It was leased to a concern which is now, I believe, on the verge of bankruptcy, and they've sub-let it—"

"Can I see you, Julian—alone?"

Marie interrupted this amiable business conversation.

"Certainly." Julian opened the door of the small dining-room. "You'll find a book or two. There's no lock on the door, so if she screams for help you can be thoroughly and expeditiously heroic."

"I'm terribly sorry, Marie," he said, when they were alone. "I've made a fool of myself over this business, and I promise to reform. But if I can prove that what I said was right, and that you've been steadily robbed—"

"You'll prove nothing. If you are making investigations you will drop them immediately," said the girl quietly.

Julian smiled.

"I have your interests to consider—" he began.

"You have your own interests to consider," said Marie.

She took from her bag a small, red leather case and handed it to him. He frowned, looked at the case, and opened it.

"My ring," he said. "You're returning it?"

She nodded.

"That's rather unkind, isn't it? I suppose the old woman—"

"You won't call her the old woman; you'll be quite polite about her; you'll not see her again, and your agents will not make any further inquiries. You'll not see me again, and if you take my advice you will leave England in the very near future."

He was looking at her through half-closed eyes, for he detected a menace in the voice.

"Exactly why does this happen?" he asked.

"You remember you gave me the ring and asked me not to look at it till the morning? Well, I looked at it when I went to bed—and that was not the ring."

She was a little short of breath, expected him to break in with protests, but he was silent.

"The ring I saw was a big, oblong sapphire, with four diamond claws. It was the sapphire that had been stolen from Cratcher's a few days before. You made a blunder and left the wrong case with me. They're both the same size and both identically marked. You discovered this when you got back to Town, and you returned to Ascot, took the stolen ring from my dressing-table, and returned your real present the next day by post."

Julian did not speak. His face was a mask. He did not even change colour, though his lips were set a little more tightly than she had remembered seeing them set before.

"That is why I say you ought to go out of England. I'm probably doing the wrong thing. I ought to go to the police and tell them what I've found out."

"And are you going!" The words were metallic.

She shook her head.

"No. I don't know what makes you live this kind of life, but it's not my business to judge you, Julian."

"Does Morlay know!"

"Of course he doesn't!" she said scornfully. "He wouldn't be such a scare-cat as I am."

Julian drew a long breath.

"Thank you," he said simply. "I will carry out all your instructions, though it may be a week or two before I can get abroad. I have all sorts of liabilities to liquidate."

She held out her hand and he took it.

"I may see you again. Bear with me if I have to call, but I shall not bother you—or that admirable lady, Mrs. Carawood."

He remembered, after she had gone, that he had given very definite instructions which would very considerably bother Mrs. Carawood. He tried all that day to get in touch with Smith, and then, in an impish spirit of mischief, he decided that he would satisfy his curiosity after all and carry out the plan which he had outlined to Smith.

In the meantime he had a great deal of work to do. He identified the office where Harry the Valet carried on a spurious business, and journeyed down to Balham to interview the late proprietor of the office, a disillusioned inventor of mechanical toys who had taken the office full of hope, and after his failure had handed on the liability of his lease to the agreeable American gentleman, who was willing not only to hire the office but to buy the furniture as it stood.

"I didn't sell the furniture, because I hoped to start again, but I'm afraid I must."

"That," said Julian, the opportunist, "is the very thing I came to see you about. I am in the market for office furniture."

The upshot of it was that the late occupant of the office produced a file of bills, and amongst them was the invoice for the Rexor Safe. The serial number was written on the invoice. Subsequently it was written on Julian's

cuff. He knew the ways of safe-makers, and that afternoon journeyed to Sheffield and interviewed the general manager of the Rexor Company, who welcomed him as an old friend, for Julian had, had many interviews with him, and had promised an article on the progressive character of the works, a promise which was doomed to remain unfulfilled.

"Curiously enough," said Julian, just before he was leaving, "I got a safe of yours the other day, and I've only one key to it."

"Do you know the number t" asked the manager.

Julian Lester went back to London with a duplicate key.

The next day he made a personal reconnaissance of the place. The two men who rented the office came at nine. They were respectable-looking young gentlemen who wore horn-rimmed spectacles and carried umbrellas, and they arrived separately and from opposite directions. They were developing a confectionery business, and immense quantities of succulent sweetstuffs were delivered, and apparently never disposed of.

Behind the house Was a mews, and an outbuilding easily reachable—a balcony...a projecting parapet...it looked extremely easy. The pity was that the nights were so short.

Julian found a lock-up garage in the mews that was to let. The owner demanded a fabulous sum in advance, but Mr. Lester paid it cheerfully, produced a powerful sports car, made arrangements for its cleaning, and personally fed it with oil and juice.

He saw the two men when they left the office in the evening, and wondered which was Harry the Valet. There had always been a Harry the Valet in the underworld, and in a vague way he wondered why this should be. Possibly there was an original Harry the Valet, who was the devil of a fellow at his job, and his imitators had chosen the name out of sheer vanity.

There was quite a lot in the newspapers about the Canadian Bank. Two men had been arrested on suspicion at Southampton. Julian wished the police had chosen another venue. The exact amount of money stolen was in the neighbourhood of a hundred and eighty thousand pounds. Through a private source he ascertained that the hue and cry which had been circulated by the police contained no numbers of banknotes, but gave a bald description of the denominations of the bills. The newspapers told him that Inspector Pickles was in charge of the case.

Pickles was very much in charge. John, meeting him by accident, learned the secret history of the robbery. It had been an inside job. A night watchman was suspected—he had vanished since the robbery.

"It's an American job. Harry the Valet's in it, I should think," said Peas. "He's not in Paris; his pals say he's in Berlin, which means he's in London. If these birds get away with that money you can come to me and say: 'Peas, you're past it.' I don't suppose they'd ever have done the job if they knew I was taking the case. How's Mrs. Carawood? Has she been to Rotherhithe lately? And how's poor Mr. Hoad?"

"Who the devil's Mr. Hoad?"

"He doesn't call himself Mr. Hoad; it's sometimes Smith and sometimes Salter. He had a bad heart-attack the night we went down there, and somebody had enough money to pay a big fee to call in the best West End physician."

"In other words, Mrs. Carawood?" said John.

Peas nodded.

"I think so. He's some relation probably, but she didn't want him to know she was well off; hence those rags. These so-called mysteries don't mean a darn' thing when you get a first-class mind at work on 'em."

"What about the Canadian Bank affair?" asked John.

"That's not a mystery," said Peas calmly; "that's a plain burglary without violence."

CHAPTER XXII

The days that followed her interview with Julian held for Marie Fioli hours of sheer joy and a happiness deeper than any that had yet come into her life. Cheltenham and its school seemed a million miles away. She lived in a new life with a new people. Once, when they were out together, John sought to turn the conversation to the direction of Mrs. Carawood.

"Oh yes, the poor darling! She is romantic. And I don't even want to laugh at her. Do you know, John, I often think that Nanny gets a real pleasure out of saying 'M'lady' to me. And she's so practical in every other way!"

Mrs. Carawood was unique; he had never met her parallel. She was two persons, lived two lives. Marie was the one reality in her world of make-believe; the one tangible aristocrat that had come into her life.

"She told me the other day that ever since she was a little girl," Marie went on, "she had loved these stories of dukes and duchesses, of marble palaces and princely entertainments. She never reads a book that hasn't a lord or a lady in it."

It was when they spent an afternoon at the Queen's Hall that Marie told him of the strange visitor who had come to the store that morning.

"Do you know Father Benito?" she asked. "He's such a wonderful-looking man! Very tall and bearded. I think he belongs to some religious order, for he wears a monk's robe."

"I know him—yes," said John quickly. "What did he want?"

"He came to see Mrs. Carawood about something—a dress he wanted to buy for a niece. Personally, I thought it was a very flimsy excuse, and that he had some other reason."

"Did you see him?" asked John apprehensively.

She nodded.

"Mrs. Carawood brought me down to see him. He said he had heard about me from people who live in the neighbourhood. He does a lot of work in the poorer part of Pimlico."

"What else did he say?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing of any great importance. Poor dear Nanny seemed awfully nervous when he was there, and quite relieved after he had left."

John guessed well the object of Father Benito's call, and he shared something of Mrs. Carawood's relief when he learned that the visit had been of so commonplace a character.

That he himself was under some sort of observation he could not guess.

That day Julian had a visit from Martin, and the inquiry agent was received a little coldly.

"Have you got Morlay on this inquiry?" was the first question the man asked. "Because, if you haven't, I should say he is doing a little private work on his own."

"What do you mean?"

Martin had a tale to tell. He had been at Somerset House in the Central Record Office that morning and had seen one of John Morlay's cleverest assistants.

"He's Morlay's research man, and so far as I could make out he was after that will."

"But there is no copy at Somerset House," said Julian.

"No—he must have found that out too."

So John Morlay was interested in the fortune of Marie! Perhaps the impeccable John was not in as good a position as he pretended. Julian was amused. He would have been more actively interested but for a new and an absorbing pre-occupation.

Mrs. Carawood put down the book. There was a long pause, in which the ticking of a clock sounded with startling clearness.

"I've often wondered what sort of a chap your husband was," said Herman suddenly.

"My husband?"

He nodded.

"Was he romantic, like you?"

"No." She spoke slowly. "I think he made me romantic, though." She ruminated on this, and he did not break in upon her thoughts. "Life isn't easy, Herman," she said at last.

"It wasn't for me till I came your way. But I bet you missed your husband when he passed away."

She nodded slowly.

"Yes, I missed him," she said. "We're all missed in one way or another, Herman," she went on, and then changed the subject. "You look tired tonight. You must go to bed early."

He glowed at her in his doglike way, telling himself how wonderful it was for a little gutter lad to have someone notice that he looked tired, to have someone worry because he was hot during a heat wave when everyone was hot. It was very strange, very wonderful, very happy!

"Mrs. Carawood, you are funny, somehow," he jerked out.

"Funny? How!"

"Being kind...Do you know, I'd do anything for you!" It was difficult to say it; so much more so than to think it.

"Then I wish you'd wash yourself without me standing over you sometimes," she said, with grim humour.

"I will, Mrs. Carawood! I'd jump off the roof! I'd murder people—I'd kill 'em, and watch the blood oozing out, and see 'em wallow in gore, and roll on the floor—"

"Herman!" Her voice was forbidding. "I shall think you've been drinking if you talk like that! Murder somebody! You keep your mind on dusting my shelves, and not breaking things when you wash up—there's no need for you to roll people in gore! There's somebody at the front door."

It was Mr. Fenner, who entered with an air of solemn mystery. He was dressed in his Sunday suit, with a black band on the sleeve. The gold watch-guard across his waistcoat was the one touch of gaiety. He sat down before she invited him, with a weighty and impressive air.

"I hardly expected you tonight, Fenner," she said. "So soon after the funeral."

"I expect you felt you wanted cheering up, Comrade," put in Herman.

Mrs. Carawood frowned at him.

"Don't start that comrade nonsense again, Herman; I don't like it."

"You told me, didn't you?" asked Herman, looking guilelessly at Fenner, who pursed his lips and nodded.

"Well, perhaps I did, Herman, perhaps I did, in the warmth of an expansive moment. But you'd better give it up. Mrs. Carawood don't like it. Mrs. Carawood's word is law."

Leaning back comfortably, he gazed at the ceiling through half-closed lids. It was his way of focusing his own attention.

"Perhaps I've overdone the equality business a bit in the past, after all, Mrs. Carawood. As I was saying to one of the chaps today, 'There's racehorses and carthorses,' I says; 'there's them that has one spear of life and them that has another. The conglomerate mass of humanity consists of individual particles, each having its own function to perform."

Mrs. Carawood groaned.

"Fancy talking like that in a heat wave! What's the matter? Did the poor old man convert you before he died, as he said he would?"

"No, Mrs. Carawood. Nothing shall tear me from my principles. They are always there, shining like stars in the daytime. You can't always see 'em but they're on the job."

He paused effectively before he launched his surprise.

"The old man left me his business."

"Mr. Fenner, you don't mean it!"

She thought of that rough old man, guessed at the cynical smile on the dead face, and understood.

"Yes, he did. A nice little business, Mrs. Carawood, and could be doubled and trebled, if only you could get people to put their backs into it."

She did not attempt to conceal a smile.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked.

"Those stars!"

He regarded her suspiciously.

"But, really, I'm very glad for your sake. What are you going to do about it? He worked hard, the old man..."

"I've hardly thought yet. But, mark you, this makes no difference to my principles—none at all. A thing like this broadens a man, that's what it does. Experience teaches the wise. Herman, I want to talk to Mrs. Carawood."

He said this with a certain amount of importance, and the obedient Herman went out.

Fenner sat up straight and addressed her confidentially.

"That puppy been round again?"

In these terms did he speak of Julian Lester. "No; Marie saw him at his house."

"If he comes round here again," said Mr. Fenner ferociously, "I'll wring his neck!"

He watched her wistfully as she took up a sock (it was Herman's) and began to darn a hole in the heel.

"I don't need anyone to defend me, Fenner, but I expect we shan't be seeing so much of you now that you've come into this money?"

This sounded promising to him, almost a deliberate opening.

"It was that very thing that brought me to your door tonight, Mrs. Carawood. May I smoke a cigarette?"

He took out a packet of ornate design from his pocket, examining the picture with interest.

"'Turkish Joys!' Smoked by the ladies, of the Sultan's harem according to what the packet says. I can't understand them Turks. I should never want more than one wife if I got the right one."

"You never know what you'll come to," she warned him, smiling. "Experience broadens you, as you said just now. You, never smoked cigarettes before. I used to like to see you sitting there with your pipe. Some day, I shouldn't wonder, we'll see you with a wife, and then you'll want another, and another—you're such a changeable man!"

He put down his cigarette carefully and looked at her reproachfully.

"There's one woman in the world for me, Mrs. Carawood. If she'd say the word I'd be the happiest man on earth. I'd think I was in heaven."

"But you're greedy. Surely it's enough to have a nice little business left to you without wanting more."

"You know what I want. I'd give anything...Look here, what would you say to having a nice little car of your own to ride in every time you thought you'd like a breath of fresh air? How does that strike you?"

"I have a car, but I prefer buses. You called them the chariots of the proletariat last week, didn't you?"

He knew she was mocking him, but refused to be discouraged.

"But supposing you had a nice little car—and a maisonette, and—Mrs. Carawood, how about a 'honeymoon in Paris?"

As she examined him with amused eyes, she remembered, with a little self-scorn, how, not many days ago, her fears had bred a weakness which had caused her to regard him with far greater seriousness than she was now willing to admit.

She was spared the necessity of answering—the sound of Marie's feet on the stairs came simultaneously with the squeal of brakes outside the shop. If the girl had been watching for John Morlay's arrival, there was no coincidence in the dual appearance of both.

She caught sight of Fenner, puffing at his Turkish Joy, and reclining with ostentatious ease in his chair. "John, I've told you about Mr. Fenner, haven't I? He's a dreadful socialist!"

"Up to a point, Mr. Morlay," said Fenner airily. "Up to a point!"

"I suppose we're all socialists up to a point. What is your point, Fenner?"

"I believe in a fair day's work for a fair day's pay and no miking," answered Fenner.

Mrs. Carawood almost fancied she heard a queer, cynical chuckle as though the old man looked on at his convert.

"Miking? Oh, slacking, you mean? That's a new word to me. But you're quite right you're a carpenter, aren't you?"

Fenner coughed.

"Well, not a carpenter exactly, now. I'm a master man, if you understand me. I don't know that there's much in it, with wages at one and seven-pence an hour—"

"Listen to him!" said Mrs. Carawood scornfully.

She held Marie's hand tenderly, her eyes searching her face. In an instant Fenner and John and all that the room and the world held had vanished. And yet it was of John Morlay she was thinking.

"Is everything—nice?" she asked.

"Lovely. We are going back to Ascot this weekend, aren't we?"

Mrs. Carawood nodded.

"I would go anywhere with you," she said in a low voice.

John watched and listened, as he had watched and listened so often when these two were together. Father Benito was right.

The girl caught his eye; she was ready to go.

"I must be getting along myself, too, Mrs. Carawood." Fenner shook hands with his hostess—a liberty he had never permitted himself before.

John offered him a seat in the car, but this he declined.

"I think not, thank you," said Fenner. "I can get a taxi."

He gave a sidelong glance at Mrs. Carawood to see the effect of his magnificence upon her. She was unimpressed.

She went out into the street to watch the car pass out of sight, and then came back with a sigh and locked the shop door.

"We'll have the light now," she said. "It's getting gloomy. I'm sure there's going to be a storm."

"Did you hear that Fenner, Mrs. Carawood?" asked Herman, as he switched on the light. "Him and his taxis! I'm tired tonight." He yawned. "Last night it was like sleeping in an oven, and it's not any cooler tonight."

"It'll cool down after the storm has broken. Be off to bed now, and don't forget your prayers."

"I don't know as I believe in prayers. Last winter I had a bob on Aston Villa and prayed for them to win, but they didn't."

"Why should they, just to please you?" she demanded as she sat down. "You're like a lot of folks, Herman, always expecting God to do parlour tricks for you. A woman I knew used to pray to God to help her to get her washing dry."

"Well, what's the good of praying at all, then? People like us only want little things."

She looked at him thoughtfully; then she smiled.

"Whatever you do is a big thing, if you do it right. But things like washing...Well, maybe I'm wrong, Herman. Maybe Mrs. Gallimore praying to

get washing dry is the same as me praying for...what I think are big things. But if we get on religion, we'll be up all night. Good night, Herman."

"Good night, Mrs. Carawood."

At the door he turned again.

"Mrs. Carawood, when m'lady's married to Mr. Morlay, she won't be a lady any more, will she?"

She seemed startled for a moment, and then a queer look came into her eyes.

"Why, of course she won't. I never thought of that!"

CHAPTER XXIII

It was some time before she took up her pen, bringing her mind to the book before her. She turned back the pages in the ledger to where, in very small handwriting, as though she were ashamed to set them down, she had entered her own personal expenses. She kept a very exact account and checked her expenditure ruthlessly. Marie had no place in the ledger.

She looked up as a faint sound reached her ears, glancing towards the passage door, half expecting to see Herman. The door remained closed, and she turned back to her book, reading over the entries, each one of which told a story of someone's need and her own well-used power to relieve.

The quietness settled down, the rustle of the leaves as she turned them was the only sound which broke the stillness. She started violently as a stealthy creak came from the passage, and lifted her head alertly.

There was a second or two of silence, then another stealthy sound, which brought her to her feet, trembling a little. Her eyes dilated as she watched the door move slowly inwards.

"Herman!" she cried sharply. "Don't be such a fool, trying to frighten me!"

The door opened wide and a man stood framed in the doorway; a man white-faced, with queer, tormented eyes, his skin stretched tight over gaunt cheekbones, his mouth twisted in a perpetual sneer. His hat was pulled low over his forehead, his coat buttoned up to the neck despite the heavy heat.

Her lips fell apart, and she struggled voicelessly for breath. At last:

"Joe!" she gasped hoarsely. "My God, Joe!"

The man called Joe Smith stared at her, his loose mouth wide open. He had not expected to see her there, and was startled to terror at the sight of her. And then he came in and shut the door. Standing there like a ghost, he smiled at her a horrible, twisted smile.

"You…I'll be damned you!"

She could not speak.

"Thought I was dyin', didn't you? Come over to see me in rags, pretendin' you had no money! 'My God, Joe!" he mimicked. "I don't wonder you're knocked out a bit to see me. You Mrs. Carawood?"

She nodded.

"You've had money from me regularly. You had it when you were in Broadmoor and when you came out of prison. How did you know I was here? I thought..."

She leaned on the table, shaking.

"You thought! Yes, I know you and your thinking of old! You always was a thinker! You thought I was in the house in Rotherhithe till I was carried out feet first, didn't you? But I'm not. I'm here—home with me loving wife!"

She stared at him dumbly, trying in vain to realize all that his coming meant—eighteen years of work, eighteen years of dreaming, of planning, and unceasing effort to build up happiness, to bury the ugly past, and now...wrecked in a moment, crumbled like one of her dream palaces, dragged down into the mire from which she had struggled so long and so gallantly to rise.

She gave a little sob and sank into a chair, her arm across her eyes as though to shut out the sight of her ruined hopes and the fearful future.

"Oh, God! How awful!" she wailed.

"Awful, ain't it?" he retorted, and broke off, his head darting round spasmodically as heavy, steady footfalls went by the window and the shadow of a helmet passed slowly. "A copper!" he breathed.

She looked up with a wild hope in her eyes.

"Joe, you're not wanted by the police?" she cried.

She had no pity in that moment. She could think only of the horror, the degradation, the beastliness his coming threatened to bring back into her life; the fleeing from justice, the humiliation of hiding, the thankless slavery from which she had escaped in these happy years of freedom, the more wonderful because of the sordid misery which had preceded them. If anyone had to suffer, had not she suffered enough? She darted to the door.

"I'm not wanted!" he said huskily. "I've been released by His Gracious Majesty, and finished my time. Go and fetch the copper if you like. I've got papers to prove it. Discharged—free as air!"

The man's laugh froze Mrs. Carawood's blood, but something told her that he was speaking the truth, and she turned back from the door. The policeman's steps died away in the distance.

"Has he gone?" he asked, with that convulsive sidewise jerk of the head.

She nodded. He collapsed into a chair, and a dull growl of thunder rumbled overhead.

"The sound of a copper's feet makes me sweat!" he muttered.

"Don't think about it." She shuddered.

She had her ugly memories too—memories she had shut out resolutely—until now.

"I've had nineteen years to think about it," he said. "How he looked as he lay there in the moonlight, with his face all over blood." He shuddered, despite his boast. "The swine, interfering with me! What was it to do with him, anyway? I wasn't touching his stuff when he come on me."

"He—he was a policeman, and you were a burglar."

"Yes; he's dead an' I'm alive!" he rejoined brutally.

She clasped her hands tightly together.

"Anyone would think you liked to remember it," she breathed. "Oh, don't talk of it! Somebody may hear you, Joe."

"And what if they did I They can't harm me. I've paid. My own wits saved me. If I'd not been a brainy man, I'd never have been able to sham loony and get the better of the doctor. I was marked mad for a year an' then they sent me on to Dartmoor—sane."

A flash of lightning zigzagged into the room, illuminating his dreadful eyes as they looked at her hungrily.

"Do your friends know about me?"

She shook her head. All the time she was trying to think.

"No, thank God! I've lived it down—I've lived my own life and got on top where many a woman would have sunk."

He staggered across to her as her voice died away, and stood over her with the old, brutal gesture of command that seemed farcical to her now.

"Got anything to eat?"

"Yes yes, I'll find you something," she said, and paused, aghast, trying to calm herself, as the door opened to admit Herman, in his shirt sleeves, his braces hanging down behind, as though he had flung his clothes on hurriedly.

He looked harmless enough as he peered in through his glasses, but the man eyed him apprehensively. "Who's this?" the demanded.

"The boy—" she began.

He did not answer, staring at the boy. His face was drawn and twisted with pain, and he clawed at his throat with one hand, while he fumbled in his pocket with the other. He brought out a little leather-covered box, and took from it a phial of thinnest glass which he smashed between thumb and finger, inhaling as he did so. They watched as he fought for his breath in evident agony, and saw him slowly recover.

"Angina, they call it," he said. "That's why they let me out. Put that medicine where I can see it, and give it to me if I look queer. It's the new stuff...they gave it to me at the hospital this morning...better than that muck I had to drink. These shocks..." His eyes wandered again to Herman.

"What is it, Mrs. Carawood?" asked the boy breathlessly. It seemed almost as if one of his novelettes was being enacted before his eyes, as if he had suddenly become an actor in one of them himself.

"Mrs. Carawood!" sneered the man.

"That's my name, Joe," she said. "Let the boy go away before you talk, please. Herman, go back to bed. This is a gentleman I knew years ago."

Herman had mechanically taken the little leather-covered box and put it in the middle of the mantelpiece.

"But, Mrs. Carawood, he looks...queer. I don't like to leave you. Shall I fetch Mr. Fenner?" he asked in a low voice as she urged him to the door.

"No, no. It is quite all right. He'll be going in a minute."

"A gentleman you knew, eh!" laughed the man when the boy had gone. "And I'm your husband!"

It was terrible to watch his head jerking this way and that, nervous of the shadows; she could see him quiver as the rain hissed against the window, yet his fears seemed only to react in a fury of resentment, as if they were another grudge he owed the world.

"Don't I know?" she asked bitterly. "Don't you think I know?"

"That lad isn't yours, then? He called you Mrs. Carawood."

"No, he isn't mine. He's a poor little chap I saw at a police court one day. He's a good lad to me, as good as one of my own."

"You could keep a kid out of Borstal. Did you ever come to see me at Dartmoor?" he snarled. "Did you, eh?"

"No...I know I didn't."

"No; you thought you'd seen the last of me, and you was glad. And you haven't seen the last of me. And now they call you Mrs. Carawood. What's the meaning of that—another husband, eh?"

"No, one husband was enough. It's true I didn't want you to get off—"

"What?" He half rose, threateningly.

"But I lied to save you. I'd always done my best for you just because you were my husband. I'd slaved for you. I stuck to you all through that awful life, always shadowed by the police, dodging from place to place, getting a few things together only to have you pawn them...and I was glad when it seemed the end had come."

"You—"

"I prayed they'd hang you," she said defiantly, and added, almost to herself: "That was asking God to get my washing dry, I suppose." She looked up at his working mouth. "But I didn't help to hang you—I lied to save your neck. And now you've come back," she ended, dropping to a note of dull despair. She sat with her head hanging, unheeding the lightning, the long roll of thunder, and the increased torrent of rain.

"Now I know!" he exclaimed. "You wanted me hanged—Mrs. Carawood!" His hand gripped her arm until she winced. "You shall suffer for that, my girl!" he swore. "Tomorrow them gold letters come down, and 'load' goes up in place of them. Now you'll go and get me some grub, or you'll pay...as you paid before—remember?"

How well she remembered! She almost staggered as she went to obey him. She had to fight to keep her courage, to remind herself that she was a different woman now, not to be intimidated. She was in his power, inasmuch as he could go into the street and scream out the truth, but she was no longer the trembling girl she had been. A few hours in which to think clearly, and she would find some way out. Perhaps she could see John Morlay and ask his advice...

"That kid of yours!" came the hoarse voice. "You had one, after I went in?"

She shivered.

"Yes—a little boy."

"They told me as you'd had one. You never thought a loving father might want news?"

"He died. Only a week old. Could you expect anything else, with all my troubles?" she returned breathlessly.

"Oh, you and your troubles! Where's my supper?" he burst out, and as she went she wondered if she had indeed lied when she had assisted his defence of insanity, or whether long residence among madmen had not made the lie a truth. There was that about him which made him terrible apart from the hideous memories he recalled.

She must keep him quiet for the present, until she could come to some decision. She piled a few things hurriedly on a tray and carried it in to him.

"I'm sorry there's only bread and cheese, Joe. I'll run down to the ham-and-beef shop, if you like. I dare say they'd let me have something at the back door."

"You're not going to leave this place," he said suspiciously. "I don't want none of your sneaking on me!" Then he laughed suddenly as he remembered that he was free, and not all the police in the world could drag him back. "Bread and cheese is good enough," he remarked, and began to eat it wolfishly.

The lightning, flashing in through the thin blind, played over his face in a ghastly flicker, piercing the softer glow of the electric light; the thunder set his nerves jangling, though he swore in an attempt to hide it. Only then did he remember his mission—the black box and the letters. He put down his fork.

"I got something to ask you—" he began.

And then he started at the sound of a motor-horn, a sound Mrs. Carawood knew well. She leapt to the door and looked through the rain-smeared glass.

"Quick, behind the screen, Joe!" she cried.

"Who is it?" he asked obstinately. "Why should I hide? Don't I tell you I'm a free man?"

"You don't know—perhaps the pardon's not quite right—just a minute..." She was incoherent, and her fear infected him. "Joe, for God's sake! It's safer."

The old instinct to hide got the better of him, and he disappeared.

Mrs. Carawood opened the door wide—it was Marie...she had returned.

The woman's lips moved.

"Oh, God," she was praying wildly, "I don't ask for much...but for this once...do a trick for me!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Her heart nearly stopped beating as Marie moved about the store in her search. When the girl's frock brushed against the screen she resisted an hysterical impulse to scream.

"What—what is it?" she asked, fighting against her faintness. "Is anything wrong?"

It was a matter of a lost theatre bag—rather important, because it contained the theatre tickets and a handkerchief or two, and some twenty pounds and a letter that John Morlay had written to her which nobody in the world but she could possibly understand.

"What's this little box, Nanny?" asked the girl, taking up the case from the mantelpiece.

"Put it down!" cried the woman urgently. She could not let her fingers touch what had been in his pocket. "It's—it's medicine."

The girl laid it down obediently, turning to her in surprise.

"Are you ill, darling? Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

But Mrs. Carawood was on her knees by the table, underneath which the little silk vanity-bag was lying.

"Here it is," she said, giving it into the girl's hands.

But Marie was not looking at the bag: she was regarding Mrs. Carawood with alarmed eyes.

"I'm not ill the least bit, m'lady, except for the heat. Perhaps when we get that week in the country I'll feel better..."

John, too, was looking at her searchingly. Something was wrong—badly wrong. She looked ghastly, and he had seen what Marie had missed—the unfinished supper on the table. There was a queer medicinal smell in the shop and he saw the glitter of broken glass on the floor. Marie was talking to the woman, trying to extract from her the cause of her distress. Gently Mrs. Carawood pushed her towards the door.

"I—can't talk—I mustn't keep you. You'll be late for the play."

She knew she was acting badly, that John's keen eyes had taken in the supper-table; but she could not do better while that sinister figure crouched behind the screen. She was horribly conscious of him; desperately anxious—the irony of it!—to have the girl out of the place. Every moment she lingered seemed an age.

"Isn't there some woman we can find to look after you, Mrs. Carawood?" asked Morlay. "You certainly don't seem fit to be left alone."

"I've got Herman here; he's not gone to bed yet." She was lying wildly. "It's only tiredness, really, m'lady. I was just thinking of going to bed."

At last they were persuaded. With a sigh of heartfelt thankfulness she induced the girl to leave her, though even at the last minute, as she patted a displaced curl before the mirror, Marie delayed.

Mrs. Carawood leaned heavily against the door, watching the tail-light of the car grow smaller.

Joe came from behind the screen, furtive, a little shrunken, a little older, he seemed. He stared at her silently, his jaws working as he ground his teeth, a habit he had acquired when he dared not speak, dared not do things.

"It's a lady and gentleman who buys clothes from me, Joe," she explained desperately.

He moved towards her, bent of back, his fist upraised. His eyes gleamed menacingly.

"Don't lie to me!" he snarled. "That's another of your penny-novelette ideas."

She made a valiant effort, trying to speak indifferently.

"I'm not lying, Joe. She's a countess—"

He took a sudden step forward, twisted her round, his grey face thrust forward to hers. There was a smile of triumph in his lack-lustre eyes. Gripping her by the shoulder, he rocked her savagely backward and forward.

"Shall I tell you who that fine young lady is, eh?" His voice was a whistle of sound. "She's your daughter—yours and mine!"

If he had not held her in that cruel grip she would have dropped. Her knees weakened, and she saved herself with difficulty from slipping down.

"Don't be a fool, Joe," she said thickly. "I—I believe living in Dartmoor has turned you mad!"

He shook her violently until her head reeled.

"Don't I know my own flesh and blood?" he squeaked. "She's the living spit of what you were at her age. Her voice and her laugh and everything! You to a 'T'! Don't you think I know? I've thought of you all these years the same as she is now!"

She tore herself away from him.

"You're mad! They'll have you up for libel, talking like that. Her mother was a countess."

"Mad, am I? You wicked old liar! How much have you made out of it! Why have you done it? That's what beats me!"

Still she fought desperately, though she knew now the game was up; but it was in her to fight. She had fought for her womanhood during her life with him; she had fought for her motherhood after she was rid of him; she would fight now.

"Joe, it's turned your brain, getting free," she said breathlessly. "You mustn't get these ideas. I have all sorts of people come in here buying and selling things. You don't think every one of them is your daughter?"

It was the last wall of her defence; the last desperate, hopeless effort to fight back heart-breaking defeat. She wanted to go down with her gaudy banner flying, but heart-breaking defeat was facing her, starkly.

CHAPTER XXV

"That girl that's gone out is my daughter."

Joe Smith dropped his hand down on the table with a crash that set the plates rattling. It was Joe, the old Joe she knew, unchanged by prison, by suffering; unsoftened by the generosity she had shown towards him.

"That's our kid and I'm going to have a word with her this minute. Brought up in the lap of luxury while her father's been in Dartmoor. M'lady indeed! And that young feller with her—I could tear your head off your body when I think where the money has gone that I ought to be having all the time. Two pound a week—an' you spending hundreds on that little..."

He was at the door when she caught and held him, shivering almost with pity as she felt the bones through his coat, and thought of what life had done to him. He was undoubtedly ill. Perhaps he would be softened, perhaps he would think kindly if she showed him the care he had never known, never understood, never wanted. She surprised him by speaking gently.

"Joe—supposing I admit it, what then?"

Her eyes were no longer on him. Through the door she could see the tail-light of the car still where it had been when she had turned away from it, stationary, blurred by the torrents of rain. Just when it was most needed to work well, the engine had failed. As she clung to the man she prayed wildly for more tricks—more tricks!

"What then? There's no need to admit it. I knew it as soon as I heard her laugh. Let go of me—I'm going to introduce my daughter to her dear old dad!"

The car started. The small red light gradually decreased in size until it became a mere pin-point and vanished.

"They've gone," she cried, and staggered back into the shop, feeling her way blindly towards a chair. "I'll—talk, Joe. I'll tell you anything you want to know if you'll only be quiet. I'll help you—give you anything I've got..."

"You'll have to," he growled, as he seated himself, and once again that feeble hope of conciliating him came to her. Surely, if she explained—if she showed him her ambition—she could make him see with her eyes. She would put up with anything...

"Joe, I'll tell you all about it. Try to understand. Yes, she is our child—I never had a little boy at all. Only her—only Marie! And when I knew she was coming to me, I was frightened of what she would become—I didn't want her. I thought of the dreadful life. It had been dodging and hiding, always hard-up, never safe, never anything safe or secure in our lives, was there?"

He made a grunting sound, but she saw that she had secured his interest, though he watched her warily, suspiciously, ready to detect any deviation from the truth, any attempt to deceive him.

"It was dreadful to think I might bring a thief or a murderer into the world, and I wished I had the courage to kill her when she lay there so weak that just a pinch with my fingers would be enough. But I couldn't. I hated the very thought of her before I saw her, and then when she cried and looked so little...I felt ashamed of having been frightened, and I loved her as much as I'd feared and hated her before. But I determined to bring her up different, cut her right away from you and all you stood for."

"What right had you to take a kid away from her father?"

The glare in his eyes frightened her.

"I was thinking of you, Joe—how you used to tell me, when we first married and you were trying to go straight, that it was impossible for you. Don't you remember? You said you'd got to steal and fight because it was in your blood your father had died in gaol and there was no hope for you. Joe, I don't believe it! I believe if you'd never known about that father of yours you might have been a good man. It seems strange now, but we were happy for a few weeks, when we lived in the country and you ran straight. Don't you remember—when we had the cottage at Cheam, and you grew mignonette all up the path?"

He was silent, startled out of his own atmosphere, put down into something different, something he had forgotten.

"Then that father of yours would come out of gaol and drag you back. And I loved you through it all...for a long time..."

She thought she had succeeded in touching him. Perhaps he was sorry for her, sorry for the hopelessness of his own life; if so, it was not for long.

"So you can see, Joe, when you were gone, I had only her to love. You know what a hard girlhood I had had, in the Foundlings' Home, starved of beauty and love, starved of romance—"

"Romance! That was your downfall," he muttered. "Always dreaming instead of doing things."

"Was I?" She lifted her head proudly.

Here in this shop was her monument of achievement, the vindication of her dreaming and romance—here, and in the girl who had just ridden away.

He examined her intently. This was a new woman to him. These years had changed her.

"That's how it all came to me," she resumed. "I thought if I brought her up in our station it would come out some day. Questions would be asked; either I'd have to say she was a—an illegitimate child, or yours. I'd have to tell her. And she'd try to run straight, but every time one of those little temptations we all get came to her, instead of being able to fight it, she'd say to herself, What's the good? I'm born to it. My father's in Dartmoor.' And so I covered my tracks, and hers—"

"You didn't cover them well enough to escape me," he snarled, and she realized that she had not succeeded in softening him.

"I'd never mixed with educated people before," she went on, "though I'd been well trained at the orphanage. Then I went to work for the Countess Fioli, and I got an insight into their lives. All the beauty, the loveliness of it, their pretty ways, the soft way they spoke and ate, and the gentleness. It was that attracted me, Joe. I suppose because I'd never been used to it. They were good to us at the orphanage, but never gentle. And you...there was no gentleness about you, was there?"

She spoke bitterly, resignedly; she had dreamed in those far-off orphanage days, and those days when she had been in service and escaped into bright worlds through the little paper-backed books her scarce pennies bought. She had dreamed of a Prince Charming—and married Joe Hoad, the burglar's son.

"Can't you see the things I wanted for my baby? Not only to free her from you and her terrible relations—a child learns what its parents are, and copies them," she went on. "Haven't I seen it here in these streets? Decent

parents, decent child; bad parents, weak child who goes wrong in the end, like Herman. But they're all right if you take them away where there's no badness to copy, and—oh! I wish you could have lived with the Countess like I did, and seen her gentleness and sweetness..."

She stopped. He was staring at her morosely.

"Marie was seven months old when I went to the Countess Marie Fioli at Bournemouth. She was out to nurse, and I told the Countess about her. Her own little one had died, and she was pining away herself. After a time, she let me have Marie with me just for a month, and then she gave me her grand pram—white kid it was, with coronets on it. I used to wheel it along the front—she was very good, sending me out for airings when she was so ill herself—and, not having been long from Italy, not many people knew much about her, though there was a lot M of gossip. Most thought Marie was her baby—all the other nurses did. I suppose they couldn't understand anyone so kind as to let a maid have her little one with her in the house. And then she died. She wasn't rich at all, as they said. She left me a hundred pounds for faithful services to her, there was a little money for a convent where she had been brought up in Rome, and that was all. There was a lot of gossip at the time in Bournemouth, because they said she'd left piles of money to her baby. And then we went away, Marie and I—and I called her m'lady!"

CHAPTER XXVI

He laughed harshly.

"You poor fool! You crammed your head with novelettes till they turned your brain," he said. "Even then I can't see where you got your money."

She was too weary to feel contempt for him.

"I got it as everybody worth anything gets it—by hard work. I'd got my start; there I was luckier than most. I started in a small way, through a few ladies' maids I knew, and put Marie out to nurse while she was a tiny baby. Then it grew—the money, I mean. I never had an idle moment; but her schooling ate it all up—first a little girls' school at Bexhill, where she mixed with a lot of nice children, and then Cheltenham you couldn't get anything better for a girl."

He glowered at her.

"You spent on her the money you ought to have been spending on me! Damn you, why didn't you write and tell me where you were? If I hadn't been put on this job I'd never have seen you again—died in the gutter maybe."

"I wanted to forget you," she said deliberately. "It was for her sake chiefly. It was a case of choosing between you, and I weighed it up. You'd brought all the trouble on us—I don't say it was all your fault; it was much to do with your bad upbringing. But Marie had done nothing, only come into a world where I didn't want her. And so I chose her and let you drop out. It wasn't possible to think of both of you. To some women, I suppose, being a wife is what counts, but I don't seem to have been cut out for a wife you knocked that out of me. But I was cut out for a mother—a mother first and last."

For too many years she had looked back with horror to her life with him, shuddered at the thought of him. He was a broken man, but an impassable gulf stretched between them which no pity could bridge, and his distorted brain, distorted with years of brooding, sensed the finality of her words.

"And she was so sweet!" she breathed. "When she came here all the neighbours thought she was a nurse-child, and I let them think. It helped me so...to see her all that I wished I could have been, to give her all that I never had, to have something to serve—serve willingly, and look up to. There were times when I felt I could let everything go, and not fight any longer...it was lonely..."

"And how about me, shut up there like I was? Wasn't I lonely too? You didn't ever think of me?"

She shook her head. How should she have thought of him except with horror? What had he ever done to merit her compassion? Her eyes grew absent as she lived again in retrospect the years of aching loneliness, without even the consolation of her own child's love, though the thought of m'lady had been a constant beacon light to her, holding her up when moments of weakness or weariness dragged her down.

"I couldn't think of both of you. I told you that before," she said dully. "It was m'lady first, the rest of the world nowhere. Oh, and it was worth it! It seemed such a wonderful thing I'd done—"

Her voice died away; she looked at him questioningly, wondering if she had appeased him, if he would hold his hand. But his next words showed her the futility of her attempts.

"She's going to marry that swell?" he asked broodingly. His queer, pale eyes burned into hers.

"I don't know he's a gentleman. I hope she does. I've prayed for it—she's safe when she's married to a man like that. No one can touch her then, because he'll stand between her and trouble."

"And he's got money?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I think so."

He stood up and started to shuffle about the shop.

"He can pay for her," said Joe Hoad briefly.

Her first feeling was of blank astonishment, the words were torn from her. A fierce clap of thunder, climax of the storm, seemed to burst almost overhead and emphasize the blow of that curt statement, the more resolute for the comparative restraint with which it was uttered.

"Joe, you wouldn't tell him? You wouldn't try to force yourself upon him?" she cried, unable to hide her horror, even though it might only add to his determination to do the thing.

"Of course I shall tell him," he rejoined, devouring the sight of her suffering. She was not so proud now. "I'll get all that I can out of him, and he's got to be generous, or I'll make it hot for him. I know him now—Morlay! He's a busy! Good God—that's what he is! I'd sooner see her dead."

"I'll give you money, Joe," she promised feverishly. "Plenty of it. I'll get it tomorrow."

"Of course you will. You've got to. Don't go making a favour of it. You've left me to rot for all these years; d'you think you can go on riding the high horse?"

She moistened her dry lips helplessly.

"And you'll tell him everything—that you're Marie's father and that you killed a policeman in cold blood because he'd been after you?"

"Shut up!" he roared, his face and hands twitching as he glared at her.

"Well, that's what you'll have to tell him, if you tell him anything. And do you think he'll help you then? Oh, you can't undo everything—you can't ruin her life!" she exclaimed, unable any longer to appeal to his self-interest, coming irresistibly back to the one thing that mattered, the one person to be considered.

"If she's worth anything, she'll be glad to look after me. I'm her father, ain't I?"

She watched him fearfully, realizing the danger of angering him. Perhaps tomorrow would bring renewed safety. They had set him free as cured, turned him loose as a sane man, but perhaps the shock of that freedom had really made him mad, and they would take him back again. She must keep him quiet, until she could get advice. In the morning, in the daylight, everything would be easier, and less terrible.

"Joe," she said nervously, "perhaps I was wrong not to think about you, not to forgive you. You've seen her now. Didn't I do well? Aren't you proud of her now?"

"All her! Where do I come in?" he growled.

"Where I do—nowhere!" she cried passionately. "What do we matter? What do parents matter, anyway? It's the children that matter. She's got the best of both of us in her, a pure flame lighted from us both. You can't die while she lives. She's yours. Isn't she worth sacrificing something for, as I've sacrificed all these years to work for her? Joe, you couldn't tell her and spoil it all!"

"That's the very thing I'm going to do," came his answer, and she realized with sick horror just what she had to deal with. "I'm going to tell her, because, as you say, she's mine. She's got to pay for all she's had. She owes it to me!"

"Oh, you're wrong this idea of owing," she said wildly. "Children don't owe—they're owed! Hundreds of them are in the world today through grownups thinking only of themselves. Don't you think we owe them the very best we can give them?"

But they spoke different languages.

"She owes me her life, and she's going to pay," he said stubbornly. "I'll teach her! M'lady, indeed! I'll soon knock some of the nonsense out of her—and out of you, too, you snivelling old fool! When I think of all you've done for her, that you might have done for me—wrapping her up in luxury, and me—me there!"

His voice broke with rage on an almost shrill note. For a moment he crouched and then sprang at her with a force that almost threw her to the ground. "All these years...all these years!"

It seemed to her that the end of her troubles had come, for his fingers were sinking into her throat, and she was choking...everything went red before her eyes, and the steady beat of the rain outside became a deafening roar. Through her mind rushed the peril in which her death would leave m'lady, ghastly pictures.

She could not struggle any longer; she could not even pray. She had a vague impression that the door opened before the pressure on her throat relaxed, and she sank down heavily into darkness, the blood roaring in her ears.

It was Herman. He had returned to his room to sit listening uneasily to the rumble of voices below. The storm died away, and after one resounding peal

of thunder the quiet grew burdensome, the downpour of the rain against the window intolerable, deadening any sound of voices from below which might otherwise have reached him.

Unable to bear the suspense, he crept downstairs in his stockinged feet, to hear the sound of her voice and know that she was safe, to be at hand if she was in danger. He heard the man's last shrill cry of rage, and the strangled sound which came from her as his fingers closed on her throat, and, with his heart beating thunderously, he flung open the door and went in.

Gripping the man by the shoulders he flung him backwards. The convict staggered to his feet, glaring.

"Get out!" he said savagely.

"What has he done to you?" Herman's voice was tremulous.

Mrs. Carawood's eyes opened. Taking up the fight again, she remembered that even Herman must not know the truth.

"It's all right, Herman." She struggled up. "He—didn't mean anything, I fainted."

"Why, he was throttling you!"

"You leave my wife alone!"

The boy heard; looked from one to the other, dazed.

"Your wife—sir?"

He turned imploringly to the woman. She inclined her head helplessly.

"It's all true, Herman, what he says," she said in a low voice. "M'lady—Marie is my daughter—not a real lady...silly...I've worked all these years for her—and now he's going to ruin everything. She'll curse me tomorrow—oh, Herman, she'll hate me! I wish I was dead!"

The man had seated himself. Looking round for a cushion and not finding one, he dragged down a frock from the nearest stand and, crumpling it up, put it behind his back. Then he jerked his thumb towards the boy.

"Clear out," he ordered. "I'm going to sleep here tonight. Cut it, both of yer. I want some sleep."

Thankful to escape, to put off what must be for a few hours at least, Mrs. Carawood went towards the door, her step heavy, her face haggard and old-looking. Marie would not be home that night. John was taking her on to the house of a school-friend. Thank God for that! It seemed to Herman that she had aged many years since the beginning of the evening.

Her steps grew faint as she passed upstairs, and then were softly audible overhead as she entered her own room.

Herman stood irresolute. He did not like to leave the intruder there. Mrs. Carawood had fought, and was temporarily defeated. He was the poor reserve in this losing battle.

"What are you standing there for?" demanded the man. "Clear out, d'yer hear?"

"It's—it's you to get out," returned Herman, resolute though trembling. "You're going to break Mrs. Carawood's heart, and...nobody's ever been good to me but her..."

Tears were near then: he choked them back as the man staggered to his feet.

"Get out!" He pointed the way. "Get out, or I'll do for you! I'm Joe Hoad that killed the copper on the Blackheath Road—and I'd do it again for two pins!"

"You can't be, or you'd have been hanged!" gasped Herman. "I'll fetch the police. I believe you've escaped from an asylum—you're raving mad."

The man's face was convulsed as he struggled for words; his trembling fingers pointed at the boy, and through purplish lips came words Herman could scarcely hear as he sank back in his chair.

Herman watched him, fascinated, as he clutched at his heart, his eyes rolling as he fought for breath. One shaking hand was stretched towards the mantelpiece as he struggled to rise, choking out a few spasmodic words.

"...box...phial!"

Herman started towards the mantelpiece, the natural instinct to help anyone in pain carrying him a few steps.

"Quick!" came the strangled voice. "Quick, you fool, or I'll croak!"

The boy turned and saw him lying there in the chair, his breath coming in shallow gasps. He took another two strides to the mantelpiece and lifted the box. The man's eyes suddenly focused again and his hand seemed to be motioning feebly to him .for help.

Herman's heart was thumping madly and his knees trembling.

"You you had no pity for her," he whimpered, and nerved himself for the supreme act.

Between finger and thumb he crushed the little phial as he had seen Hoad crush it before, and there escaped a minute spot of something pungent. In the box were three more phials. He looked across to where the man was breathing, unconsciously now. Herman held his own breath as he crushed the phials one after the other, and flung the little box into the fireplace with a sob.

The sound of the box falling had an echo as Joe slid to the floor limply. Herman remained still, listening intently. There was no sound from upstairs, no sound outside, but the quiet drip of water. Herman switched out the light, opened the door of the shop. He had to draw back the bolts.

Tiptoeing back to where the body lay, he dragged it through the open door into the street. Rain fell heavily—there was nobody in sight.

He tiptoed over to the body, peering through his glasses at the huddled heap.

"Damn you!" he whimpered. "You're dead an' in hell an' I'm glad!"

He returned and bolted the door.

CHAPTER XXVII

There was a sound of footsteps on the pavement outside. The footsteps stopped; a policeman gazed at a figure lying on the pavement.

"Here, come along out of this!" he said, shaking the man roughly. "This is no place to sleep!"

The arm which he seized dropped stiffly when he released it. Startled, he bent closer, touched the cold face, the still pulse. The next moment his whistle was shrilling...

Nothing untoward was discovered at the inquest. By the papers found on his body it appeared that Joe Hoad or Smith had been released from Dartmoor on the completion of his sentence. The doctor said that he was suffering from angina pectoris which was likely to kill him at any moment. Tucked away in an inside pocket were ten new notes for five pounds each. These the police might have traced to Mr. Julian Lester but for a great deal of prudence and foresight on Julian's part.

There were evidences that he had been drinking a little, quite enough to hurt a man in his state of health, and the theory was that the little phials of amyl nitrate, without which he was warned never to move a step, had been stolen from him, or lost while he was drunk.

An intelligent jury had brought in a verdict of "Death from Natural Causes".

Mrs. Carawood won a reputation for sentimentality and generosity that she did not want when she had him buried at her expense instead of by the parish.

That night:

"He's dead—that's all that matters," said Herman, and the cold-bloodedness of the youth made her gasp.

They were sitting in the living-room, no longer caring to remain in the shop when business was over. The gas hissed harshly—the electric light did not extend beyond the shop—Herman having turned it too high in his desire to dispel every shadow lurking in the corners.

Mrs. Carawood shook her head. Her eyes were red with weeping. The neighbours, who whispered and peered about the shop, wondered to see the levelheaded Mrs. Carawood so upset about the death of a casual burglar.

"I'm sorry for him now, Herman, and it's all rather a mystery to me."

"There's no mystery, Mrs. Carawood. He's dead," said Herman, looking round nervously. "He's better dead."

This time Herman glared defiantly at the shadowy places of the room. If he lurked there, he of the dreadful eyes, here was a challenge that he might take up or leave. Nothing happened.

Mrs. Carawood touched the boy's hand gratefully. She was unnerved by the sleepless nights, the reaction from the horror and pain which had preceded them. His stout refusal to deplore what had happened was almost comforting.

"Let's go to bed," she said. "We've neither of us had much rest these last few nights. Thank God, m'lady's in the country! I wish I could have talked the thing over with Mr. Morlay; he would have understood."

They each took a candle and put out the gas. Mrs. Carawood had her foot on the first stair when the latch of the shop door rattled, and their eyes met in sudden fear. She was the first to recover.

"It's nothing," she said; "some neighbour. It's early yet. Go and see who it is."

She stood in the doorway while he, blowing out his candle and putting it down, went over to the electric switch above the spot where that huddled body had lain, and hurriedly put on the light. His fingers fumbled a little as he drew back the bolt and opened the door. With chattering teeth he recognized the visitor.

"Can I see you, Mrs. Carawood?" came a voice as the man walked into the shop.

It was John Morlay. He had come up from Ascot—he contrived to spend most of his afternoons there.

"Is anything wrong!" she asked.

"Nothing."

He was almost too cheerful. She would have sent Herman away, but he asked the boy to stay, and she waited with a sense of foreboding. Yet he could know nothing.

"I had to see you tonight," he said. "I rather think you have something on your mind that might very profitably come off."

There was a little pause, and then:

"I know all about Marie. There is only one living member of the Fioli family—Emilio Benito Fioli. They call him Father Benito in London."

"You know?" she gasped, and John smiled.

"Yes; Father Benito came to hear about Marie, and he was worried. He knew that his sister had died childless. Curiously enough, he knew that you had a daughter. It was easy to guess the rest, Mrs. Carawood. Now tell me."

Haltingly she told him the truth, right up to the moment when she had gone to bed that night, all the courage of her long fight, all the depth of her love for her child, revealed in the faltering sentences.

And to John Morlay, accustomed to hearing of people too wicked to wish to rise out of the mire, or too weak to rise if they wished it, she seemed something of a miracle. As she ceased speaking, he turned to Herman.

"And after that?"

"I told him to clear out," said Herman huskily. "And he didn't?"

"No, he told me to get out, or he'd do for me...And then he came over queer, and—and...he asked me to give him the medicine."

John's eyes were on the boy's face.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't."

There was an air of defiance about the lad's words, almost of challenge. Mrs. Carawood was shivering, and looked at John fearfully.

"He said he had angina," she whispered, "He hadn't long to live...just long enough to ruin me, and Marie."

John sat with knitted brows, his hands clasped. In a sense the boy was a murderer.

"If you had given him the phial it would have been of no use, I should imagine," he said.

There was a moment's silence, Herman blinking through his glasses at the visitor.

"It's queer your coming tonight," said Mrs. Carawood, after a pause "because when he came I could think of no one that I could go to for help but you. And now...I'm worrying..."

"About the Countess Marie Fioli?" he queried, without the suspicion of mockery in his voice.

She nodded.

"Does anyone know?"

"We two—and you, and Father Benito. I understand now why he came to the shop. He thought I was doing something fraudulent. I suppose I was. We four."

"The Father will not speak—Herman will not speak. It must be our little secret. There is another man who knows. I saw him tonight. He is a police officer, but he will not bother you. We followed you to Rotherhithe."

She shrank back, her face a dull red.

"They told me he was dying, and I had the best doctor sent to him. He lodged with a man, a good fellow I have helped ever since he came from prison. I made an allowance to him—the only thing I was afraid of was his knowing that I had money. I was in terror he would trace me. That day in your office..."

John Morlay nodded.

"Yes, I realized that," he said. "Marie must not know. There is no necessity."

She did not ask why. There was something else troubling her; something that she had not put into words.

"I've been a vain, wicked woman, I suppose"—there was a stifled sob in her words—"but I did it all for her. And now I know how badly I have treated her. Some day she will marry—"

Herman nodded. This solution was the only solution.

"That's right, Mrs. Carawood! I told you so the night—he came here. She'll change her name."

Mrs. Carawood shook her head.

"Her husband must know—" she began.

"He knows," said John Morlay, and, as she raised her eyes to his. "I think the matter can be settled very soon."

"Would you…after all you know? Her father…you couldn't do that, Mr. Morlay!"

"I want to do that," he said. "I'll be the happiest man in the world if she will agree. I haven't asked her—yet."

CHAPTER XXVIII

There is a moral axiom that when thieves disagree honest men come by their own. Which may or may not be true.

Inspector Peas was self-admittedly an honest man. The two gentlemen who alarmed and horrified the West End of London by engaging in a shooting-match were admittedly thieves.

They rushed the wounded men to the hospital, and Peas went down and sat by the side of one of them for two hours, listening to delirious ravings and the most shocking language that had ever polluted a casualty-ward.

He recognized Harry the Valet, but the other man was a stranger to him, and, so far as he could gather, they had double-crossed each other; there had been a fight which started in an office in Grosvenor Square and extended into Regent Street.

They didn't speak about the fight; the main topic of their incoherent conversation was their mutual treachery.

Peas got on the telephone to his immediate superior and reported.

"There's no doubt both these men were in the Canadian Bank affair. They've got the stuff; it's been cached somewhere, and one or the other has got away with it. I am going to have a look at the office."

The office told him nothing more than an overturned chair, a wall spattered with ink, and a broken inkwell could suggest. There was a safe, wide open and empty. There was also a fine manilla rope fastened to an office table and dropping through the open window. Now he understood why both men had accused the other of staging a fake burglary.

There was a big hole in the plaster of one wall, where the first bullet had struck. He examined the safe carefully, and sent for a photographer, hoping that luck would be on his side and that a fingerprint or two might help towards the elucidation of the mystery. Though there was little mystery in it. It might be an outside job; there might possibly be a third member of the gang who had "shopped" both Harry the Valet and his disreputable friend. But such an idea would have occurred to them also, and they spoke of no third party.

He pulled up the rope; it was light, pliable, strong. A man could carry it wound round his waist under an overcoat and never attract attention. He wondered whether the Lone Cat had been miaowing in the neighbourhood, and, because he did not exclude that possibility, he went down to the mews and made some inquiries. Nobody had any information to offer; none of the people who slept over the garages had noticed anything remarkable. Throughout the night cars had come and gone, but that was not unusual.

He reported to police headquarters and gave his theory, then went back to the hospital and resumed his vigil. He learned of a new member of the confederacy, a man who might be found in a certain bar near the Place de l'Opera in Paris. It was a slender clue, but one obviously to be followed. At a quarter to eleven the next morning he was at Victoria, carrying a suitcase. The train had hardly pulled out of the station when a man walked along the aisle of the Pullman recognized him, and greeted him cheerily.

"Good morning, Mr. Lester!"

He was glad to have a companion. Julian sat down in the seat opposite to him, with that inscrutable smile of his on his face.

"Where are you gadding to?"

"A little trip to Paris," said Peas airily. "I spend a great deal of my time wandering about the Continent—a knowledge of foreign languages is a great thing, Mr. Lester."

He had a working but limited knowledge of French. He could speak a dozen sentences in German, but Peas always took a generous view of his own accomplishments.

"I'm going to Switzerland. This country is over-taxed," said Julian.

He passed a dainty gold cigarette-case to Peas. "I've got my book to write."

"Aren't you coming back?"

"For a few months every year," explained Julian. "The devil of it is that I have a cottage on the Solent. It cost me a lot of money to buy, and I've one of the fastest motor-boats in Southampton you don't know anybody who wants a bargain? If you do, I wish you'd let me know."

It was natural he should talk about the Canadian Bank robbery.

"The papers say that these two men who were shooting each other up in the West End were suspected of the crime," he said.

"I shouldn't think so." Peas shook his head. "You mustn't believe all you read in the papers, Mr. Lester. I know a few things which, naturally, I can't tell you."

"Naturally," agreed Julian, and rather ponderously Peas turned the conversation to another subject.

They had a very pleasant trip to Dover.

"I can get you passed through the Customs without any trouble if you like," said Inspector Pickles.

Julian thanked him, but it was unnecessary. He was leaving by the Simplon, and was exempt from baggage-examination at the quay. There being a shortage of porters, Peas helped him ashore with his two big suitcases, one of which he carried, and deposited it at the end of the platform where the Simplon stood waiting to pull out.

He never saw Julian again, and few of Julian's old friends ever met him thence onwards.

If he forgot Mr. Lester, Mr. Lester never forgot him. One of his happiest memories was that of a sub-inspector of Scotland Yard carrying ashore a suitcase packed tight with the proceeds of the Canadian Bank robbery.

Before he left, Julian wrote a letter to John Morlay. It was beautifully written and expressed. He hoped John's life would be happy; he would always remember their friendly association.

In his letter to Marie, Julian was beautifully tender. He did not reproach her, but told her there were some things which were beyond endurance. He would go away quietly to some new country, and try to forget the one woman in the world who had left a fragrant memory which time would never eradicate. All this, and a great deal more.

The paper on which the letter was written was slightly perfumed.

CHAPTER XXIX

It was a glorious summer day; no cloud broke the blue of the sky, and as they passed slowly against the tide from lock to lock, the girl, stretched in the well of the boat on a heap of cushions, was very silent.

Green lawns, gay with flowers, ancient gardens with their clipped yews and trailing roses, white palaces and gay bungalows slipped past them.

West of Hambledon Lock, John turned the nose of the launch to a leafy backwater and brought the boat to the bank.

"If you took a course in domestic economy, prepare to prove it now," he said, as he lifted out a big hamper and laid it on the grass.

"I can make tea—if that is what you mean," she said.

She was still very grave, he thought, and wondered why.

"You are worrying about Mrs. Carawood?" She shook her head.

"No...I am wondering about myself. I've got...what was it your cousin called it—a new angle to life!"

"That sounds frightfully impressive," he smiled, watching her struggle with a patent oil-stove. "I'll light that for you."

But she waved aside his offer of assistance.

The cups and plates had been washed in the river, the hamper repacked, and he was lying on the grass, a cigarette between his lips, when abruptly she came back to the subject.

"I'm like a river—"

"A fresh and sparkling brook," he murmured. "Anything that has been running on without a thought of its destination," said Marie soberly.

"And now you're coming to the sea?"

She shook her head.

"No...to a sort of desert where I disappear."

"Or dissipate. And where do these melancholy notions come from? I suggest that your young digestion is out of order."

She sat up suddenly.

"John, I'm a beggar," she said dramatically, and he turned his head sharply towards her.

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm a beggar—a poverty-stricken countess. I have no money and I never had money."

He sat up in turn.

"Why do you think so?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"It has come to me—a sort of inspiration. I woke up last night and realized it. John, I want you to tell me the truth."

He tried to fence but failed, as he knew.

"I am not in Mrs. Carawood's confidence—"

"I don't care whether you are or whether you're not," she insisted, "you know. John Morlay, will you tell me the truth?"

He was silent.

"Am I rich or poor?"

John drew a long breath.

"You're not rich," he said.

"And all the good things I have had—Mrs. Carawood gave them to me?"

He nodded, and saw her face soften, and the eyes grow tender.

"The darling—the dear, unselfish darling."

She was biting her lip to keep back the tears, and for a long time neither spoke.

"What must I do now, John? I can't live on her—I must work. What a silly little fool I was not to think of this before! And I have had glimmerings of intelligence...suspicions. John, what am I to do?"

His voice sounded strange and unreal to himself when he answered:

"You must get married, Marie."

She looked at him, unstartled.

"But—that isn't work. And there isn't anybody...I mean, there is nobody I care for."

John Morlay's heart sank.

"That's very unfortunate," he said, and his words seemed ridiculously commonplace. "I hoped—"

She turned her eyes upon his and for a second he saw wonder and doubt.

"I used to think that people who fell in love at first sight needed the attention of a mental specialist," he said huskily, "and that people who didn't marry other...people exactly the same age were heading for destruction. I've changed my view."

She was looking at the river, seemingly absorbed in a log of driftwood that had floated into the backwater.

"It isn't fair to expect a girl who has a picture of Prince Charming in her heart to be satisfied with dry-as-dust substitutes, is it?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know; I have never harboured a Prince Charming, but if I had..."

He waited.

"...if I had he would be—very nice; rather tall and not too good-looking...and just a little bit stupid."

His hand went out and touched hers; she did not draw away. And then his arm went about her.

CHAPTER XXX

There was an air of festivity in Penton Street. Though its womenkind had been denied a view of the bride, save those—and they were many—who had made the journey to St Asaph's, the wedding rightly belonged to the street.

Mr. Fenner, strolling homeward with Herman, had a sense of importance, as was natural in one who was intimately associated with the events which had led to the perfect culmination. He was attired magnificently, and, even if bright brown boots do not accord with a shining silk hat, Herman, uncomfortably respectable himself, thought he had never seen Mr. Fenner looking so gentlemanly.

This employer of labour had given his men a day's holiday on full pay. They had refused the holiday on half-pay and there had been some unseemly haggling. But the matter had been settled to the satisfaction of all, and as he strutted past the closed gates of his "yard" he could afford the royal glow of power which enveloped him. They turned into the shop through the side door. Mr. Fenner took off his hat, and, putting it carefully down, surveyed it for a long time.

Herman looked at the ragged cigar he was endeavouring to smoke, and threw it into the fireplace.

"Well, Herman," said Fenner oracularly, "we're getting into Society. An inquest and a wedding in a fortnight. Don't you like that cigar? Try one of mine."

"This is one of yours," said Herman unpleasantly.

"That inquest is going to be a mystery to me for some time," said Mr. Fenner in his profoundest manner. "I was talking to a colleague of mine at a meeting of the Master Builders' Federation, and he said it licked him."

"I don't see any mystery about it." Herman's voice was strange and irritable. "The chap was a thief and had been discharged from Dartmoor."

Fenner was not convinced.

"But why outside of this shop?" he demanded.

"If he's got to go and die, why not anywhere?" asked Herman savagely.

He pulled, from his pocket a shining gold watch and examined it.

"What's that, Herman?" Mr. Fenner was curious. "A watch. M'lady gave it to me," said the proud Herman.

"Gave it to you? Today?"—incredulously.

"Yes. It's a wedding-present," said Herman. "The first one I've ever had. Ain't it a grand thing? It's twenty-seven and a half minutes past four—now it's twenty-eight minutes. I never knew that time was so exact. Didn't she look lovely, Mr. Fenner?" He clicked his lips in an ecstasy of admiration. "I wouldn't have missed that wedding for the world."

"Did you see me talking to Lord Pertham?"

"That bald-headed bloke?" said Herman, interested. "Was he a lord?"

"Can't you tell a lord when you see one?"

Mr. Fenner was reproachful. "There's something about a lord that's—well, he's different!"

"Oh, I remember," Herman nodded, "the bloke with a white shirt. Big fat fellow?"

Mr. Fenner closed his eyes.

"That was the butler," he said resignedly.

Herman recalled guiltily that he had shaken hands with this magnificent fellow.

"Yes, Lord Pertham and me had a bit of a talk about the prevailing condition of the labour market," said Fenner with relish. "Would you believe it, his lordship has been obliged to give up building on his estate at 'Ighgate 'Ill because of the way them builders are going on? It requires legislation, Herman."

"Does it? Well, I suppose you're right. My word, what an awful lot of long words you know, Mr. Fenner!"

"I know one or two," said Fenner complacently.

A car had pulled up at the door and Mrs. Carawood got out. She looked surprisingly attractive. It was as though the magic hand of Nature had smoothed every line from her face.

"I'm going to change my things," she said. "Did you enjoy yourself, Fenner?"

Mr. Fenner indicated his gracious approval.

"It was very neat," he said. "Art and taste everywhere."

"I saw the art, but I didn't so much as nibble a sandwich." Mrs. Carawood shook her head. "It would have choked me."

Mr. Fenner closed the door upon her, looked at Herman, and coughed. He had something on his mind. For the moment the youth had no desire for confidences. He had pulled up a chair before the empty fireplace and, with his hands on his knees, was staring into the polished grate.

"Herman, do you mind if I talk to you on a private matter!"

Herman started.

"It's about Mrs. Carawood. She's been a widow for a good many years, but women never get quite used to being alone. Do you agree with me or do you not?"

"What's the good of asking me?" snarled the young man.

"Well, I can tell you, they don't. I'm very fond of Mrs. Carawood."

"Who isn't?" demanded Herman scornfully.

"What a help for a man with social ambitions!" Mr. Fenner's voice was hushed. "Mrs. Carawood would make a handsome hostess. Now, suppose I wrote an' asked Lord Pertham to come to dinner?"

Herman was shocked.

"You wouldn't have the cheek," he said awestricken.

"What do you mean?" demanded the climber.

"We're all equal, ain't we? What's he better than me?"

Herman was not prepared to advance a view.

"I invite him to dinner—what happens?" Mr. Fenner continued his hypothesis.

Herman shook his head vigorously.

"I'll bet he wouldn't come. I'll bet you anything he wouldn't. If he did he'd find you wasn't married, an' go home."

"Well, suppose I had a wife?"

"You goin' to get married?"

Herman was amazed. He had never regarded the master man as a candidate for matrimony.

"I'll give you anything up to a five-pun' note if you drop a hint to Mr. Carawood."

"What kind of a hint?" Herman was on his guard.

"Well, suppose you happen to remark like this," said the diplomatic Fenner, "just careless. 'Here, Mrs. Carawood, have you noticed anything about Fenner?'"

"Mr. Fenner," corrected the youth.

"Mr. Fenner—yes, Mr. Fenner. 'No,' she says, quite upset."

"Would she be upset?" asked Herman.

Mr. Fenner thought that it was extremely likely.

"Well, I'm not goin' to tell her," said Herman emphatically. "You don't suppose I'd upset Mrs. Carawood?"

"Suppose she ain't upset." He hastened to wipe out that picture. "Suppose you just say: 'Yes, Mrs. Carawood, I can't help feeling'—just like that —'I can't help feeling he ain't long for this world."

"You going away?" asked the interested Herman.

"I don't know how I keep my temper with you, Herman," said Mr. Fenner wildly. "I mean that I'm pining away."

Herman shook his head.

"You ain't pining away, you're getting fat!"

"Well, you say it to her," snapped the suitor.

Herman shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said, with exasperating indifference. "I don't mind. I'll mention it"

"And say, 'Mrs. Carawood, you ought to have a man in the house. Somebody with a bit of common sense, somebody you could introduce to your friends, somebody easy-going and gentlemanly."

Herman was palpably relieved.

"I see—not you, you don't mean?"

Mrs. Carawood came downstairs in time to save his life.

Herman's memory was not his strongest point and he was conscious of his defect. Moreover, it was desirable that his mission should be fulfilled to the letter in the presence of his instructor.

"Mrs. Carawood, don't you think Mr. Fenner's pining away?" he asked.

Mrs. Carawood looked from one to the other in astonishment.

"No don't," she admitted.

"Well, don't you feel lonely at nights without a man in the house?" asked Herman.

Mr. Fenner made frantic signals commanding discretion, but these Herman ignored. Mrs. Carawood had seen the signals and understood.

"Ah, I see," she said. "Fenner!" She shook her finger solemnly at him. "Now, if you're going to stay here, make yourself useful. Bring that table over here, Herman, and go and get the cloth."

"What's up, Mrs. Carawood?" asked Fenner in surprise. "Are you going to give a party?"

"M'lady's coming to have a cup of tea before she goes, that's all," said Mrs. Carawood shortly.

Fenner stroked his moustache.

"Oh, I'd like to say good-bye too."

"Well, you can go to Fenchurch Street at seven-thirty-five and say good-bye to her there," said Mrs. Carawood, whose directness of speech would have abashed any man but Fenner. "I'm always glad to see you at other times, but today I want to be with her—alone,"

Still Fenner lingered.

"I suppose you haven't thought over the matter I discussed the other day?" he asked.

"I haven't had much time to think, Fenner, but if I had—"

"If you had—?" he asked when she paused.

"I'd have put that idea out of your mind long ago. You're a nice man, Fenner. I've told you that before. But I'm not marrying—any more. I've got nothing to give to a husband, and that's the truth."

"Maybe, as the song says—" he began.

"I haven't come to my time of life to worry about what the song says. Now, Fenner, be sensible. You've got twice the interest in life you had. You've got plenty to do and plenty to occupy your time without taking a wife."

"I suppose I have," he said dejectedly. "I don't think I'll wait and help, Mrs. Carawood. I think I'll go away for a bit like that man in the book you read about the other night. I sort of set my heart on this. Yes, I'll go away. I'll travel. I haven't been to. Brighton for years. Maybe when I come back—"

"I shall never change my mind, Fenner," she said, shaking her head, "not if you are away years and years."

"I shan't be away more than a couple of days," he assured her. "I've got a meeting with the Masters' Federation over this new demand of the carpenters. Perfectly sickening, I call it. Blackmail! That's what it is. Good-bye, Herman."

"You going?" asked Herman conventionally.

There was a bitter smile on Mr. Fenner's face.

"Yes, I've got my congé."

"Well, don't lose it," was the cheerful farewell.

After Fenner's departure, Mrs. Carawood stood for a long time in thought. A new chapter: of life was opening, the old and ugly narrative of the past was closed, or nearly closed.

"Herman," she said at last, "bring down that black box from under my bed."

Herman went out and presently returned with the box and put it on the table. She unlocked it and took out an envelope. Watching her, Herman moved into the shop discreetly. Mrs. Carawood took a paper out of the envelope and, sitting down, read:

Marie Louise Hoad...Father, Joseph Hoad, plumber. Mother... She knew the mother!

She struck a match and burnt the paper slowly.

"Herman!"

He came hurriedly to her.

"Yes, Mrs. Carawood."

"Herman, there's a parcel on my dressing-table—I'll want it in a minute."

"What am I going to do when you give up the shops?" he asked. He had only learned that morning that the business had been sold, and in the midst of the wedding-festivities that knowledge had overclouded his mind.

"You're coming to live with me, Herman."

His face lit up.

"You don't say!" he gasped.

"And you're going to be educated," she said with a smile.

"I can spell my name now," he said eagerly, and then his face fell; "but I don't think they'll ever make much of me, Mrs. Carawood. I'm a bit of a fool. When I see other young fellows able to read the football news and write their own bets I feel ashamed of myself."

"It's education that makes a gentleman or a lady. Education and surroundings," said Mrs. Carawood.

Here he was puzzled.

"I can't quite see how a young woman can educate herself into a lady, Mrs. Carawood. She's got to be born. Of course I know she can be, because—well, I know that she can—"

"Being a lady or gentleman is a matter of wanting to be nice and living with people who want you to be nice and knowing how to be," said Mrs. Carawood.

"But suppose—well, suppose a lady has got—well, a rotten father—wouldn't his rottenness come out in her? That's what puzzled me."

"You only take out what you put in, Herman. If there's an empty bit of your mind and you fill it with poison, it'll poison the other bits," she said.

CHAPTER XXXI

Marie came to the little shop in Penton Street, no longer "M'lady", and the imponderable change in her status gave her, for some reason which she could not define, a peculiar satisfaction.

"I'll go alone, John—come later," she asked, and John Morlay understood.

The tea-table was set when she came into the shop, and at first she did not see Mrs. Carawood. And then with a little sob she had run into the open arms and had felt herself crushed against the heart of the woman who had dared so much.

"My dear!" gasped Mrs. Carawood, her face streaming. "You'll want a cup of tea!"

"No, no, I don't want anything except to sit and talk with you. I'm going very soon. Were you proud of me, Nanny?"

Mrs. Carawood took the girl's face in her hands and gazed hungrily into the tearful eyes.

"Proud of you?" she said in a low voice. "You'll never know how proud!"

"You'll have no one to fuss over when I've gone, Nanny." Marie tried to smile, but it was a dismal failure.

"M'lady, you know..." But she could not speak.

"No more sending me money for holidays and clothes—you've to use all that for yourself."

"My dear, one minute."

Mrs. Carawood turned and opened the door of her living-room.

"Herman!"

His voice answered her.

"Bring that parcel I told you about."

Herman came instantly, smiled a greeting to the girl, and laid the little package on the table.

With trembling hands, Mrs. Carawood opened the case and revealed a row of pearls, white against the dark-blue velvet.

"It's a little thing part of the money that was left over from your dear mother."

Marie caught her breath.

"Nanny? For me! Pearls—oh, Nanny, how beautiful! Why did you do it?" Her tears were falling fast now.

"They aren't very big, m'lady, but they're pretty, almost as pretty as my dear girl." She took Marie's hand in hers and kissed it. "You're going to be very happy, Marie."

"I've always been happy—you've been like a mother to me."

She found it difficult to speak at all.

"I've done all I could. Let me have a good look at you." She gazed raptly at the beloved face. The girl caught her eyes and was almost frightened.

"You're all of my dreams, all—all—there's nothing in life, there's nothing in the hereafter that hasn't you in it—baby!"

Marie could smile now.

"Baby! How dear that sounds!"

"It slipped out."

"Let it stay out, Nanny." And, as the woman's arms closed round her: "That's lovely and peaceful! I wish you had a girl of your own, Nanny, you'd be such a wonderful mother. No, I don't; I want you to have me and me alone!"

Mrs. Carawood nodded.

"There's a bit in the Bible, m'lady, in Isaiah 'As one whom her mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.' You've got a good man; care for him and—his children, my love, as I—as I love you."

She kissed her tenderly.

"I feel that you have given me all the love that any mother could have given me," said the girl in a low voice. "Tell me, Nanny, am I anything like my mother?"

Mrs. Carawood shook her head.

"You're more beautiful, m'lady. Shut your eyes tight!"

The girl obeyed.

"Pretend—pretend." Mrs. Carawood's voice was hardly audible.

"What shall I pretend?"

"Say—say—'Mother!'"

For the first time and the last time in her life Mrs. Carawood heard that word.

THE END