

**THE MAN WHO  
CHANGED HIS  
NAME**

**BY  
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# The Man Who Changed His Name

## CHAPTER I

NITA CLIVE was sitting in a deck chair on the well-trimmed lawn, gazing, with a slight pucker between her well-trimmed eyebrows, at what was described by Messrs. Truman & Co., Estate Agents and Purveyors of Adjectives, as "Sunningbourne Lodge, Ascot; a charming, detached, picturesque, creeper-clad, freehold residential property, standing in a matured, old-world garden of three acres." At this time of the year both the house, draped with greenery so that not a brick was visible, and the garden, with its riot of rambler roses in full bloom, bore witness to the accuracy of Messrs. Truman & Co.'s description.

If called upon to describe Mrs. Clive as she sat there with her dark hair confessing to the sunlight a secret tendency to be auburn, her mouth rather wistful, and her grey eyes thoughtful, Messrs. Truman & Co. would probably have used some of the same adjectives, "Charming" and "picturesque," as applied to the slim, girlish figure lolling in the deck chair, would have stood; "detached" she certainly was at the moment, with an air of being quite unaware of her surroundings; and since, three years ago, she had been legally conveyed to Selby Clive as his wife, they might have felt justified in leaving unaltered the words "freehold residential property."

Nita glanced again at the letter which she held in her hand. It was from Truman & Co. They were pleased to inform her that they had forwarded particulars of Sunningbourne Lodge to a Mr. Denham, who was looking for a residence in the district, and he proposed calling tomorrow to view the property. They trusted that she could conveniently allow him to look over the house and grounds and that a satisfactory sale would ensue.

Nita's glance suddenly shifted to the French windows that gave onto the terrace from the library. They were open, and she could see her husband busily writing, his grey head, as he bent over his desk, showing up clearly against the oak-panelled wall. Selby, she reflected, disliked being interrupted when at work, but it might be as well, she thought, to beard him at once and show him the letter. It would be a difficult interview. Selby, of course, would refuse to discuss the matter seriously—try to laugh it off, as he had always done in the past. Probably, to appease her, he would suggest an evening in town—dinner at some highly respectable restaurant where the music was "good" and the food "wholesome," followed by a visit to some show, during which he would yawn every few minutes and glance frequently at his watch.

But this time she did not mean to be appeased. She had never seriously opposed Selby before, and she was a little nervous as to what would happen

when he discovered that she had flouted his wishes and taken matters into her own hands. She had never seen him angry, and the knowledge that he would almost certainly be furious when he heard what she had done gave her a strange thrill of excitement—and nervousness.

It would be something of an achievement to stir the placid, imperturbable Selby to anger; something of an interesting experiment. Rather alarming too, perhaps. She had always felt that Selby, if ever he should lose his temper, would be a rather terrifying person; which partly explained, no doubt, why she had been at pains to avoid making him lose it. Selby set at defiance was an unknown quantity, and she supposed, now she came to think of it, that she had always been just a little afraid of him.

Frank O'Ryan had often said as much, and, though she had stoutly denied it, Frank was probably right. But she would not be afraid this time. She would go to him now, show him the letter, and, if she were compelled to go so far, tell him bluntly that it was a choice between parting with Sunningbourne Lodge and parting with her. That, after all, was the truth.

With sudden resolution she got up from her chair, and as she did so she saw her husband step through the French windows and come towards her across the lawn—tall, broad-shouldered, grey-haired, his face rather grave, looking, as she had often told him, so much like Mr. Justice Somebody at the assizes that she wanted to call him "M'lud." She hastily slipped the letter into her pocket.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he began, "but I'm afraid the trip to Scotland will have to be postponed. I've just had a cable from Muller. He reaches England at the end of next week, and I must be here to see him."

Nita frowned.

"Muller? Have I ever heard of him?"

"Someone from my mysterious past," smiled her husband. "He's my lawyer in Canada—looks after all my affairs out there for me—besides being one of my oldest friends. There'll be a good deal of business to discuss, Nita, and as he'll only be in England for a few days I'm wiring him to come straight down here and stay with us. We can make the trip to Scotland later."

"But you won't want me for the business discussions, Selby, and there's no reason why I shouldn't go to Scotland, is there?"

He glanced at her quickly.

"You mean—alone?" He was so obviously surprised and shocked that Nita could not restrain a smile.

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't go—alone?"

"I suppose not, my dear, except that—up till now——"

"Except that up till now, ever since we've been married, I've never been anywhere without you?" interrupted Nita. "But we can't always live in each other's pockets, Selby. Frankly, I can't stand much more of the sort of life I've been leading lately—mooning about down here, doing nothing, seeing no one but you and old Sir Ralph Whitcombe—that stuffy old bore! I can't sit in the same room with him unless the window's open. And now, when I've a chance of getting away from it all for a few days, you expect me to cancel the trip and stay at home to entertain some fusty old lawyer."

He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said. "I had no idea that you felt like that about it."

"Well, I do, Selby."

He took her hand between his.

"In that case, my dear," he said, "by all means, go."

He turned abruptly and went back to the library, and Nita, with a sigh of relief, returned to her chair. She had not meant to say all that, but it was just as well that it had been said. It was more than time that Selby realized that a girl of twenty-five could not go on indefinitely living like a hermit. The news had obviously surprised him—and hurt him. There was a big streak of sentimentality in Selby, and it had come as a shock to him that she should contemplate going anywhere by herself. But he had been quite nice about it. If only he weren't always quite so nice, quite so reasonable, quite so irreproachable! It was his flawlessness more than anything else that sometimes irritated her almost beyond endurance. If he would sometimes be wrong or inconsiderate or selfish or short-tempered, he would be so much easier to live with.

There came the sound of a car in the drive, and a few moments later she saw Frank O'Ryan sauntering towards her across the lawn. She greeted him with a smile. There were few women below the age of thirty who did not greet Frank O'Ryan with a smile, and in her present mood the sight of a good-looking, well-dressed young man was more than welcome to Nita.

He tossed his hat aside and seated himself on the grass beside her chair.

"I say, Nita," he exclaimed, glancing round the garden, "you've a marvelous spot here. You've improved the place no end."

"There's this much to be said for Sunningbourne Lodge, Frank," she replied: "you can't do anything to it without improving it."

"Rambler roses all a-bloom, Nita, well-trimmed lawns, picturesque creeper-clad house—what more do you want?"

She gave a shrug.

"The worst of living in a creeper-clad house is that you're liable to get like it."

He nodded.

"I know. Beats me how you stick it, Nita. You're unhappy, aren't you?"

"Are you suddenly becoming observant, Frank?"

"Not suddenly. I've always wondered why you married old Selby. He's a good chap, of course. I admire him immensely——"

"But—? You may as well say it, now you've started. When one man says he admires another man, it usually means that he's going to start slanging him."

"Well, he's not your sort, Nita. It doesn't need very acute observation to see that Selby wants nothing better than to loaf about down here and watch the antirrhinums grow, but that sort of thing bores you to tears. You've been married for three years, and for two years and eleven months you've been wondering how much longer you could stick it. But you haven't the pluck to do anything else: you're scared stiff of Selby; and so the farce goes on. Why don't you break away?"

"Break away—from Selby?"

"He doesn't mean a thing to you."

She did not contradict him. She had so often told herself just what Frank was telling her now. But then, as now, she had not been sure how far it was true. Often, too, during the last three years, in a rather timid, halfhearted way, feeling all the time that she was not in earnest about it and that she was considering something which could never be, she had toyed with the idea of cutting herself free and living a life in which Selby played no part. It was only lately that she had begun to look upon a break with her husband as a practical proposition; and even now, when she had come to feel that her life, like the house, could not suffer alteration without improvement, she still hesitated. After all, there were points about Selby. Whatever he had failed to give her, he had given her a sense of security—some solid foot-hold in a slippery sort of world. Anchored to him, she was in no danger of shipwreck, and however much she might long for adventurous voyaging, there were compensations in safe anchorage.

"He doesn't mean a thing to you," repeated O'Ryan. "Oh, I don't know. I admire him, Frank—tremendously—and respect him——"

"But?" grinned O'Ryan. "You may as well go on, Nita, now you've started. When a woman says she admires and respects a man, it usually means he's the last man she'd care to marry. Don't tell me you haven't often wanted to

break out. You've been thinking about it ever since you were married, but you're too much of a Puritan to do it. At one act per year it's already a three-act farce. How much longer is it going on?"

Nita smiled.

"You're always rather transparent, Frank," she said, "when you start giving advice."

"Women's most hoary delusion," he chuckled. "It's good advice, anyway."

"And disinterested?"

"Of course not. I've never pretended it was," said O'Ryan. "But, if you prefer it, we'll put it bluntly. How much longer am I to be kept waiting? You're treating me pretty badly, you know, and we can't go on like this forever. I can't, anyway. It isn't fair to expect it of me."

"And has it occurred to you, Frank, that if I were to do what you want me to, it might be a little unfair to Selby?"

"I'm not thinking of Selby. I'm thinking of you. In a case like this, Selby doesn't count. It's bad luck on him, but it can't be helped. Good Lord, Nita, if you really cared for Selby I'd be the last man to butt in. But you don't. You know damned well that if Selby never kissed you again you'd be grateful and——"

"Frank—please!"

"It's true," persisted O'Ryan. "Do you suppose I haven't noticed? You hate him to touch you, and when he kisses you good-night you put up with it because you fancy it's your duty, and pull a face as if you were swallowing a dose of poison. That's pretty rotten for you, Nita—and for me. I've stood it for a good time, but I can't stand much more of it."

He caught her hand suddenly and held it.

"Nita," he said, "we could be tremendously happy together, couldn't we? You know we could. If you'll only give me the chance——"

She withdrew her hand sharply.

"When you're proposing to rob a man of his wife, Frank," she said, "it isn't wise to hold her hand in full view of the library window."

O'Ryan's glance travelled swiftly to the open windows of the library and back to the girl's face.

"It's not a case of robbery, Nita," he said. "You'd be giving me something you could never give to Selby, and I'd be taking nothing from him. You can't rob a man of something he doesn't possess—and you've never really belonged to Selby. Being married to a man and sharing a house with him and eating

your meals at the same table doesn't mean that you really belong to him. It may just be a case of two strangers being miserable together under the same roof because neither of them has the courage to leave it. That's how it is with you and Selby and I don't see anything to laugh at, Nita."

She was gazing, with a smile of amusement, at the library windows.

"I was just wondering, Frank," she said. "Suppose I did agree to do as you suggest, what would Selby do when he found out? Do you think he'd just be pathetic and broken-hearted and blame himself for not having understood me?" She shook her head. "I can't quite see Selby crumpling up and feeling sorry for himself. And I don't think he'd get dramatic about it; he hates anything approaching a scene, and he's much too self-conscious to be really dramatic. He'd feel all the time what a fool he was making of himself."

"Why worry about that now, Nita? I'm ready to risk——"

"I think I know what he would do," she interrupted. "He wouldn't make the least fuss about it. He'd take it all very calmly—say nothing to either of us and go on just as if nothing had happened, until the right moment arrived; and then he'd quite coolly put a bullet through each of us."

O'Ryan shot a quick glance at her.

"Good God, Nita! You don't really believe——"

"Oh, he'd do it ever so kindly, Frank," she added, "but I'm sure that's what he'd do—commit a nice, considerate murder and then refuse to discuss the matter further."

The man forced a smile.

"I'll risk the bullet if you will," he laughed. "But seriously, my dear—how much longer? Or how soon?"

She shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"Seriously, Frank, I don't know," she told him. "Never, perhaps. If you forced me to answer you now, I should certainly say 'never.' But I know that's only because Selby has just been rather sweet to me, and I'd feel a mean little worm at the moment if I agreed to let him down. Sometimes I feel—oh, I don't know. You're right in a way, of course: I don't belong to Selby. I can't ever feel towards him as I feel towards you—sometimes. You don't know how near I've been once or twice to turning up with a bag at your flat and saying, 'Here I am, Frank.' I've felt that I simply must rush off to you, that I couldn't stand another minute away from you. But the feeling has never lasted long enough for me to pack my bag. It may do so one day; I don't know. It's rather like cheating, isn't it? Cheating Selby, I mean. But I'm cheating him now in a way—and cheating us, too. I'm not sure it wouldn't be more honest

to go to Selby and tell him frankly that I've made a mistake in marrying him and ask him to call the whole thing off in a friendly way."

"Good Lord, Nita, don't be crazy! You can't."

"I think I could, Frank. Selby must feel he's not getting a square deal, and he might be glad to call it off. He's too nice to suggest it himself, but if I suggested it——"

"You're not going to suggest it. For heaven's sake, my dear, be reasonable. If Selby had the least suspicion he'd—well, it would make things deuced awkward for me, anyway."

"Any more awkward than for me?" she countered. "Or for Selby? I'm not suggesting it would be comfortable for any of us, but if I'm prepared to face it out——"

"I'm not prepared to let you," he cut in. "Hang it, Vita, that would put paid to everything. The first thing Selby would do would be to call the whole deal off."

"Deal?"

He nodded.

"The Tamagari property. I've been trying to get Selby to lease the land to me, and he seems inclined to do it. He has written to his lawyer in Canada about it, anyway, and I'm hoping to pull it off. I thought you knew—didn't Selby tell you?"

"Yes, he did mention it."

"He's going to do it, isn't he?"

"I believe so."

He frowned.

"Well, it'll be a pretty big thing for me, Nita, if it does come off—put me right on my feet. But if Selby had the least suspicion that there was anything between you and me, the deal would be as dead as doornails. Until the lease is signed——"

"All right, Frank; I understand. Until the lease is signed I'm to let him go on thinking that you're the perfect little gentleman he believes you to be. Sorry if that hurts, but we may as well face facts. I'm not blaming you any more than I blame myself, but don't let's deceive ourselves. However we might justify it to ourselves, we should be playing a shabby sort of trick on Selby. We're doing so in even discussing it."

"If that's how you feel about it——"



"I do," she said. "But I don't say it isn't worth it. I don't know. All I know is that sometimes I've wanted terribly to do it, and it's quite possible that one day I shall do it. But if it means so much to you, I won't be indiscreet until the lease is signed. I mean, if we're going to rob Selby of his wife, a bit of land in Canada won't make any odds one way or the other, and we may as well do the job thoroughly."

"You've a rotten way of putting things, Nita."

She shrugged.

"If you can't be good, be honest," she smiled. "What are you going to do with a bit of land in Canada, Frank?"

"Farm it, probably—if I can get it. Incidentally, you might put a word in for me if you get the chance. Selby takes notice of what you say, and if you tell him you want him to lease the land to me, that'll probably help matters."

"I've already done what I can," she told him. "There's Selby on the terrace. Go and talk to him, please, Frank; I don't want him here just now." O'Ryan rose, smiling.

"Afraid of a bullet?"

She shook her head.

"Afraid to look him in the eyes," she said.

For some time after O'Ryan and her husband had gone into the library, Nita remained, with puckered forehead, in her deck chair. Frank would soon have to be answered definitely, and what answer was she to give him: Yes, and cheat Selby, or No, and cheat both Frank and herself?

It struck her that thousands of others had been faced with the same question since the world began, and that after all that time some satisfactory answer should have been found to it. It was not reasonable that after so much experience and experiment she should still have to decide the question for herself. Was it really more honest, since she did not love Selby, to leave him, or was that merely a convenient bit of sophistry to justify her own inclinations? Would she eventually be able to avoid leaving him? She did not know. She had been so near to doing it more than once....

It was Lane, the butler, who interrupted her.

"A Mr. Denham to see you, madam," he announced. "To look over the house, I understood."

Nita rose from her chair.

"I'll be with him in a moment, Lane," she said, and again she glanced anxiously towards the library windows.

## CHAPTER II

MIXING a whisky-and-soda in the library, O'Ryan wondered if he might not be imagining things. Clive, when he had greeted him on the terrace, had struck him as in some way different from the calm, self-possessed Clive to whom he was accustomed. He was frowning and seemed preoccupied, and his "Ah, come in, O'Ryan; I want to have a chat with you" was unusually curt.

Probably, O'Ryan decided, he was letting his imagination run away with him. All that talk, of Nita's ... rot, of course. Selby could not possibly have the least suspicion. There was nothing to suspect—so far, and Selby had never raised the least objection to his being with Nita. He had always rather encouraged it, asking him to take her out in the car or play tennis with her while he was busy in his study. All the same, he did seem a bit queer this morning, and it would be devilish awkward if he got any ideas into his head just now....

He glanced across at the older man, seated at his writing desk, and met the gaze of a keen pair of eyes staring at him with disconcerting fixity. O'Ryan forced a smile and raised his glass.

"Cheerio, Selby!"

Selby nodded, but continued to stare. Then:

"You've known Nita a long time, O'Ryan, haven't you?"

The glass rattled noisily onto the table. "Good Lord, yes—pretty well since she was so high, Selby. Why?"

"She's fond of you, isn't she?"

"We've always been good pals, if that's what you mean. Get on well together, you know, and that sort of thing."

"Quite," said Clive absently.

He shifted his gaze from O'Ryan's face and sat for some moments staring into the garden, his fingers drumming on the desk. O'Ryan watched him with uneasy eyes. What was old Selby getting at? You could never tell from his face what he was thinking. Awkward fellow he must be at a poker table. If he had heard every word that had passed between them in the garden his face would reveal nothing—just as it was revealing nothing now. Of course, he hadn't heard, but it didn't follow that he had no suspicion as to what they had discussed. Selby didn't miss much, and if Nita had let slip a hint...

"Any special reason for asking?"

Clive smiled.

"Only a man's natural desire to see his wife happy, O'Ryan. I'm afraid Nita finds things a bit dull sometimes, and I just wanted to tell you that whenever you can come down and run around with her a bit you'll be more than welcome."

O'Ryan glanced at him quickly, but Clive's face was as inscrutable as ever.

"And now about this Tamagari business," added Clive. "Nita has been telling me I'm to lease you the property, and I'd be glad to do anything I can for a friend of hers. Besides, I like you, O'Ryan, and I'd like to do it for you if it can be managed."

"Any hitch?" asked O'Ryan.

"Not exactly a hitch, but just at the moment I can't give you a definite promise. All my Canadian business is in the hands of my lawyer out there. Muller's his name—half the lawyers in Canada seem to be called Muller—and until I hear from him I don't know whether I'm free to lease you the property or not. Muller has my power of attorney and deals with everything as he thinks fit, and for all I know he may already have leased the Tamagari land to someone else."

"Is that likely?"

"I don't imagine so," Clive told him, "but it's as well to be sure before making any promise. I wrote Muller about it as soon as you mentioned it, and I've just had a cable saying he'll be in England towards the end of next week, so I shall know for certain then. If you care to run down the following week, Muller can draw up the lease if everything is all right, and we'll fix it up straight away. Thinking of farming it, are you?"

O'Ryan nodded.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't do well with it," Clive continued. "It'll need capital, of course, but if you've a few thousand to play with——"

There came a tap at the door and Nita, followed by a short, plump, prosperous-looking little man, came in.

"May I come in, Selby?" she asked. "Sorry to interrupt, but this is Mr. Denham. This is my husband, Mr. Denham."

Mr. Denham smiled.

"Charming house, Mr. Clive," he said. "Old-fashioned, of course, but in excellent repair and——"

"This is the library, Mr. Denham," interrupted Nita. "It's all genuine old oak panelling——"

"Charming," said Mr. Denham. "And the panelling is of no consequence. A few coats of paint would soon brighten that up. I'm all for brightness, Mrs."

Clive. There'd be room here to build on a billiard room, I should say. A fine game, billiards. I always say no house is complete without a billiard room, but there'd be room here if I did away with the greenhouse... ."

As Mr. Denham rattled on, though Selby's face betrayed no surprise, his glance sought Nita's eyes questioningly but failed to find them.

"Library, eh?" the little man was saying. "Well, I'm not much of a reader myself. Never found a book that could tell me anything I didn't know already. But the wife has always said we ought to have a library. Gives tone to a house, she says, and what she says goes. I daresay the house furnishers will fit us up with a nice handsome set of books. Well, I like your house, Mr. Clive, and if you don't make the price too stiff I'm prepared——"

"Price?"

It was Clive's voice, like the crack of a whip. Nita turned and faced him.

"Mr. Denham has been sent by Truman's, Selby," she said. "He's thinking of buying the house."

"Ready to talk business, anyway," said Mr. Denham. "Brass tacks and no haggling, eh? That's my way. Name your figure and I'll take it or leave it. I understand I can have possession within a month of completion, but if you can let the workmen in sooner——"

"The house is not for sale," said Selby in a voice that seemed to have a ring of steel in it.

"Eh? What's that? Truman's told me——"

"You were misinformed, Mr. Denham."

"But, my dear sir, your wife distinctly gave me to understand——"

"The house happens to belong to me, Mr. Denham, and not to my wife, and I'm telling you that it is not for sale."

"Selby——" began Nita, but he waved her to silence.

"I'm sorry you should have wasted your time, Mr. Denham," he said, "but there has evidently been some misunderstanding."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Mr. Denham in evident confusion. "I shall tell Truman's exactly what I think of them. Most embarrassing! No ill-feeling, I hope, Mr.—er—Clive. Not my fault, you know. Wouldn't have butted in for worlds. I always say that an Englishman's home is his castle——"

Nita opened the door, and Mr. Denham, still apologizing, followed her from the room.

In a few moments she returned, closed the door behind her, and stood, with flaming cheeks and defiant eyes, her back against it.

"Do you mind, Frank?" she said, with a nod towards the garden. "I want to talk to Selby."

As O'Ryan went out through the French windows, she strode quickly forward and paused in front of Clive's desk.

"Well, Nita?"

"Selby—how dare you!"

"Isn't that rather a question for me to ask?"

"In front of Frank—with Mr. Denham here—to insult and cheapen and humiliate me——"

"I had no intention of doing that."

"The house is not for sale!—when I'd just been showing him round the place! You might as well have hit me in the face, Selby: it would have been just as dignified, just as considerate, just as much the action of a gentleman."

"If you were insulted and cheapened and humiliated, Nita," said her husband calmly, "you must admit that you have only yourself to blame. You knew that I had no intention whatever of selling the house, but because you wished to get rid of it you seem to have gone behind my back and placed it in the estate agents' hands, hoping, I suppose, that when a prospective purchaser turned up I might give way to you and sell. It was an attempt to force my hand, but you should have known better than that. You should have known me better. Why you should be so anxious to sell the house, I can't understand."

"Because I hate it!" exclaimed Nita. "I've always hated it. Oh, for heaven's sake, Selby, don't remind me that it was I who persuaded you to buy it. I know I did. But I didn't imagine that buying Sunningbourne Lodge would mean living here year in and year out with nothing to do but—but to watch the antirrhinums grow. I imagined you'd have a place in town as well, and that for some part of the year we'd be living like civilized beings. But I just have to mug along here, going to bed at ten o'clock because I'm too hopelessly bored to sit up any more, with nothing to do after breakfast but wait for lunch——"

"And because of that, Nita," interrupted Clive, "you considered yourself justified in going behind my back and trying to force me into doing as you wanted."

"That isn't the point now, Selby. The point is that you refuse to do as I want. You've refused a dozen times, either because you didn't care how I felt about it or didn't understand that I was getting to the point where I could stand no more of it. But you do understand now. I shouldn't have gone to Truman's if

I hadn't been feeling desperate. I shouldn't have been crazy enough to imagine I could force you to do anything you didn't want to do. And now that you do know how I feel, what are you going to do about it?"

"Suppose, Nita," he said, "my answer to that is 'nothing'?"

She shrugged.

"In that case, you must take the consequences." Clive's mouth hardened.

"In all my life," he said, "I've never yet allowed myself to be threatened or bullied into doing anything. It has always been a matter of principle with me. However inclined I might be to do a thing or to refrain from doing it, I have always felt that to surrender to a threat is a sign of weakness far more contemptible——"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Selby," she interrupted impatiently, "don't be so old!"

It was cheap. She knew it was cheap. She saw Clive wince as if she had struck him, and despised herself. The words "I'm sorry, Selby" trembled on her lips, but she could not bring herself to utter them.

He smiled rather wistfully.

"Very well, Nita," he said quietly, "we'll put it down to the obstinacy of old age. I'm too old to be able to do without principles."

"You mean that you refuse to sell?"

He nodded. Nita turned abruptly and strode from the room.

For the rest of the afternoon she saw neither Selby nor O'Ryan. She remained in her bedroom, curled up in the corner of the couch, thinking. She felt mean and contemptible; and her outburst, after all, had only made matters worse. Selby would certainly not sell the house now, and she had only anchored herself more firmly than ever to the sort of existence from which she had been trying to escape. She should have known her husband well enough to realize that with him tactics of that kind were bound to fail.

But she knew so little of Selby. When she came to consider it, she was surprised to discover how meagre was her knowledge of him. When first she had met him, she had known what everyone knew of him—that he was wealthy, that he had lived most of his life abroad, that he was highly thought of as a man of business, and that, having made more than enough money, he proposed to settle down in England; and since then she had added practically nothing to her stock of knowledge about him.

Of his past life he had never spoken, and she had never questioned him. Looking back, she realized that she had taken him very much for granted. He had asked her to marry him, and because it had all seemed eminently convenient and satisfactory, she had married him. She had liked him and

admired him, and she had not paused to consider if admiration and liking were a sufficiently solid foundation on which to build her happiness. Often in the early days of her marriage she had asked herself if she loved him, and the very fact of her asking gave her an uneasy feeling that her feelings towards Selby must be something less intense than love. If she were in love with him, then love was not the burning flame she had imagined it to be.

But she had striven hard to fan her feelings into a blaze, and it was not her fault that the blaze was not forthcoming, and that what little warmth there was had gradually faded away so that fanning was only wasted effort.

She knew now that Selby drew nothing from her but friendliness and respect. Entering the room, he had never caused her to feel that acute little stab of pleasure which marked the entrance of Frank O'Ryan; a touch of Selby's hand never brought that quickening of her pulse which she felt at contact with Frank's. She had never ached to run her fingers through Selby's hair. Frank had been right when he had said that he would be taking nothing from Selby. All that she gave her husband now she would always give him—admiration, respect, friendship, a recognition of his worth. Even now, when she felt that he had humiliated her and treated her unfairly, the respect remained. She would have thought less of him if he had surrendered to her threats and allowed her to force his hand against his judgment.

But there was so much that she could give to Frank that she had never given to Selby and never could give to him, so much that Frank could give to her that Selby could never give. And the thought that it was only Selby who stood between her and this fullness of happiness increased her bitterness against him a hundredfold. The more she thought of that scene in the library, the more humiliating it became, the more unreasonable Selby's attitude, the more callously selfish his refusal.

The sound of Selby's footsteps in the corridor as he went towards his room reminded her that it was almost time for dinner, and she embarked listlessly on the process of dressing. But half an hour later she was still sitting, clad in her flimsy wrap, at the dressing table, gazing thoughtfully into the mirror. A tap on the door aroused her, and in response to her "Come in!" she saw in the mirror the door open and Selby, already dressed, step into the room. She did not turn her head.

"Well, Selby?"

He came slowly across the room and paused beside her, watching her as she combed her hair.

"Nita, my dear——"

She combed more rapidly, leaning forward and gazing intently at her reflection.

"Yes?"

"Nita, it seems such a terrible pity. Can't we do something?"

"About what?"

"About everything, my dear," he said. "We're drifting—further and further apart. We've been drifting for a long time. It's difficult to explain, but I think you feel it as much as I do. We've lost something that we used to have."

Nita laid down her comb and began to apply her lipstick.

"Is that my fault?"

"I'm not saying that, Nita. I've an idea I'm to blame. I've a feeling that I'm failing somewhere, but I'm puzzled to know where. It's not easy for a man of my age to see things from the point of view of a girl of twenty-five, and perhaps that's where the trouble lies. I don't know. All I know is that we've drifted apart, and I want to stop the drifting before we lose each other entirely. It's worth an effort, Nita, isn't it?"

"Do you imagine that I haven't made an effort?"

He shook his head.

"It's not that, my dear. I want to tell you that I'm going to make an effort. All this misunderstanding—I feel there's no need for it. If we'd only be frank with each other—try to keep close to each other, to understand and make allowances——"

"Be frank? My dear Selby, when husband and wife start being frank with each other, one of them usually gets murdered. Has Lane rung the gong yet?"

She rose from her chair and slipped off her wrap; and as she did so he stepped forward, laid a hand on each of her shoulders, and turned her towards him.

"Nita darling," he said, "what I really want to tell you is that I've never loved you as much as I love you now."

And then, as his arm slipped round her and drew her eagerly towards him, she suddenly wrenched herself free and stepped quickly back.

"Selby—please—I don't want to be mauled!"

For a moment he stood motionless, staring at her with pained, puzzled eyes; and then he turned and went quickly from the room.



Dinner that night was an ordeal to Nita. Sir Ralph Whitcombe was there—sixty, a retired K.C., with a talent for prosiness which, if merit received its just reward, so his colleagues said, should have swiftly raised him to the Bench; and after listening for an hour while Sir Ralph discoursed on the intricacies of ecclesiastical law, while Selby sat watching her with the eyes of a dog reproaching her for having kicked him, and Frank O'Ryan was blatantly bored, she was thankful when the meal was over and she could slip out onto the terrace and soothe her frayed nerves in the quietness of the garden. And there, a little later, O'Ryan found her.

"Well, Nita? Is the genuine old oak panelling to have a coat of paint? Thank God for the Denhams! He was the one bright spot in a dreary scene."

"For heaven's sake, Frank, forget it."

"Is Selby selling the house?"

She shook her head.

"So Act Four of the farce will now begin, eh, Nita? You'll go on being the dutiful little wife who'd rather be bored than bad."

"You needn't rub it in, Frank. I don't need reminding of what's in front of me. I know the whole dreary business from beginning to end. How I'm going to stand any more of it——"

He grasped her arm and turned her towards him. "Listen, Nita," he said. "You're not going to stand it any longer. Nor am I. You don't love Selby——"

"Frank—please—I don't know—I can't think——"

His arms went round her and crushed her to him. "You do know," he insisted. "You don't love Selby. You've never loved him. You love me, and you're mine, and here and now you're going to tell me that you'll keep me waiting no longer. Good God, Nita, how much longer do you want me to wait? I'm not going to wait." His lips were crushed against hers, and just for a moment she lay in his arms, inert, unresisting. And then she suddenly strove to free herself, but he held her fast.

"Promise me, Nita," he begged. "Darling, promise me now that the next time you want to come to me you will pack your bag and come. Just forget all about cheating Selby, and remember that if you don't come you'll be cheating me, cheating yourself——"

"Frank, I—I can't promise," she told him. "Not yet, I mean. I want to think. I've made one mistake, and I don't mean to make another. But I will think, Frank. I'm going to Scotland tomorrow, and next week—when I get back—I'll tell you. And if it's Yes——"

His arms tightened around her and again his lips found hers.

### CHAPTER III

NITA kept her promise. During her week in Scotland she did little else than think. She had believed that, away from Selby, she would be able to get things into focus and see them clearly, that she could take a calm survey of the situation and come to a deliberate decision on which she could rely.

But she soon discovered that there was no eluding her problem by a railway journey, and that correct focus and deliberate decision were no easier in the Highlands than at Sunningbourne Lodge. Each time that she remembered that scene in the library, her resentment against her husband blazed up a little more fiercely; each time that she tried to envisage the future with him it seemed less possible for her to face it. Yet she could not bring herself to a firm resolution not to face it.

Each time that she turned away from it and took a step in the opposite direction, something seemed to give her a sudden tug which made her falter and glance back. Selby had been amazingly kind to her, and this was poor repayment for all his kindness. Selby meant security, and it was, perhaps, foolish to throw aside security for the sake of a glamour and excitement which might prove impermanent. Her thoughts would linger over that moment when she had lain in Frank's arms and felt the touch of his lips, and then there would flash into her mind the picture of Selby standing by her dressing table, with that hurt, puzzled look in his eyes, searching for something he had lost, terribly afraid of drifting away from her, begging her to grasp his hand and keep the gap from widening.

And she had refused her hand and left him to flounder alone. She had despised herself for that. She wondered whether, if she deliberately pushed him under the water, she would ever cease to despise herself. There was so much that she admired about Selby, so many qualities which only just fell short of making her love him, a strength and bigness which made her feel pitifully small. There were moments when, because of those qualities, she felt that she hated him.

She had written to Selby that she would be returning on the Tuesday and expected to arrive in time for dinner; and as she got into the train she had still come to no decision as to what her answer to O'Ryan was to be. Because she knew that he would expect her answer and that she could not avoid giving it, she had not written to Frank. He would have met her at the station, and she was not ready to meet him. Somehow, before his next visit to Sunningbourne Lodge, she would come to a decision and be able to answer him, but she must have those few extra days in which to think.

And then she suddenly saw quite clearly what she must do. She was tired, drowsy, sick to death of thinking, and of asking herself questions to which

there were no answers. She would think no more about it until she was home again. She settled herself comfortably in her corner and closed her eyes.

It was an hour later that she awoke, realized her surroundings, and again closed her eyes, thankful to shut out everything but the noise of the train. She found herself listening to the rhythmic rattle of the wheels as they crossed the joints in the metals—thud-thud, thud-thud—regular—unvarying—dreadfully monotonous; and so it would go on until the end of the journey. Just like her life with Selby, the life she was going back to—regular, unvarying, monotonous—thud-thud, thud- thud—day after day, year after year. Every thud of the wheels was rushing her nearer to it, and she couldn't face it. Why should she try to face it? She had only to say one word to Frank ...

As the train slowed down at a station she sprang to her feet, let down the window, and leaned out, glancing anxiously along the platform. Yes, there it was—TELEGRAPH OFFICE. But when the train stopped the compartment would be a long way off, and she might not have time—oh, why in heaven's name didn't they put on the brakes!

Before the train had come to a standstill she opened the door, stepped out, turned, and hurried back along the platform; and a few moments later she had written out her telegram to Frank. "Laffan Hotel To-night, Nita," it said. She thrust it across the counter, threw down a shilling, saw the clerk nod, and sped back to her compartment.

And as the train moved off she smiled. After all, it was perfectly simple. She wondered why she had worried so terribly about it when all that was needed was a shilling telegram. Happiness—for a shilling!

Nita had stayed at the Laffan Hotel before. On the rare occasions when Selby had been cajoled into spending in town a night which he might have spent at Sunningbourne Lodge, he had taken her to the Laffan, preferring it, he said, to any other hotel because most of the rooms communicated and it was always possible to secure a suite to themselves. She had chosen it because it was the first name that occurred to her; but as she went in through the revolving door she caught herself wishing that she had chosen some other hotel than the Laffan. Here, where she had never before been without Selby, the treachery, she felt, would seem worse.

In the foyer she paused, wondering whether she would not go elsewhere. She was surprised somehow to find herself there at all. Just for a few moments she had the queerest sensation that she was not there, that it was all unreal, that either this wasn't the Laffan Hotel or that she was not Nita Clive. The whole affair seemed too fantastic to be actual. She had not really

sent a telegram to Frank; she was not really expecting him here; she had not really finished with her life with Selby. That sort of thing did not really happen.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Clive!"

It was the manager, smiling at her as she passed, and she nodded and smiled back at him. It had not occurred to her that anyone at the Laffan might remember her, and the realization that the manager had recognized her brought her swiftly back to reality.

She crossed to a settee, sat down and lighted a cigarette, conscious again of that acute thrill of excitement which she had felt as she had written the telegram to O'Ryan.

The manager had startled her, but there was nothing, she told herself, to be startled at. It was really of no importance that he had recognized her. There was no need to conceal anything. Selby would know everything within a few hours. She would write to him tonight, and he would have her letter in the morning. It would be a difficult letter to write, but she would manage it somehow. There was no need to be unpleasant about it. People arranged this sort of thing nowadays in quite a friendly way, and leaving a husband was no longer the dreadful disgrace it used to be... .

"Nita!"

She glanced up quickly, her eyes suddenly bright; as she saw O'Ryan standing beside her, she rose from the settee.

"Nita darling—bless you for this!"

She laid a hand on his arm and squeezed it, smiling at him.

"You got my wire?"

He nodded.

Nita hesitated, uncertain whether to ask him to get a taxi and take her to some other hotel. She did not want to hurt him, and she felt that to tell him the truth could not fail to hurt him. She did not want him to think that now, during their first few moments together, she had a thought for anyone but him. To tell him now that because she had been to the Laffan with Selby ...

"Rooms twenty-three and four, Nita," he said. "I've seen to the booking, and I've reserved a table for dinner. This place is crowded out."

She nodded.

"I won't be long, Frank," she said; "not more than ten minutes."

Frank smiled.

"I'll wait for you here, Nita. What's ten minutes— after three years?—"

Music; the soft murmur of voices; the sparkle of glass and silver; flowers; and Frank smiling at her across the table. Once again Nita had that sensation that it could not possibly be real. She had never felt like this before—this quivering sensitiveness to everything about her, this acute awareness that every atom of her was intensely alive. Everything around her seemed to have taken on a strange new beauty. She noticed the splash of warm red on her hand cast by the crimson shade of the table lamp, the graceful sweep of the violinist's arm, the tiny bubbles dancing in her wine, the little lines round Frank's eyes where smiles had worn a pathway. There was nothing new about it all; it had always been there. But tonight, because of the newness in herself, she saw it.

She said very little. She did not want to talk; she wanted to sit quietly there and feel it all, opening herself to this new beauty and letting it pour in upon her senses. "Cigarette, Nita?"

"Thanks, Frank."

Again she lapsed into silence.

"Not worrying, darling, are you?"

She glanced at him, surprised.

"Worrying—now?—"

"About Selby, I mean."

A frown ruffled her forehead and disappeared. She shook her head, smiling.

"There's nothing to worry about," he assured her. "Selby's not a suspicious sort, fortunately. He gave me a bit of a start last week when he began asking me if I was fond of you, but I needn't have been alarmed. He wants me to see you as often as possible and cheer things up a bit. It was a bad moment, though. I thought the lease had gone west for good."

"Oh, yes—the lease. I'm afraid I'd forgotten the lease, Frank. Does it matter tremendously?"

"Yes, it does."

"But you can hardly hope for it now, Frank."

"I don't see why not," said O'Ryan. "I'm taking a risk tonight, of course, but it's not a big one. Selby is never likely to discover anything."

"But, Frank, how—how can he help discovering?" Her eyes were vaguely troubled.

"There's no reason why he should ever find out," said O'Ryan. "Of course, we shall have to cut out this sort of thing. Places like the Laffan are too dangerous. Somebody sees you and tells somebody else, and before you

know where you are everybody knows all about it. But we can talk about that later. I've an idea I might take a small flat somewhere."

"Frank!"

She was staring at him with puzzled, incredulous eyes. "Good Lord, Nita! What's wrong?"

She shrugged her shoulders. What was wrong? Only that the newly found beauty had disappeared, that she could feel it no longer, that her senses were suddenly numbed, dead, incapable of responding to anything. She pressed out her cigarette and rose.

"I say, Nita," said O'Ryan, with a puzzled frown, "I'm sorry if I've said anything to upset you."

"Oh, it's all right; it's—nothing. I didn't understand, that's all. We won't start arguing about it here. I think I'll—go up to my room."

She turned and went swiftly from the restaurant, up the stairs, without waiting for the lift, and into her room. And there she flung herself on the bed and buried her face in the pillow.

For some time she lay motionless, hiding her face, feeling that to show it to the empty room needed more courage than she possessed. Then, with an effort, she forced herself to sit up. She told herself wearily that she must start thinking again. Happiness—for a shilling! She might have known that the sort of happiness she could buy for a shilling would be worth no more.

"There's no reason why Selby should ever discover ..."

"Take a small flat somewhere ..." So that was all Frank had to offer her! What a fool she had been not to understand him better! Why hadn't she realized? How had he dared—Frank, who said that he loved her, that she belonged to him, that he had a right to her because of his love—how had he dared offer her, instead of love, this shoddy substitute? Didn't he know her better than that? To leave Selby, openly, honestly, admitting frankly that she did not love him—yes, she could have done that. Because of her love for Frank she had been ready to face that ordeal, imagining that he was ready to face it with her. But to play the hypocrite, to spend her life tricking and deceiving Selby, taking all he gave her and giving nothing in return—she would rather a thousand times let things continue as they were. Compared with Selby's love for her, this which Frank offered was a cheap and contemptible fraud. She felt that she hated Frank O'Ryan for having insulted her with such an offering.

And now what? She glanced at her watch. There were no more trains to Sunningbourne now, and in any case there was nothing to be gained by returning that night. She could explain to Selby in the morning that she had

changed her mind at the last moment and travelled by the night train. There was no need even to mention the Laffan, and it was hardly likely that he would ever hear that she had stayed there. In any case, he would never suspect her of doing what she had so nearly done.

After that scene with her in the library she had some idea of what Selby would be like if any such suspicion did cross his mind. He would be terribly ruthless in his anger. She had probably been right when she had told Frank that he would put a bullet into each of them. Still, he had no reason to suspect, and she would not see Frank again....

She glanced round the room. There was a communicating door between her own room and the next. She could see no key in it, but just above the handle was a small silver bolt. She slipped from the bed, went to the door, and shot the small silver bolt across. She sighed as she turned away.

It was barely eight o'clock the next morning when Nita left her room and hurried down to the hotel office. She had spent a sleepless night and would have left earlier but for her fear of calling attention to herself.

During the night a sudden panic had overtaken her, a dreadful feeling of certainty that, in some unaccountable way, Selby had come to know exactly what had happened, and she had found it hard to resist the temptation to dress at once and hurry from the hotel. Every moment she stayed there seemed to increase her danger of discovery. She caught herself picturing the scene when Selby accused her—saw him gazing at her with those piercing eyes of his, his lips set, his face showing no sign of what he was feeling. She heard his voice—cold, calm, terribly hard—she saw herself, white-lipped, protesting her innocence, begging him to believe her.

Nerves, she decided. She would leave at eight o'clock.

There would be no risk of seeing Frank. He would never dream that she would breakfast before nine.

She had no breakfast. Paying her bill, she hurried out into the taxi which the porter had called for her, sinking back in the corner with a sigh of relief. Once out of the hotel, her panic left her. It was all over now, and there was nothing more to worry about.

And then, just as the taxi started, she leaned forward, tapped on the window, signalled to the driver to stop, and got out.

"Sorry," she smiled. "I've left my bag behind. I shan't be a minute."

She hurried back into the hotel and crossed the foyer. Her bag lay on the office counter, and with a smile at the clerk she picked it up and was turning to go when he called after her.

"Oh, Mrs. Clive!"

She paused.

"There's just been a telephone call for you. You'd hardly gone out when—"

"Telephone?"

He nodded.

"A call from—er—" he consulted a slip of paper—"Sunningbourne Lodge, I believe was the name. Mr. Clive wished to know if you were in the hotel."

"What—what did you say?"

"As it was Mr. Clive inquiring," said the clerk, "I gave the information. I said you had stayed here last night and had left a few minutes ago."



## CHAPTER IV

NITA stood motionless for some moments. She felt weak, limp, as if all the strength had suddenly drained away from her limbs and left her with a terrible lassitude against which it was hopeless to fight. There was a throbbing in her throat which made each breath a painful effort, and before her eyes there seemed to be a pulsating film which made everything blurred and distorted.

"I hope I did right, Mrs. Clive?"

She forced herself to smile.

"Oh, yes—quite right, thanks. There was no—no message?"

"No message at all, Mrs. Clive."

She nodded and stood nervously drumming on the counter with her fingers. Why had Selby telephoned? She had not told him that she would be at the Laffan; she had not known herself that she would be there until she had sent that wire to Frank when she was already halfway to London. Until that telegram had been sent there had been nothing for Selby to suspect; but if he suspected nothing, why had he telephoned? If only she had waited a few minutes longer before leaving the hotel! She would have known then. She could have spoken to Selby on the telephone—heard his voice. She could have told in an instant if there were anything amiss. If only she knew exactly what he had said and exactly how he had said it, she would have had some inkling of what she would have to face when she got back to Sunningbourne. But she could scarcely question the clerk about it.

"If you'd care to ring through to Sunningbourne, Mrs. Clive—"

"Oh, no—I won't trouble, thanks," said Nita. "It can't be anything of importance. If there are any other inquiries for me, say that I'm on my way home, will you r—"

She hurried out to the waiting taxi, told the driver to take her to Waterloo, and got in. There was a train at eight thirty-five: she had looked it up at the Laffan before leaving. She was desperately anxious to catch it; she felt an urgent need to get home as quickly as possible and discover if there was everything to fear or nothing. She would know as soon as she met Selby: his manner, his voice, the look on his face would tell her infallibly what she wanted to know. And if she found that he knew everything, how was she to persuade him that he was putting a wrong construction on a perfectly innocent incident? It was never easy to persuade Selby of anything. Once he got his teeth into an idea, there was no prizing them apart, and if you still tried to take it from him when he had given his growl of warning, you were certain to get bitten. He had snapped at her dangerously when she had tried

to make him give up Sunningbourne Lodge, and though he had come to her afterwards cringing for forgiveness, pitifully anxious to be received back into favour, she knew that if she attempted any further interference he would snap just as savagely again.

She tried to review the situation calmly, to see it as Selby would see it. There was no cause, at any rate, to be nervous about the telegram which she had sent to Frank. Only she and Frank knew of its existence, and without that damning bit of evidence at his disposal Selby could not prove that her meeting Frank at the Laffan that night had not been purely fortuitous. Even Selby must realize that to suspect that there was something amiss for no better reason than that she and Frank had both stayed at the Laffan Hotel would be absurd. There was nothing remarkable in the coincidence of two friends happening to stay at the same hotel; it must happen every day in London. Ridiculous to play the jealous husband for no better reason than that. And then it struck her that, just because it was so obviously ridiculous, Selby would certainly not do it. Selby was nothing if not reasonable, sensible, exasperatingly logical. If he suspected her, he had some more definite grounds for his suspicion than that.

She forced herself to sum up the evidence which he might conceivably have against her. She had told him that she would be home last night, but instead of going home she had stayed at the Laffan and had not telephoned, as she easily might have done, to tell him so. She saw now that if she had telephoned to Selby last night and told him where she was, his suspicions would never have been aroused. But last night she had been sure that the break with Selby was an accomplished fact, and she had intended writing to him in the morning. Actually, of course, her failure to telephone was in her favour, because, if she had been indulging in the sort of escapade which Selby suspected, she would certainly have been clever enough to telephone to Selby and disarm all suspicion by telling him that she was too tired after her journey from Scotland to go on to Sunningbourne and was spending the night at the Laffan. But that, she felt, would be too subtle an argument for Selby to appreciate, too artistic a deception to pass muster with his direct, logical mind.

And if she failed to convince him on that point, the case looked black against her: she had stayed at the Laffan without telling her husband; she had met Frank O'Ryan there; they had had dinner together; her room had been booked by Frank and their table reserved; and, with those facts against her, what would be the use of expecting Selby to believe her when she told him of the little silver bolt? If only she knew how much of all this was within his knowledge! She had sat in the foyer—foolishly, she realized now—waiting for Frank to come, and if anyone had seen her, as the manager had, it must have been obvious that she was keeping an appointment. It was difficult to

see how the information that she was at the Laffan could have travelled so quickly to Sunningbourne, but that was just the unexpected sort of thing that did happen—the one chance in a thousand that came off and brought about disaster.

At Waterloo she bought her ticket, glanced at the clock, found that she still had several minutes in hand, and went towards the platform. And then, after a few steps, she suddenly paused. She could not go yet. In an hour, if she caught this train, she would have to face Selby, meet his eyes, hear him asking her this and that in his quiet, persistent way, and she had no idea what answers she was going to make to his questions. It was absurd to go rushing back to Sunningbourne like this before she had given herself a chance to think things out. If she was to convince Selby of her innocence, she must not arrive home like a panic-stricken schoolgirl with a guilty look and a pack of feeble lies which would only land her in further difficulties. And of course she would have to lie. If she told the truth, made a clean breast of everything from the moment when she had sent the telegram, he would not believe her. It was a pretty thin story, and no husband could be blamed for not accepting it. Innocent as she was, she would have to lie to convince him of her innocence, and she must not meet Selby until she had a ready answer to any question he might put to her, a plausible "because" to counter every searching "why."

She went from the station, walked over Waterloo Bridge, and in the Strand, catching sight of a notice outside a tea shop which said, "Open for breakfasts from 8 a.m.," she remembered that she had had no breakfast, went in and ordered a meal. And there, while cleaners swabbed the floor round her feet, and waitresses clattered cutlery as they laid the tables in readiness for the midday lunchers, she drank her coffee and ate her egg and bacon and smoked a cigarette and began to feel calmer, to think more clearly, and to comfort herself with the thought—though she had no faith in it—that perhaps, after all, Selby suspected nothing and there was some quite simple explanation of his telephone call to the Laffan. She could not help sighing, as she left the teashop, at the thought that breakfast this morning had not been as she had planned it.

It was twelve o'clock when she reached Sunningbourne Lodge, and as she walked up the drive to the house she was again aware of a throbbing in her throat, and her glance anxiously swept the garden for a glimpse of her husband. She was immensely relieved that he was not to be seen. She was suddenly in a panic again in case he should come round the corner of the house and see her, and longed to throw all restraint to the winds and scuttle into the house and up to her room while the way was clear for her. But she overcame that impulse and forced herself to walk slowly along the drive,

pausing every now and then to look at the flower beds, as she usually did, and nip off a dead bloom.

Lane was in the hall. He turned sharply as he heard her footstep, and gave her a look which, just for an instant, made her hesitate, certain that he was well aware of where she had been and what she had been doing. And then she went calmly on towards the staircase. Lane, she reflected, always looked at you as if he suspected you of having poisoned your mother. How could he possibly know anything?

"Good-morning, Lane."

"Good-morning, madam."

"Did I startle you?"

"Just a little, madam," the man admitted. "I didn't hear you coming, and—"

"Guilty conscience?" she laughed.

He gave what passed with him for a smile.

"I daresay we all have that, madam, if the truth were told," he said. "Shall I tell the master you've returned?"

"Where is he?"

"In the library, madam. He said he would like to see you immediately you arrived."

"No need to disturb him, Lane," she said. "I shall be down again in a few minutes."

Halfway up the stairs she paused.

"Lane!"

"Yes, madam?"

"Who telephoned to me at the Laffan Hotel this morning?"

"I did, madam. Mr. Clive instructed me to ring through and inquire if you were there. He thought you might be getting here for breakfast. I got through for him, but they told me you had just left."

"And as soon as they told you I had gone, I suppose you rang off?—"

"Practically, madam."

"Mr. Clive didn't speak on the telephone himself?"

"No, madam."

She nodded.

"I just wondered," she said carelessly, turning to go upstairs. "I thought he might possibly have left a message for me in case I went back to the hotel."

"No message at all, madam," Lane assured her.

She went up a few more stairs and paused again. "Mr. Clive is all right, Lane, is he?"

"Very well, madam, I should say."

"He hasn't been—worried about anything? I mean, he hasn't seemed to be worried?"

The man glanced at her quickly, obviously a little surprised. His look told Nita plainly that he was wondering what she was driving at in asking him that question, and she instantly regretted having asked it. Lane was no fool, and there was no knowing what confidences were exchanged between a butler and his master.

"Not that I have noticed, madam," said Lane. "He was, I think, a little disappointed this morning when I told him that you had left the hotel."

"As long as he's quite well, Lane—" she interrupted, and went up to her room.

She stayed there almost an hour, sitting in front of her mirror, prolonging the ritual of powder puff and lipstick as long as possible, half hoping that Lane had told Selby of her arrival and that she would hear her husband's tap on her door. Instinct told her that, if a battle was to be fought, she would be far more certain of victory if she fought it on ground of her own choosing. Seated at her dressing table she could use her most deadly weapons of casualness and indifference with far greater effect than if she were compelled to face him across his desk in the library, with Selby sitting in his swivel chair, searching her with his eyes, watching every change of expression, reading everything which she was most anxious to hide. She could be disconcertingly casual when she was busy with an eyebrow pencil, and Selby was always a little ill at ease in her bedroom, always rather the shy schoolboy who felt embarrassed and awkward at finding himself in such strictly feminine surroundings, and terribly conscious of the clumsiness of his feet. She knew intuitively that a man has no chance against a woman in front of her mirror, and that logic is no match for lipstick.

But when, at the end of an hour, Selby had not come, she rose and went downstairs. Just for a moment, with her hand on the handle of the library door, she paused and her teeth pressed hard on her lower lip; then, with a shrug, she opened the door and went in.

Her husband was seated at his desk, writing. He glanced up as she entered the room and rose to meet her; but he did not give her his usual welcoming smile. She smiled at him, however, scanning his face anxiously for some clue to his thoughts. She had been sure that when she saw him she would

need no more than a glance at his face to warn or to reassure her, but beyond the fact that he seemed a shade more solemn than usual, his face told her nothing. There was no indication either that he knew or did not know.

"Back again, Selby," she said. "Better late than never! But I went suburban this morning—shop-gazing in London. Sales, you know." She laughed nervously. "I was terribly tempted to buy you a shirt, Selby—flannel, with stripes—but I spared you."

There was just the hint of a smile round his lips. "Thank you, Nita," he said, seating himself at the desk again. "There are some things which a dutiful wife should always spare her husband. Have you had a good time in Scotland?"

She strolled to the open French windows and stood with her' back towards him, gazing out into the garden.

"Much the same as usual," she said, with a shrug: "dreen, drizzle, and drench in turn." Again she gave that nervous little laugh. "Frank O'Ryan always says that as soon as you go to Scotland you understand why they're called mackintoshes."

She gave him that chance deliberately; it seemed a long time before he answered her.

"It has been rather dull here, Nita, while you have been away."

She frowned. Had he purposely ignored the bait, or hadn't he noticed it? If he had anything to say to her concerning Frank O'Ryan he would hardly have missed that opportunity. And if he had not noticed it, then surely that could only mean that he had nothing to say to her about him, that she had been letting her imagination run away with her, scaring herself over that telephone call when all the time there was some quite simple explanation.

"So you stayed at the Laffan last night, Nita?"

She bit her lip, wondering if he was looking at her, and thankful that he could not see her face.

"That ghastly journey, Selby!" she said. "It's hardly worth it—even to get away from Scotland. I was frightfully tired when I got to London, and I couldn't have faced another mile in a train. You weren't worried when I didn't turn up?"

"You could hardly expect me not to be anxious, Nita. You wrote that you would be home last night. If you had rung through on the telephone—"

"I did try to," she interrupted. "They said there was no reply. It was rather late—nearly midnight. Probably everyone in Sunningbourne had been asleep

for several hours. I was dead beat, Selby, and couldn't keep on ringing. I thought you'd understand."

She glanced at him quickly over her shoulder. He was staring at his blotting pad, drawing crazy-looking geometrical figures with his pen.

"You rang up the Laffan this morning, Selby, didn't you? I went back to fetch my bag—I'd left it in the office—and they told me. Anything special?"

"I wanted to know if you were there, Nita, that was all. I wondered whether you would be coming back—for breakfast."

She frowned. It was useless going on like this. All this fencing led her nowhere. Did Selby know or didn't he? She was no more able to answer that question now than she had been in the office of the Laffan this morning. He had given her no indication one way or the other. He seemed rather more solemn than usual, a little inclined to be stiff and formal with her, but that might mean nothing of any importance. She had rattled him badly over that business about the house, and while she had been amusing her friends with her description of Mr. Denham and his plans for brightening the panelling and stocking the library with books, Selby had no doubt been nursing his grievance and getting more and more resentful about it every day. He was probably still very angry with her about the Mr. Denham episode, and that would explain his solemn, formal manner. It did not necessarily mean that he had any suspicions about last night.

Yet she had an uneasy feeling that if the truth about last night—or what any husband would naturally infer to be the truth—were known, or even suspected, by Selby, he would treat her exactly as he was treating her now. She remembered what she had said to Frank O'Ryan when they had discussed how Selby would deal with such a situation. There would be no dramatic scene, she had prophesied, no fuss. He would give no hint of his suspicions, say nothing to either of them, treat them exactly as he had always treated them—until the right moment came. And then he would quite certainly put a bullet through each of them. Was that what he was doing now—waiting his time, keeping his knowledge to himself, deliberately giving them rope, trying to treat her naturally and not quite succeeding? She must know for certain. She could never stand the cat-and-mouse business. If Selby knew, she would rather face it now and get it over.

She turned from the window and strolled across towards his desk.

"How did you know I was at the Laffan last night, Selby?"

"I guessed."

She forced a smile.

"Wasn't that rather clever of you? I had no idea myself until I got to London that I wasn't coming straight on here. It was quite a sudden impulse."

He smiled faintly, his gaze still fixed on his blotting pad.

"When you know people very well, Nita," he said, "it's usually not very difficult to guess what their sudden impulses will be. When you didn't arrive

home last night, I telephoned through to Scotland. They told me you had left, and I guessed at once that you had suddenly decided to spend the night at some hotel in town. The Laffan seemed the most likely. But it was late before I got my call through to Scotland—nearly midnight."

"Just when I was trying to get through to you," said Nita. "I believe they did say the line was engaged. But if you'd rung the Laffan last night, Selby, instead of waiting until this morning—why on earth didn't your—"

"In the circumstances, Nita, I thought you might not welcome the inquiries of an anxious husband at midnight."

She glanced at him quickly, but there was nothing to be read from his face.

"In the circumstances, Selby? I don't think I understand. There were no very special circumstances."

"I thought that after a long journey from Scotland, my dear, you would have gone to bed early and would not wish to be disturbed."

Nita decided that she had better leave it at that. If Selby knew, obviously he did not intend to tell her; if he did not know, there was nothing to worry about; and if he merely suspected, nagging at the subject would only further arouse his suspicions. Until she had some grounds for believing otherwise, the best thing was to assume that he knew nothing.

She stood beside him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's nice to be back, anyway, Selby," she said. "Busy?"

"I'm expecting Muller down today," he said, with a wave of his hand towards the papers that littered his desk. "I want him to stay a few days, if he can manage it. You'll like Muller when you know him better." She wrinkled her forehead.

"Do I know him at all?"

"You met him once—only for a few minutes—when he was over here on one of his trips, two years ago." She shook her head.

"I don't seem to remember him, Selby."

"He remembers you, Nita. He told me so this morning on the telephone—said he'd recognize you in an instant anywhere. He's rather proud of never forgetting a face, and just to prove to me that he hadn't forgotten you, he described you to me exactly. He even remembered that little mole close to your ear. He got to England several days ago and is staying at the Laffan." Nita withdrew her hand sharply from his shoulder. "The—the Laffan?"

He nodded.

"He phoned me from there this morning—just before you got home."

Nita's fears came rushing back at her. Muller—Selby's oldest friend—at the Laffan last night—telephoning to him this morning—remembering the mole on her cheek.... And she had been deluding herself into believing that Selby knew nothing! Of course he knew: she had no doubt about that now. He knew—and was doing just what she had said he would do: playing with her, giving her rope, leading her on to give herself away, waiting until the right



moment came, watching her. And she was standing there and saying nothing and showing him as plainly as possible that it was all true....

She made an effort to speak naturally.

"Did he say—on the telephone—when he'd be arriving? I suppose that's what he phoned for, wasn't it?"

"Among other things," said her husband. "He'll be here soon after lunch. But that wasn't his real object in telephoning. He pretended it was, but I know Muller. There was something he wanted to tell me, and he hadn't the patience to wait until he got down here." She strolled again towards the windows.

"Something—important, Selby?"

"Only that, in Muller's opinion, I'm almost every conceivable kind of a fool."

"And one kind in particular?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Muller has got it into his head," he said, "that I don't take nearly enough care of what belongs to me. But he's wrong."

He picked up his pen again and began reading a document on the desk. Nita went out into the garden. Then: "Oh, Nita!"

She paused and glanced back.

"Young O'Ryan turned up this morning—about eleven o'clock—came down by car. He's gone off to have lunch with some friends, I believe."

"He—he's coming back?"

"Some time this afternoon, he said," Selby told her. "I've invited him to stay for a few days. There's a matter I want to settle with him, and it will be easier if he's here on the spot."

Nita nodded, turned, and walked away, frowning thoughtfully. She had an uncomfortable feeling that Selby was staring at her back.

## CHAPTER V

NITA would have been glad to escape the ordeal of lunch with her husband, but she did not dare to excuse herself. She must not, she told herself, on any account give him reason to suspect that she was avoiding him or was ill at ease with him or was being anything but perfectly natural; but the half hour at the luncheon table put a strain on her nerves which was almost more than she could bear. Selby seemed anxious to make himself as pleasant as possible, and talked to her as he always talked, but she could not rid her mind of the thought that he was all the time talking with a definite purpose. Behind every remark that he made she suspected some ulterior motive; in every seemingly innocent question she feared a trap. She hesitated before answering, knew that she had hesitated, and wondered whether her husband had noticed her hesitation. She was conscious of being awkward and unnatural, of talking in a forced, stilted way, and felt that he could hardly fail to detect that she was not at her ease and to draw his own conclusions. She found it difficult, too, to keep her attention forced on what he was saying. She did not want to talk; she wanted to think. For the first time since she had known him she felt that she would have been glad for old Sir Ralph Whitcombe to be sitting at the table, prosing away in that monotonous manner of his about something which, as far as she could see, was not of the least importance to anybody. He would, at any rate, have kept Selby occupied and given her a chance to think.

She had so much to think about if only she could get a chance. There was Frank. She had tried to keep all thoughts of Frank from her mind since she had shot the small silver bolt last night. She had told herself then that by that action she had definitely bolted him out of her life. But she realized that Frank would have to be thought about some time. He would be here at Sunningbourne this afternoon, and there would have to be some sort of settlement between them. He had hurt her atrociously, and the pain at first had made her terribly bitter against him. Too bitter, perhaps. A man did not see these things from the same point of view as a woman, and he would probably be surprised to learn that he had hurt her or done anything atrocious. He would think her, she supposed, appallingly old-fashioned and squeamish, and perhaps a little unreasonable. Men always expected everyone to be reasonable, which only went to show that they could sometimes be very unreasonable themselves. Selby, for instance, would refuse to believe her if she told him what had actually occurred at the Laffan last night, because he would not think it reasonable. She could not help smiling as the thought struck her that both Selby and O'Ryan, seeing the affair from their own points of view, would agree on the fact that she had not been reasonable.

The meal seemed interminable, and once or twice she had a vague suspicion that Selby was purposely prolonging it; but it was over at last, and she got up eagerly, intending to seek sanctuary in the garden. There was coffee, however, in the library, and since she had always had a cup of coffee and a cigarette in the library after lunch, she did not venture to break the usual routine. And before she had finished her cigarette Muller was announced—broad-shouldered, grey-haired, with a pair of piercing blue eyes that held a genial twinkle, and a voice that boomed. As he came striding into the room, gripped her husband's hand, slapped him on the back, and boomed out that he was darned glad to set eyes on the old scoundrel again, Nita reflected that to try bluffing Mr. Muller would be a foolhardy sort of enterprise, and that if there were trouble of any sort about she would rather have him with her than against her. He turned to her and took her hand.

"I'm happy to meet you again, Mrs. Clive," he said. "I missed you last trip. Thought I should miss you this trip, too."

Nita smiled.

"But you're not going back yet?"

"Early next week—through New York."

"Not even staying for Ascot?"

He shook his head.

"Horses don't mean a darned thing to me, Mrs. Clive," he said; "and I guess I'd feel too conspicuous in a grey topper. Besides, I've a whole lot of work to do in town." He stood eyeing her keenly for a moment and then turned with a smile to Selby. "It's a poor sort of husband, Selby," he said, "who knows less about his wife than his lawyer knows. It's the left cheek, as I was willing to bet you. If you ever feel inclined to get rid of your husband, Mrs. Clive, just bear in mind that, on the other side of the Atlantic, for a husband not to know on which cheek his wife's mole is situated would be deemed sufficient grounds for a divorce. Still, I'd stick to old Selby if I were you. He's a steady old horse, and you might do a lot worse."

Selby smiled.

"You'd have known her, Jerry?"

"I'd have picked her out of a thousand, man," replied Muller. "I never forget a face. I guess I'd have made a first-rate club porter."

"And is that nearly all about me?" laughed Nita. "You must forgive me, Mrs. Clive," said Muller. "I'm forgetting my English manners. But your husband was so darned disbelieving when I told him on the telephone that I'd know you again anywhere that I had to prove him wrong. So you've been to Scotland, Mrs. Clive?"

Nita nodded.

"Back this morning—and glad it's over."

"The silly girl came back by the day train," explained Selby, "which meant she arrived in London dog-tired and had to go to the Laffan for the night. And she didn't even trouble to telephone her husband."

"You're staying at the Laffan, too, aren't you, Mr. Muller?"

"I always do. The Carlton's a little too central for me. So you were there last night, Mrs. Clive?"

"We usually stay there," Selby explained. "They give us the same suite and always make us very comfortable. Funny you two didn't see each other."

"I don't see that it's funny," said Nita. "It's a huge hotel. I've often found I was staying there at the same time as people I know, yet wasn't aware of it till a long time after. You don't see every guest in a hotel when you spend a night there."

"And he's no way of knowing that I didn't see you— eh, Mrs. Clive?" said Muller.

"Did you?" she asked quickly.

"And for all your husband knows," added Muller, "you and I may have had dinner together. But it's all right, Selby, I can reassure you on that point. Mrs. Clive certainly didn't dine with me last night. No doubt she'd choose something younger than me for a dinner partner."

Nita gave him a quick, searching glance, but gathered nothing from his face. Had he seen her or hadn't he? If he hadn't, why all this talk about the Laffan? Was it deliberate? Muller and Selby were old friends, and men were queer like that; they would always forget their chivalry and side with their friend, right or wrong, against a woman. To a man, a woman who disagreed with his friend was inevitably in the wrong....

"Mind you, Selby," added Muller, "from what I know of you, if your wife went off and had dinner with some other man, you'd only have yourself to blame. There never was a man less capable of looking after what belongs to him than you are. If you don't want that sort of thing to happen you shouldn't allow her to go gallivanting off to Scotland without you and staying at the Laffan—"

Nita cut him short.

"Have you visited the Tower of London, Mr. Muller?" she inquired, smiling. "Or the Zoo, or Westminster Abbey, or Madame Tussaud's, or—"

"None of them. Much too busy. Why?"

"Only that any one of them is much more interesting to talk about than the Laffan Hotel," she laughed. She went towards the French windows. "I expect you really want to talk business—acres and leases and sites and—and plots—don't you, Mr. Muller? I'll leave you to it. I'm going down to the lower garden, if you should want me, Selby."

"I wouldn't, my dear, if I were you," said Selby casually, seating himself at his desk.

She glanced at him in surprise.

"Why not?"

"It's very hot, and you're tired already, and if you spend the afternoon down there in the sun you'll only suffer for it."

Nita smiled.

"Selby has taken to heart what you said, Mr. Muller," she laughed, "and is starting to look after what belongs to him."

Clive shrugged his shoulders.

"You must do as you please, my dear," he said, "but if you take my advice you'll keep out of the lower garden. You'd be far wiser to go up to your room and have a rest. Still, if you prefer to risk a splitting headache—"

"I'll take the risk, not the advice," she laughed, and went out through the French windows.

Muller seated himself in a chair beside the desk and deliberately lighted a cigar.

"Now, listen to me, Selby," he began. "I'm your lawyer, and if you don't think your lawyer knows better than you do, you're a darned fool if you don't sack him. About this Tamagari property. You're crazy. If I'd dreamed you'd want to do a fool thing like this—"

Selby Clive smiled and shook his head.

"You've a bee in your bonnet over the Tamagari property, Jerry," he said. "The land has been surveyed—I've got the report here ready to show you—and if there's silver on it, it's only in such small quantities that it isn't worth the expense of doing anything about it."

"Huh!" grunted Muller. "Let's have a look at your precious report."

He took the document from Clive, opened it, and spent some minutes carefully inspecting it.

"Huh!" He tossed the document aside. "To read this report you'd think there was no silver in Canada at all, let alone on your property. Besides, this is ten years old."

"If there was no silver there ten years ago, Jerry, there's no silver there now. The engineer who made the survey—"

"Who was he?" demanded Muller. He picked up the document, turned the page, and made a grimace. "Vinereau! Good God!"

"What's wrong with Vinereau?"

"Nothing, I guess, except that he was generally drunk and died in delirium tremens. You're not accepting him as an authority? If he had found silver he wouldn't have known it."

"A pretty good metallurgist in his day, Jerry."

"Sure," agreed Muller. "But you can take it from me that this"—tapping the report—"wasn't his day." He opened his attache case, took out a document, and tossed it on the desk. "Well, there's the lease, Selby. It'll need to be registered at Canada House. But remember that if you're fool enough to sign it, it's dead against my advice. Still, if you're set on being a philanthropist, I guess it's no use wasting any more breath on you. You were always a sentimental old fool, and it's too late now, I suppose, to think of curing you."

Clive smiled.

"Young O'Ryan is a decent sort of fellow, Jerry," he said, "and I'd like to do him a good turn if it's possible."

"You'll be doing him a good turn all right. You'll be leasing him silver at the price of lumber, and I guess he won't lie awake at nights thinking how unkind you've been to him. You always did have an unholy horror of anyone thinking you'd been hard-hearted enough to look after your own interests, didn't you? Damn it, man, just for once, set your teeth and be businesslike. Lease him the lumber and keep the mineral rights for yourself."

"It's not worth while, Jerry."

"It's worth a million dollars."

The other shook his head.

"Get the idea out of your head that there's silver in Tamagari, Jerry," he said. "There isn't. Vinereau may have been all you say, but I'm not relying only on his report. O'Ryan has had the land surveyed—by a friend of his—and the report says there's no sign of minerals." Muller removed his cigar from his mouth and smiled at it.

"Sure," he said. "And that settles it—eh, Selby? Well, if I were a buyer, I'd naturally hire a friend who would find no sign of minerals. If he did, he'd be no friend of mine. All right; have it your own way. There's no reason why you shouldn't give away a million dollars if it'll make you happy."

"You're a suspicious old devil, Jerry."

"I'm a lawyer," said Muller, "and a lawyer's job is to make provision against something that couldn't possibly happen. It's generally the first thing that does happen. If you've forgotten that, Selby, you've got a darned bad memory. Who is this O'Ryan fellow?"

"He's a gentleman, anyway. Rather amusing. Nita finds him terribly amusing."

"Huh! I don't like wives who are terribly amused. Start a woman laughing and you never know where she'll finish."

Clive frowned. "When you talk like that, Jerry, you make me ill."

"I'm the only misogynist I've ever met."

"Since when? Don't tell me you hate women."

"No, I don't hate 'em," admitted Muller, "but I should hate to like 'em. There was a fortune-teller in a bazaar at Montreal who said I'd be married twice. M'm! I wasn't satisfied till I'd got him a month's hard labour. It ought to have been ten years: I did my best."

"You probably will marry twice," said Clive. "It's the thing that can't possibly happen that generally happens first, Jerry. I never dreamed that I should marry twice, but I did."

He rose from his desk and began pacing the room. Muller's shrewd blue eyes followed him.

"Anyway, Selby, there's no sense now in wishing you hadn't."

Clive paused, frowning.

"Listen, Jerry," he said. "We're old pals and can be perfectly frank with each other. You don't like Nita."

"The one thing that it's not safe for a man to be frank about even with an old pal is to disillusion him about his womenfolk." He waved his cigar deprecatingly. "Anyway, I don't understand women, my boy, and that's all there is to it. I'm the only man I've ever met who doesn't understand 'em and who admits it. Anyway, I guess a man's wife is his own private load of mischief."

"Nita's not terribly in love with me," said Clive, talking more to himself, it seemed, than to his friend. "I've always known that and—made allowances. I'm not the sort of man to inspire that kind of love. Women aren't afraid of me; and you can't love people unless you're a little bit afraid of them."

"You're crazy. Fear's hate."

"It's love, too," said Clive thoughtfully. "There's no love without fear of something or other, Jerry—fear of losing a man, hurting him, displeasing

him, rousing him. If a woman isn't afraid of you she probably despises you, and then—"

He paused, frowning thoughtfully. Muller rose. "Well, that seems a pretty easy way of making yourself solid with a woman," he said with a smile. "All you gotta do is to sit down and pull faces at her."

He went up to Clive and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Now, listen," he said gravely. "You think I'm a damned interfering old busybody, don't you? Well, I guess you're right. You're not the only one who thinks that, but I shan't lie awake at nights fretting over it. I'm your lawyer as well as your friend, and a lawyer's no sort of right to call himself a lawyer if he shirks telling unpleasant truths to his client, any more than a friend has any right to call himself a friend if he's afraid of getting a snub for straight talking. Fortunately, I've a toughish sort of hide, and provided you listen to what I'm telling you, you can let off at me as much as you like afterwards. And I'm telling you, as I told you on the telephone this morning, that if you aren't clean crazy you'll have the whole thing out with your wife once and for all. There's only one way to deal with a woman—"

Clive cut him short with a gesture.

"Thanks, Jerry," he said. "You've done your bit in telling me what you have told me, and I'm grateful. But it's entirely a matter between Nita and myself, and you must leave me to deal with it in my own way." Muller shrugged and turned away.

"If you're going to sign this damn-fool lease," he said, "I'll phone Canada House and have a word with them about the registration."

Clive nodded.

"You'll find the telephone in the hall."

Muller picked up the document from the desk and went towards the door. He paused, with his hand on the knob, and glanced back at Clive as he stood staring thoughtfully into the garden.

"Selby, you may not scare your wife," he said, "but you scare me sometimes."



## CHAPTER VI

FOR some moments after Muller had left him, Selby Clive stood gazing thoughtfully into the garden. Stepping out through the French windows onto the terrace, he halted again, staring intently at the high yew hedge that cut off the lower garden from his view. Then, turning abruptly, he reentered the library, seated himself at his desk, methodically filled his pipe and lighted it, picked up a document, and began to read.

He had not read many lines when he caught the sound of hurried footsteps on the terrace, and, as he glanced up from the document in his hand, Nita came striding in from the garden. She was pale, and her eyes were angry; she spoke in quick, breathless snatches.

"Selby, what—what is happening—in the lower garden?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Happening, my dear?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't be stupid! You know what I mean. There's a huge hole—frightfully deep—right across one of the paths. You must have known it was there."

"Oh, yes, of course I knew of it. The workmen were busy on it this morning. They're putting down a catch-pit for storm water, Nita. You see, down in the lower garden—"

"Then why on earth didn't someone tell me about it?" she interrupted angrily. "It's most terribly dangerous—a regular man-trap. You take it pretty calmly, Selby. I hope you realize that I came as near as I possibly could to breaking my neck in the garden?"

Clive sprang to his feet.

"Good God, Nita—I'm sorry—I didn't realize—what happened?"

"Nothing—fortunately; but I don't know how I managed to avoid it. If it had been dark I couldn't possibly have missed it. I had no idea the thing was there—just round the corner of the hedge, of all the idiotic places—and I was reading a newspaper as I walked along and only just noticed it in time to stop myself falling in."

"Good Lord, Nita! The catch-pit! If I'd realized that you were going anywhere near it—"

"You knew I was going in the lower garden—I told you so. Besides, you know quite well I always go there. To make a man-trap like that in the middle of the path and say nothing about it—it's criminal!"

"Terribly careless of me, Nita," admitted Selby. "But when you said you were going to the lower garden I quite forgot the catch-pit. I'm afraid it has given you a bad turn, my dear."

"It's the second time I've nearly had a bad accident in this wretched place," she interrupted. "First the balcony gives way and nearly throws me down onto the terrace, and now this. And you wonder why I want to get rid of the place!"

"It's very badly built, Nita; I told you that before I bought it, my dear. If I had had my way I wouldn't have come here at all."

"Oh, I know! But don't put me in the wrong all the time. I know it was my choice, and I know you wouldn't have bought it if it hadn't been for me, and I know it's quite unreasonable of me to want to leave it now. But you needn't always be right about everything, Selby, need you? At least, if you are right, you needn't always tell me so."

Clive smiled.

"Am I being tiresome again? Sorry, my dear. I'm afraid I'm rather good at being tiresome. And I'll see about the catch-pit. I told those infernal workmen to be sure to cover the pit with planks, and I'll have the blood of that foreman."

He went to her and laid a hand on her arm.

"And now forget the catch-pit, my dear," he said. "I want you to tell me something—rather important." She glanced up quickly and met his gaze.

"Well, Selby?"

"Are you really glad to be back?"

She gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

"Oh, yes," she said suddenly—"quite glad."

His arm went round her shoulders.

"Glad to be back—with me?"

She released herself and turned away.

"Don't, Selby—please."

He looked at her with a puzzled expression in his mildly reproachful eyes. She noticed it and relented to the extent of giving him a comforting pat.

"Sorry, darling," she said, "but I'm feeling awfully bad-tempered. I'm tired, I suppose. You're right again, I'm afraid, Selby: I should have been much wiser to keep away from the lower garden and have a rest in my room, shouldn't I?" She paused for a moment; then: "Suppose I had fallen in the

man-trap, Selby? I'm afraid the coroner would have been dreadfully nasty about—"

"Try to think no more about it, my dear," he interrupted hastily. "Thank God, you didn't fall in. Listen. Baumann—the jeweller fellow—came yesterday. He brought what he called 'a wonderful piece': rather a pretty thing—emeralds and diamonds."

"A bracelet?"

He nodded.

The hint of a frown ruffled her forehead.

"You didn't buy it, Selby? Of course, I'm sure it's lovely, but—" She hesitated.

"But you've no confidence in my taste?"

"More confidence in my own, anyway, darling," she said. "You know I always like to choose things myself if I'm to wear them."

"Well, I didn't exactly buy it," he told her. "Baumann will change it if you don't care about it. I arranged that, because the last time I bought you a bracelet—well, it struck me as very pretty, but you didn't seem to care for it particularly, and you never wear it."

"Sorry, darling," she laughed, "but it really was rather awful. The sort of thing a barmaid would wear on her evening out."

Clive smiled.

"It was a little—florid, wasn't it?" he admitted. "But this piece—I think you'll like it, Nita. It's very simple: a sort of background of diamonds and a knot of emeralds. Something like this," he added, and traced a design with his finger on the desk.

Nita frowned.

"Selby, don't tell me it's a true-lovers' knot!"

"Er—yes—I believe that's what they do call it, now you mention it. It struck me as being rather novel, though. Diamonds as a background, you know, and—er—well, a sort of knot. I'll show you, shall I?"

He opened one of the drawers of his desk, took out a jewel case, threw back the lid, and held it out for her inspection. "Rather lovely, don't you think, Nita?" he inquired eagerly. "That's the—er—knot."

Nita nodded and gave an inaudible little sigh. The bracelet was, of course, exactly what Selby would inevitably give her. Out of a hundred bracelets she could hardly have failed to pick on this one as his selection. It was so exactly typical of him. It had the same air of solid worth, the same rather

heavy impressiveness, the same suggestion of unassailable respectability. No woman, she felt, who had herself chosen such a bracelet could possibly have landed herself in the predicament in which she had landed herself. She could never for an instant have contemplated an indiscretion like the episode at the Laffan Hotel. Did Selby really believe her to be the type of woman for whom that bracelet was suitable? It would be a comfort to think so, just at the moment, but it certainly was not safe to infer that he did. He had bought it for her because he thought it "rather lovely" and because, since that was his opinion of it, he could not conceive of the possibility of her not thinking it "rather lovely," too. That was Selby—always right, always infallible, always taking it for granted that everyone would see a thing from his point of view. It irritated her to discover, as she stood gazing at the bracelet, that it was just as impossible to find any definite fault in it as it was to find any definite fault in Selby.

"You like it, Nita?"

"Oh, yes—of course—of course I like it. It's—magnificent. But—"

"It's a good one, Nita. Eight hundred pounds."

Nita sighed—audibly this time.

"Darling, must you tell me how much things cost?"

"Well, I mean, it's not a cheap one. I—I thought it would be a little surprise for you."

There was a hint of disappointment in his tone, and she glanced up at him to find him looking at her with such obvious anxiety in his eyes—he made her think of a dog that was desperately anxious to do right and pathetically afraid it had done wrong—that she could not bring herself to tell him the truth. She smiled at him and closed the case.

"I think it's charming, Selby," she said, "and you're a darling to have thought of it."

She went to him and was about to kiss him when the door opened and Muller came in. He paused and smiled.

"Carry on, Mrs. Clive," he said, "and don't mind me. And if you can kiss a bit of sense into his head, so much the better. The man's a blind fool. But I guess you discovered that long ago, eh?"

"Selby blind?"

Muller nodded.

"Can't see—or won't see—what's happening right in front of his nose. Thinks no friend of his would ever play a low-down trick on him. He's crazy."

Clive seated himself at the desk.

"It's not that, Jerry," he said: "it's just that I prefer to trust my friends until I'm convinced that they have let me down. When I am convinced—" he smiled faintly—"I fancy I can deal with friends of that sort—in my own way."

Muller shrugged.

"Well, I guess I've said enough to convince you," he said, "and the rest is up to you. There's the lease of the Tamagari property." He tossed it on to the desk. "I shall want a duplicate to register in Ottawa; you ought to let me have it by Monday at the latest."

He turned to Nita again and waved his cigar towards Clive.

"He's giving away a million dollars, Mrs. Clive," he said. "Can't you stop him?"

Nita glanced quickly at her husband.

"What's that, Selby?"

Clive smiled indulgently.

"The bee in Jerry's bonnet buzzing, that's all, Nita. He thinks that there are minerals—silver—on the property I'm leasing to young O'Ryan."

"I don't think—I know," said Muller. "Now, listen, Selby: I guarantee I could sell that land for a million and a half dollars."

Glove shook his head.

"I'm not selling the land at all, Jerry."

"You're leasing it for ninety years, and that's the nearest you can get to selling without actually doing it. What will you be selling in ninety years' time?"

Nita, glancing at Muller, frowned slightly. For all his genial manner, there was something about him which roused in her a feeling of antagonism. He was so sure of himself, so certain about everything—the sort of man who somehow created the impression that he saw through every action to the motive behind it, and that with those keen blue eyes looking at you it would be no use hoping to get away with a lie. She could imagine him being very ruthless. If you did not agree with him, he would bang his opinion into your head with sledgehammer blows until you did agree with him. She had an uneasy feeling that he had been banging something into her husband's head. Selby, fortunately, had a fairly hard head, and it would take a terrific blow to bang into it a belief that she had been seen at the Laffan Hotel with Frank O'Ryan. That, she had little doubt now, was what Muller had been trying to drive into it, and once he had managed to do so it would need a still harder blow to bang the idea out again. Why on earth couldn't the man

mind his own business? And now he was trying to interfere over the lease, suggesting to Selby that Frank was swindling him....

"I can't see my husband throwing away a million dollars, Mr. Muller," she said. "I thought, Selby, that Frank said there was no silver on the land?"

Clive nodded.

"He did, my dear."

Muller turned and faced her.

"It's as well to remember, Mrs. Clive," he said, "that O'Ryan is a buyer, and I've never yet known a buyer boost what he's wanting to buy. If a hat's marked three guineas, I guess you don't tell 'em they ought to be charging you five."

"And in this case, Mr. Muller," she said coldly, "it might be as well to remember that Mr. O'Ryan is a friend of mine—of ours. I've known him since we were children together."

"Fine," smiled Muller. "There's a fellow in Montreal doing five years for forging my signature on a cheque, and we used to share the same rattle before we could walk. I've always found, Mrs. Clive, that when I do a deal with one of my little playmates I need police protection."

Nita made a gesture of impatience.

"You must have been most unfortunate in your playmates, Mr. Muller," she said. "In any case, even if there are minerals on the land, they're of no interest to Mr. O'Ryan: he's going to farm."

"He'll raise a fine crop of mortgages on that land, Mrs. Clive."

He was gazing at her with those shrewd eyes of his, and with a shrug Nita turned away. It was stupid to let him annoy her; he would only lead her into saying something which she did not wish to say. Whatever suspicions—or knowledge—he might have concerning Frank and herself, she would only fix them in his mind more firmly than ever if she championed Frank too ardently. It surprised her a little that, after last night, she had felt impelled to champion him at all.

"You are going to give Frank the lease, Selby, aren't you?" she inquired.

"Of course I am, my dear," he told her. "It doesn't do to take too much notice of Jerry; he has had so much to do with the law that he has forgotten that there are still honest people in the world. I've given O'Ryan my word that he shall have the lease, and I'm going to stick to it. As a matter of fact, it is already signed."

Muller took several turns up and down the room, puffing at his cigar.

"Well," he said, halting again at the desk, "before you hand over that lease, Selby, I'd like to have a talk with Mr. O'Ryan. There's nothing against talking—eh, Mrs. Clive?"

"When Jerry sets his heart on talking, Nita," said Selby, "it's no use trying to put him off it. I'll see if O'Ryan is back yet."

He rang the bell, and a moment later Lane appeared.

"See if Mr. O'Ryan is back, please, Lane."

"He is back, sir," Lane informed him. "I saw him just now—coming from the lower garden."

Nita shot a quick glance at her husband.

"I—I didn't see him," she said hastily.

"No?" said Selby. "How odd!"

"I don't see anything odd about it," replied Nita irritably. "It's more of a labyrinth than a garden. He might easily have been in the lower garden all the time I was there without my seeing him. Tell him that Mr. Clive would like to see him, please, Lane."

Lane went out, and a few moments later O'Ryan came into the room. He paused by the door, and shot a quick, questioning glance at Nita. Clive swung round in his chair and waved a hand towards the lawyer.

"Come in, O'Ryan," he said. "I want you to meet my friend Jerry Muller—my Canadian lawyer." O'Ryan went forward and took Muller's hand.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Muller."

"So you're the fortunate leaseholder, eh, Mr. O'Ryan? Well, you're a lucky young man."

"Lucky?"

Muller nodded.

"Mr. Muller has an idea, Frank," explained Nita, "that there's silver on the land Selby's leasing to you."

"I wish you were a prophet, Mr. Muller," smiled O'Ryan. "My engineer says there may be a trace of silver, but only a trace. Do you know the country?"

"Like his right hand," Selby told him. "You had a camp up on the lake, didn't you, Jerry?"

"Yeah. The best bass fishing in Canada—and that's saying a lot. Now, about this Tamagari land, Mr. O'Ryan. I understand you're proposing to farm it, and, that being so, I'm suggesting to Clive that the mineral rights—"

Nita sighed.

"Selby, couldn't you possibly stop talking business for a little while?" she laughed. "I'm really not a bit interested in leases and that sort of thing, and I'm sure Mr. Muller must be as tired of them as I am." She turned to O'Ryan. "You haven't even said 'How are you?' yet, Frank."

O'Ryan started.

"I say, I'm terribly sorry," he apologized. "Did you enjoy your Scottish trip?"

Nita made a grimace.

"Wonderfully!" she said. "All the men talked salmon, and all the women talked men—two subjects in which I'm not much more interested than I am in leases."

Clive rose and handed Muller a document.

"That's the end of business, Nita," he smiled. "You've had more than your dose since you came home this morning, and if I tire you too badly as soon as you're back I shall have you running away and leaving me again." He turned to Muller. "There's nothing more to discuss, Jerry," he said. "I stand by what I've already said. Those are the particulars of the Toronto lots you asked for—as far as I remember them. I'd post them, but the nearest pillar box is a mile away. We're almost as uncivilized here as you are in Canada, when it comes to posting a letter. But it's really Nita's fault: she would make me buy this place."

"And Selby has worried the post office so much," said Nita, "that they've promised to put up a pillar box opposite the house."

"Promised!" laughed Selby. "You should know how much a promise is worth nowadays, my dear. At present they've got no further than sending relays of men to stare at the site and put chalk marks on the ground. They were doing it again this morning, but there's still no pillar box." He went to the French windows. "Come along, Jerry, and see my catch-pit. I'm going to make the lower garden a little Eden."

"Huh!" grunted the lawyer. "I guess he won't have to import a snake—eh, Mrs. Clive?"

He went out with Clive onto the terrace, and O'Ryan moved towards the windows, obviously anxious to follow them. Nita, watching him with a suggestion of amusement in her eyes, seated herself in an armchair and lighted a cigarette.

"Frank!"

He paused at the window, glanced back, and saw her beckoning with her finger.

"You had better stay and talk to me, please, Frank," she said.



## CHAPTER VII

O'RYAN turned, with a slight shrug, and came slowly back into the room. He was frowning, Nita noted, and he struck a match for his cigarette as if he had a grudge against it. He seated himself, with one leg swinging, on the corner of the desk, and sat for some moments, thoughtfully staring at his shoe, before he glanced up at her.

"I say, Nita, there's nothing—nothing wrong, is there?"

"Wrong?"

"About—us."

Nita smiled.

"Nothing—fortunately, Frank. But I admit it was a close shave. Aren't you feeling terribly relieved today that you can still look Selby in the eyes?"

"You don't think—Selby—it struck me when I got here this morning that he seemed a bit queer. But I'm probably imagining things. What could he possibly know?"

"Suppose he knew—everything?"

He sprang to his feet.

"Good God, Nita, you don't really mean—"

"I'm not saying he does know anything," she interrupted: "I'm only saying that, if he had somehow had his suspicions aroused, you went the very best way about confirming them. You're supposed not to have seen me for over a week, yet you come in here and don't even say 'Good-morning.'"

"Yes, I know. Sorry, Nita. But just for the moment I was feeling pretty badly rattled. Lane came out and said I was wanted in here, and you had just passed me in the garden without a word, and I wondered—what on earth was the matter, Nita? You looked as white as death, and you went straight past without even looking at me."

"I'd nearly had a bad accident. Selby's catch-pit—a regular man-trap—right across the path. I only just missed falling in and breaking my neck."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed O'Ryan fervently.

"And thank you for that, Frank," she laughed.

"Oh, I didn't mean that, darling. But you passed me without a word, and naturally I jumped to the conclusion that Selby—somehow—I mean, you looked so scared—"

"It was so like Selby—he's never happy unless he's watching people digging holes. He's a born potterer. Still, I didn't fall in, so there's really nothing to make a fuss about. I seem to have a knack of avoiding mantraps, don't I?"

He picked up the jewel case from the desk and sat thoughtfully toying with it.

"I'll tell you something, Nita, shall I?" he said. "I think you're a mean little swine."

"I'm not contradicting you, Frank. I've been feeling rather a mean little swine ever since I got back—and met Selby."

He opened the jewel case, glanced at the bracelet, and smiled.

"Yours?"

She nodded.

"Good Lord! Did he give it to you? But I needn't ask: only Selby Clive could have given you a thing like this. What's this squiffy thing—like a couple of green worms?—"

"You could hardly be expected to know what that is, Frank," she said. "It's a true lovers' knot."

She rose from her chair, crossed to him, took the jewel case from his hand, and closed it.

"If anything has made me feel mean, this has," she said, tapping the case with a finger. "Selby bought it for me—it cost him eight hundred pounds, which is a lot of money even to Selby—just because he wanted to give me a surprise when I got back from Scotland."

"Instead of which he gave you a shock, eh?" grinned O'Ryan. "Did you scream when you saw it?"

She laid the case on the desk.

"I didn't feel like screaming," she said. "I felt much more like bursting into tears. When Selby showed it to me, I believe I hated you more than before. I know I hated myself—just for a moment. Selby tries so desperately hard But never mind. Why do you think I'm a mean little swine?"

"If it was meant to be a joke, Nita," he said, "it didn't strike me as a particularly funny one. What time did you leave the hotel?"

"Soon after eight—without breakfast. I was in a hurry. I'd have left last night if I could have got away without attracting attention. Why?"

"I don't know. The least I expected, when they brought in my breakfast, was a rather penitent little note."

"And a bunch of forget-me-nots?"

He took her hand, but she withdrew it sharply. "Don't you think you're rather a pig, Nita?"

"No, I don't."

O'Ryan smiled.

"Suppose I had knocked on the door? I nearly did. What would you have done?"

Nita turned from him with a shrug.

"I should probably have rung for the night porter and had you thrown out of the hotel."

"I say, that's a bit steep, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. That was how I was feeling about you, anyway."

She was leaning a shoulder against the frame of the French windows, with her back towards him, gazing out into the garden, and for some moments he sat watching her with a rather sulky frown. Then he got up and began pacing the room.

"You know, Nita," he began, "you're the queerest girl—suddenly changing your mind and dashing up to your room and Oh, I'm damned if I understand."

She gave a hard little laugh.

"You make me feel very old when you talk like that, Frank. You don't understand! I suppose I shouldn't have expected you to understand. It's the only thing—your not understanding—that makes it possible to think of forgiving you."

"But, damn it, it was your idea!" he protested. "You sent me the telegram. You told me you'd be staying at the Laffan, and of course I thought you meant—"

"Lord, the woman tempted me—"

"That's just the point: I didn't," grumbled O'Ryan. "If I had eaten, I shouldn't be grouching." He went to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "Nita darling," he said, "it's you who don't understand. You don't seem to realize how I'd looked forward to yesterday. I've longed for it, dreamed of it, waited for it, hoping that one day, if I were patient, you'd give me my reward. And when I got your telegram—you don't know what that meant to me. I never for an instant doubted that you meant it. I was there—hanging about in the Laffan—hours before you arrived. I don't know how I passed the time in that beastly room, and then—you bolted your door! When I discovered that, I just

couldn't believe it. I nearly went mad. I simply couldn't understand—after that telegram—"

She freed herself from his arm.

"I've warned you before, Frank," she said, "that when you're trying to rob a man of his wife it isn't wise to be affectionate in public. Selby's in the garden."

"What was it—a sudden spasm of conscience?" he demanded. "All I can say is, damn your conscience!"

"My conscience?" She shook her head. "It wasn't that—entirely. Listen, Frank. You say that you don't understand. That's probably quite true—though I didn't realize it last night—and I'm glad in a way. But I want to make you understand. You think I'm a mean little cat because I ran away from you and shot the bolt and left the Laffan before you were up this morning. But I'm not. I may be all sorts of other things—old-fashioned, overfastidious, stupidly sentimental—but I'm not mean—as far as you are concerned."

"If you only meant to play the fool, Nita, why send that telegram?"

"When I sent the telegram," she told him, "I didn't mean to play the fool. I meant you to understand it just as you did understand it. I meant to see it through. I had made up my mind that I wanted you more than I wanted Selby, that you and I meant more to each other than Selby and I ever could, and I persuaded myself that I should be perfectly justified in doing what I had decided to do. I believe I was really terribly in love with you on the journey back to London." She laughed nervously. "You'd never believe what castles I built—about you and me and the future—when once I'd sent off that wire. Just like a sentimental schoolgirl. I never thought again about Selby. I just sat there dreaming of glamorous days with you, when we should always be together—"

She broke off with a sudden gesture of impatience. "But what's the use of talking about that?" she went on. "The point is, Frank, that to me it was all something wonderful—beautiful—sacred. You were going to take me into a kind of fairyland, and then—then—when we were having dinner—you said something which told me quite clearly that, instead of taking me to fairyland, you were only asking me to share in a nasty little backstairs intrigue."

"Nita!"

"It's true!" she exclaimed. "A sordid, squalid, hole-in-the-corner liaison—a little flat somewhere—sneaking into it like a couple of criminals, scared of being seen together, kissing each other as if we were doing something

shameful, despising each other all the time—just being nasty and cheap and furtive—"

"For God's sake—"

"Let me finish," she insisted. "That's all you had to offer me, Frank, and when I realized what you wanted, I just couldn't do it, and I hated you for wanting it, for expecting me to take part in it. I suppose I should have found out exactly what you did mean first, but I took it for granted that, if I left Selby and went to you, I'd be able to do so openly—decently—cleanly. I was ready to do that. But the other way—your way—sorry, but the guilt was off the gingerbread, and I shot the bolt. Thank God for the bolt! It held the door shut between a rather lovely dream and a terribly sordid reality."

She paused, and stood watching his bewildered face. "Don't you understand now?"

"What you mean, Nita," he said sulkily, "is that unless I'm prepared to marry you—"

"Prepared?" She sighed. "Don't be too enthusiastic, Frank, will you?"

"Well, you know what I mean," said O'Ryan, with a touch of irritation. "You knew—you must have known—that I couldn't marry you yet. My bank manager will confirm that, if you doubt my word. But of course I meant to marry you as soon as possible. As soon as I get going with the Tamagari land, money won't matter; but in the meantime ... Good Lord, Nita! That sort of thing—nowadays—it never struck me you'd be so damnably squeamish. I certainly never thought you'd work that sort of stunt on me. I wonder you've the nerve to look me in the face."

The girl smiled.

"You're really rather delicious, Frank," she said. "You can look Selby in the face, can't you?"

He turned from her impatiently.

"That's a frightfully commonplace thing to say," he replied testily. "After all, you're not in love with Selby."

"And I am in love with you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You pretend to be, Nita, but I'm damned if I know. One moment you're arranging to meet me at the Laffan, and the next you're wanting to burst into tears because Selby has bought you a hideous bracelet. Hang it, we'd be doing Selby no harm. Hurt his pride a bit, perhaps, but that's all. I mean to say, you and he—you've always led me to suppose—it isn't as though I'd be taking anything from him—"

She cut him short.

"You're floundering, Frank," she said. Then she went to him and laid a hand on his arm. "Poor old Frank!" she said. "I really am sorry."

"If you had only pulled that beastly bolt back again, Nita—"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no—I'm not sorry about that," she said. "Not at the moment, anyway. Perhaps one of these days, when I'm feeling bored beyond endurance, it might seem worth it not to be quite so early Victorian.... I don't know. No; I'm sorry I was so stupid that I went to the Laffan at all. When I decided to go—still, it's ... nothing. One might easily find oneself staying in the same hotel as a man one knows—on the same floor—in the next suite. But I didn't feel like that about it when I got there. Not when I got up to my room, I mean. I felt so terribly guilty that I believe I blushed when I said good-night to the chambermaid. And when you feel guilty in front of servants you're on the high-road to losing your self-respect."

"Oh, rot!"

"Perhaps," she admitted. "But I haven't lost that guilty feeling yet."

"Windy?" He smiled confidently. "You needn't be; Selby's not a suspicious man."

"Isn't he? I wouldn't be too sure about that."

He shot her a quick, anxious glance.

"I say, he isn't, is he? I mean, I don't see how—you don't think he has any idea—"

"He may have," said Nita. "We may as well face it. Selby may know. I've a feeling that he does know—something. Did he ask you—when you arrived this morning, I mean—where you stayed in town last night?—"

"As a matter of fact, now you come to mention it, Nita," said O'Ryan thoughtfully, "he did ask me."

"What did you say? You didn't tell him—"

"That I stayed at the Laffan in the room next to yours?" He grinned. "I didn't tell him anything; I sort of passed it off. After all, Nita, there's nothing to get scared about. We're both as innocent as the unborn babe—unfortunately. Selby has nothing to be suspicious of."

"Hasn't he? Think it out, Frank. We two knew that there was nothing in it, but put yourself in Selby's place and see if it looks quite as harmless. Imagine that your wife, instead of coming home, as she had said she would,

spent the night in London at the Laffan Hotel without troubling to let you know."

"Good Lord, Nita, if you hadn't the sense to tell him you wouldn't be back until the next day—"

"I hadn't," she said. "But I didn't expect things to turn out quite as they did. I didn't expect to be coming back here at all. And in any case Selby phoned to Scotland and knew I'd left, so the lie would have been wasted. And then suppose, Frank, your wife stayed at the Laffan in a room which was booked for her by some young man of whom you knew her to be rather fond, and the room was next to his, with a communicating door—"

"Quite," interrupted O'Ryan. "I'd probably instruct my solicitor—if I knew. But Selby can't possibly know—"

"And suppose," she went on, "your wife were seen in the foyer by the manager, who knows her quite well by sight, obviously waiting to meet someone—"

"Good God! Were you?"

She nodded.

"And you didn't tell me? We could have cleared out of the Laffan."

"I know. But being seen didn't seem to matter—then. Selby was bound to know, anyway, I thought."

"And you think the manager told him—telephoned here, perhaps, and spilt the beans—"

"Oh, I don't know," she said wearily. "I've wondered until I'm sick of wondering. All I know is that this morning, just as I was leaving, Selby telephoned to the Laffan and asked for me, and the reception clerk told him I'd spent the night there and had just left. He says he only guessed I'd have gone there, but I'm not so sure. There's that man Muller."

"Nasty bit of work, Nita."

"He's shrewd—and he's Selby's oldest friend, if that's what you mean," said Nita. "He stayed at the Laffan last night."

"Oh! He didn't see us—me—did he?"

"How do I know what he saw or didn't see?" she exclaimed. "He didn't tell me, when we met, that he'd seen me with you at the Laffan last night, but he somehow managed to make me feel—oh, I don't know. I don't think I'm just imagining things, but I've a feeling that Selby knows and that Muller told him. He kept on sort of hinting, and looking at me as if—oh, it's hopeless trying to explain. Muller knows: I'm certain of that. And if Muller knows, then it's ten to one he has told Selby."

"But if Selby hasn't said anything—"

"Would he?" She shook her head. "You don't know him like I do. He'd wait—and watch; and suddenly, when you weren't expecting it, he'd—well, I told you what he'd probably do, didn't I? It doesn't follow, because Selby has said nothing, that he knows nothing. Besides, from one or two hints he has let fall—oh, I don't know, Frank. I'm scared, that's all."

O'Ryan was frowning, gnawing the tip of his finger. "Deuced awkward, Nita, if he does know!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she exclaimed irritably, "don't start dishing out platitudes. Do you suppose I need telling it would be deuced awkward?"

"I mean—that lease and everything—"

"Lease?" She smiled. "Oh, yes, of course. How stupid! I thought you were thinking about me. It might be just a little awkward for me too, mightn't it? But, of course, the lease—naturally—much more deuced awkward for you. If Selby should be unreasonable enough to refuse to grant the lease to a man who has seduced his wife—"

"Cut out that sort of talk," he interrupted. "It doesn't help either of us. If Selby knows, the lease has gone west, and you don't seem to realize—"

"Oh, yes, I do," she said, turning abruptly away from him. "I realize just how important Nita and the lease are to you. Nita and the lease, or the lease and Nita?" She shrugged a shoulder. "I wonder who first thought of putting bolts on communicating doors. It's a grand idea, isn't it?"

"Ridiculous nonsense, if you ask me."

She shook her head.

"It's a fine idea," she repeated. "It gives people a chance to change their minds—in time."



## CHAPTER VIII

NITA strolled out onto the terrace and stood with her arms resting on the parapet, gazing at the riot of rambler roses. They were wonderful this year—masses of red and pink blossom that formed a solid hedge across the end of the lawn. She remembered that three years ago, when she had come with Selby to view the house, she had casually remarked that a few ramblers would improve the garden, and this was the result. So like Selby; he was always thorough in whatever he undertook. No half measures. No sense of proportion, really, she supposed—rather inclined to overdo things in his desire for thoroughness. That bracelet, for instance. Eight hundred pounds, when he could have given her just as much pleasure by buying her something which had cost him ten. Solid masses of roses and solid masses of diamonds. She would never be able to wear the thing. And a true-lovers' knot! Just like Selby! Terribly sentimental, really, and so many of the things he did for her had a true-lovers' knot attached to them. She wished they hadn't; it would be so much easier to treat him badly if he cared for her less or even considered her less. He gave her everything she asked for—almost; usually far more than she asked for—like the ramblers—and it made her feel terribly cheap when she thought how little she gave him in return.

He still seemed to think that he hadn't given her enough rambler roses. He was having a new pergola built—a solid-looking affair of massive timber baulks that was at present a dreadful eyesore—and he probably intended to have it covered with ramblers. Once an idea got into Selby's head it was impossible to get it out again. That bracelet was the third he had given her recently—each one rather less possible than the one before. Still, she hadn't liked it when Frank had laughed at the bracelet. His sneers had somehow stung her, angered her, made her want to defend Selby and hurt Frank. Funny that she should feel like that.

The thought of Frank brought a pucker between her eyebrows. He hadn't shown up particularly well, she reflected. He was scared stiff in case Selby knew. He had suddenly gone very white when she had told him that Selby had telephoned to the Laffan. "Deuced awkward!" It would certainly be all that for Frank if Selby did know. Selby versus Frank—it would be a pitifully unequal sort of contest. She had, of course, meant to scare Frank. She had wanted to shake him out of his complacency, hurt him, make him suffer in some way for his treatment of her yesterday. Partly that, and partly that she was nervous herself and had felt an urgent need to unburden herself to someone. She had hoped, she supposed, that Frank would tell her that there was nothing to worry about, reassure her, give her some explanation of that telephone call which would convince her that it was only her uneasy conscience that was making her imagine all sorts of unlikely possibilities. But the result had been that she had only frightened herself a little more.

She had frightened Frank, and his fear had infected her. She had not fully realized, until she had marshalled the evidence for Frank's benefit, how convincing was the case against her, and the net result of her vindictive longing to make him suffer had simply been to increase her own uneasiness by adding his to it.

It served her right, perhaps, for being vindictive. After all, she had treated Frank pretty badly—from his point of view—and he was hardly to be blamed because he had not understood hers. She had never given him reason to suspect her of being old-fashioned over such matters; she had rather been at pains to make him believe her very modern and broad-minded and difficult to shock. The streak of Puritanism which she knew to be in her she had always carefully concealed, from the same instinct that would have made her conceal a grey hair or a greasy complexion—because grey hairs and greasy complexions were not fashionable. She hadn't, perhaps, been quite fair to Frank in judging him by her own standards, particularly since they were standards to which she would not, except to herself, admit allegiance. He, after all, stirred something in her which no other man had ever stirred. She would not easily forget last night, when she had sat with him in the restaurant at the Laffan, in a sort of haze of happiness, every sense so acutely alive, every nerve keyed up to respond to the faintest breath of sensation....

She caught the sound of footsteps on the gravel path and glanced round to see Muller and her husband coming towards the house.

"Oh, here you are, darling!" said Selby, as he came up the steps. "Muller wants to get back to town and I'm going to look up a train for him."

She nodded. So Muller was going. Thank God for that, anyway. Muller, with his shrewd blue eyes and his air of knowing everything—perhaps she'd feel better when he was out of the way. She could probably manage Selby alone, whatever he might suspect. But Selby with Muller beside him, prompting him, goading him, banging facts into his head ...

She realized that Muller was loitering on the terrace.

"So it's only a flying visit, Mr. Muller?" she said with a smile.

"Sure," replied Muller. "A matter of business, but it won't mean more than a few hours in London. I'll be back as soon as I can get here. Tonight, perhaps; tomorrow anyway—if you feel you can put up with me. Selby says I shan't be in the way."

"Of course not."

He smiled.

"Selby likes to have me around," he said. "God knows why. He says I'm always bullying him over something, and I guess he's right. But when you see an old friend making a damn fool of himself—"

"And is he?"

"Sure."

"Over—over that lease?"

"Well, that's just one particular instance of his foolishness, Mrs. Clive, but there are others. But you can't teach Selby—never could. Gets an idea into his cranium and nothing short of dynamite can shift it. He's an obstinate old devil. Tell him he's doing a thing in the wrong way, and he's dead sure to go on doing it that way. Tell him to open his eyes and face facts, and he'll clamp 'em tight shut and shirk 'em. That's Selby—God bless him!"

"And what in particular is he doing in the wrong way now, Mr. Muller?"

"Huh!" grunted the lawyer. "Pretty near everything." He waved a hand towards the lower garden. "His precious catch-pit, for instance. I've just been telling him he's tackling things in the wrong way. His methods are—well, I reckon 'primitive' is the word; and if he carries on that way he'll only be landing himself in serious trouble."

Nita was frowning.

"You mean—over draining the garden?"

"Sure. What else could I mean? Making an Eden, is he? If you want my opinion, he's heading straight for a deluge."

He turned abruptly and strode into the library, and Nita, after a moment's hesitation, followed. Clive was seated at his desk, poring over an A B C; O'Ryan, smoking a cigarette, was lolling against the mantelpiece. She noticed that he was smiling in his usual confident way, but there was a look in his eyes, as he glanced quickly at her, which cancelled out his confident smile. And he was smoking very quickly.

"I've just been telling O'Ryan that I've a bone to pick with him," said her husband, as she stepped in through the French windows.

Nita smiled.

"Never argue with Selby over a bone, Frank," she laughed. "He snaps. What's the bone, Selby?"

Clive turned a page of the time-table.

"All the time you've been in Scotland, my dear," he said, "the young bounder has never been near me. Instead of taking pity on my solitude, he has been gallivanting off somewhere or other—Paris, wasn't it, O'Ryan?"

"Yes—absolutely—Paris," replied O'Ryan. "Sorry to have deserted you, sir, but I only got back last night."

"And last night, when you got back from Paris, instead of coming along here to keep me company—"

"Couldn't be done, sir. I had an appointment in town."

"A pleasant one, I hope."

O'Ryan smiled.

"It promised to be—yes."

Clive glanced up.

"And it didn't work out quite as you expected? Well, if there was a woman in the case—as I suppose there was—I can quite understand that. Things rarely do work out as you expect them to when there's a woman concerned."

"Depends what you expect, doesn't it?" remarked Nita. "What do you know about women, Selby, anyway?"

He shrugged and returned to the time-table.

"I've been married twice," he said.

"Huh!" grunted Muller. "If you weren't here, Mrs. Clive, do you know what I'd say to him? I'd tell him that having married twice doesn't prove a darned thing except that he didn't learn much about women on his first trip."

Nita smiled.

"Not enough to avoid a second trip, eh, Mr. Muller? That's rather sweet of you, isn't it? Or perhaps you were polite enough only to mean that he didn't learn enough about women to justify him in attempting a second trip?"

"Never mind me," laughed her husband. "I'm slanging O'Ryan. A man who's supposed to be my friend and prefers to stay at some hotel in town—where do you stay in town, O'Ryan?"

The young man removed his cigarette from his lips and stared intently at the glowing tip.

"Oh, various places ... sometimes at my club."

"You should try the Laffan," advised Selby, running a finger down the page. "Rather a jolly place, isn't it, Nita? They can make you as snug as if you were in a flat of your own—all the rooms communicate. That cuts both ways, of course. It can be jolly awkward if you forget to bolt the doors."

Nita did her utmost not to look at O'Ryan, but she could not help it. She saw the sudden alarm in his eyes and risked a frown at him. Thank goodness

Selby had not looked at him as he had made that remark: he would have needed no further confirmation. If only Frank would get a grip of himself!

"Of course, if you're intelligent," added her husband, "you don't forget. Bolts are a good idea to my mind—better than keys, because you can't lose them, and they're just as effective."

"Provided they're on the right side of the door, Selby," laughed his wife. "Selby's crazy about bolts," she explained. "They have small silver bolts at the Laffan, and he wasn't satisfied, after he'd seen them, until he'd had small silver bolts fitted to all the doors here." She waved a hand towards the door of the library. "It looks rather silly in a library, doesn't it? But he would have it."

She was scaring O'Ryan badly; she could see that. All this skating on thin ice was sending cold shivers down his spine, and somehow she wanted to keep him shivering. She was wondering if she could find still thinner ice....

"Reminded you of home, eh, Nita?" said Clive. "Last night, I mean—when you deserted me—at the Laffan—the little silver bolt."

Suddenly she wanted no thinner ice. She wanted desperately to get off the ice altogether.

"What on earth are you poring over, Selby?" she exclaimed irritably. "Mr. Muller is waiting for the car."

"Jerry's going by train," interrupted Clive. "He hates cars. Two years ago he drove a car into a tree in Canada, and since then he hasn't a good word to say for motors. Here we are—four thirty-five, five- seventeen—that's a good train, Jerry."

"Not so bad—for this country," grunted the lawyer. "I'll walk with you to the station," said Clive. "There's heaps of time."

Muller nodded.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Clive," he said, "for the moment." He turned to O'Ryan. "Good-bye, Mr. O'Ryan. You're a lucky young man. Still, if you get what I think you'll get, the laugh's on Selby."

At the door Clive paused.

"I forgot to tell you, Nita," he said. "Whitcombe phoned through to say that he's coming along to tea." Nita sighed.

"Don't ask him to stay to dinner, darling, that's all. I shall fall asleep to the droning."

Her husband smiled.

"Oh, he's a nice old boy—frightfully interesting."

"If you meet him, Selby, on your way to the station, be an angel and take him with you. He drives me distracted, and if I have to entertain him to tea on my own—"

"I'll be back in time if I can, my dear," he assured her. "If I'm not—" he nodded towards O'Ryan—"O'Ryan will look after you. I'm sure he's an excellent chaperon."

As the door closed behind her husband, Nita turned to O'Ryan.

"Well, Frank?"

"I say, you—you heard? All that stuff about the Laffan—"

"Does he know?"

"Well—the way he kept on at it—pumping me about where I'd been and what I'd been doing—it looks as if he knows something. But how on earth You don't suppose he had somebody watching, do you?"

"Don't be a fool, Frank. That's not Selby. Besides, there was no need. There's the manager of the Laffan—and Mr. Muller; either of them may have seen us and told him. We know that—almost for certain; and goodness knows how many other people may have seen us."

"Comforting, aren't you? I'm not so sure, though. If Selby got wind of anything, he might easily have put someone to watch."

"I tell you he didn't—he wouldn't!" she interrupted angrily. "Besides, until we were actually at the Laffan, he couldn't possibly have got wind of anything. He's not a mind reader. I'm not so sure that Mr. Muller isn't, though. Awkward if he is, eh, Frank? For both of us, of course, but particularly for you. It must be an enormous asset to a lawyer to be able to read what's going on in his client's mind—all the little subterfuges and deceptions—"

"Talk sense," he interrupted irritably. "You don't seem to realize that this is a jolly serious matter for me. If this deal didn't come off, I'd be in a hell of a mess. And he was talking about helping me to finance the syndicate. I've no capital, and I've got to find some somewhere—it's too good a chance to miss—and if only Selby will lend a hand—see what I mean? It's a damned serious business."

She nodded.

"Would it be very indiscreet of me if I asked you something, Frank? I think I will ask you, anyway. Is there silver on the property?"

He turned from her with a shrug.

"Well, you never know, you know. There may be."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. "Has anybody said there is silver on the property?"

He came back at her irritably:

"I've told you—there's always a chance."

"Then I am being indiscreet?"

"Nita darling, be an angel," he begged, "and don't start nagging me now. I've enough to worry me, in all conscience. Besides, you know what I've told you. As soon as I get the syndicate floated I'm going to give you a block of shares. I'm not going to let you down."

"That makes me feel rather like a thief, Frank."

"Why should it?"

"It does, anyway. My conscience again, perhaps—refusing to be damned."

"Oh, rot!" exclaimed O'Ryan. "There's nothing to turn you squeamish. It's only fair. You've married without a settlement, and if anything should happen—you know what I mean. If... you know?"

"If I pulled the bolt—yes."

"And if Selby found out—well, you'd be penniless. Isn't that so?"

She nodded.

"I mean, he may know already—about last night—and that's all the evidence he'd want, and you've got to look after yourself. There's nothing wrong in being on the safe side. Why the hell you married him, I don't know. He's a good chap and all that sort of thing, but—well, you knew absolutely nothing about him, did you? Except that he made a pile of money in Canada, nobody does know anything about him."

"And most people," she replied, "provided he had the money, didn't care where or how he had made it. I was one of them." She was thoughtful for some moments. Then: "I'll tell you something, Frank. Selby is one of the nicest men I have ever met. I hate myself sometimes because I've been such a brute—such a mean little beast—to him. I could quite easily fall in love with him—if he weren't so nice."

"Sometimes you talk pretty average rot, Nita, don't you?"

"Do I? Selby, after all, has all the qualities that any sane woman likes. Most women, I expect, would think me marvellously lucky to have married him. Lots of them were terribly annoyed about it, anyway. If something would only shake me in the right direction, I might fall desperately in love with him."

"If something would shake him in the direction of signing that lease, I should be a good deal happier. I wish that infernal lawyer weren't here. That fellow dislikes me. He as good as told me that, if he had his way, the lease never would be signed."

"But the lease is signed, Frank."

"No! Really?"

"Selby himself told me so."

"I say, if that's so—good egg! Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"Best bit of news I've had for a long time," said O'Ryan, with a smile of satisfaction. "But I wonder—the mineral rights, you know—that's what I'm rather scared about. Muller didn't persuade him to stick to the mineral rights, did he?"

"Always a chance, eh, Frank? No, I'm pretty sure Selby wasn't persuaded to do that. Muller tried to make him, I fancy, but Selby wouldn't listen. He had promised you the lease, and when he does a thing he always does it thoroughly. I don't think you need worry: you'll get what you want, and the laugh, as Mr. Muller said, will be on Selby."

"I hope you're right, Nita, but I shan't feel really comfortable until I've seen the lease and made sure." Nita went to the writing desk.

"I expect it's here somewhere," she said, beginning to turn over the papers that were strewn on it, "and as it's all fixed up there can't be any reason why you shouldn't see it. If you're so terribly anxious, why didn't you ask Selby about it? I'm sure he'd have told you." He shook his head.

"The less said about it the better while that man Muller was here," he said. "I didn't want to start a discussion with him. Besides, if I kept asking about it—especially about the mineral rights—Selby might have thought I was trying to stampede him into it before he had a chance to think it over."

She glanced up at him.

"You stampeding Selby?" She smiled. "You've a wonderful imagination, Frank. I'm afraid you'll be wasted on farming." She began turning over the papers again. "What does a lease look like, Frank? Is this it? It looks legal enough, anyway."

She held out a document, and O'Ryan took it eagerly and began rapidly glancing down the typewritten sheets.

"This is an agreement for—" he hastily turned a page —"excavating, supplying, and laying down earthenware pipes." He tossed the document back on to the desk. "That's not it, Nita."



"Then I'm afraid you'll have to wait," she said.

"The lease isn't here—unless Wait a minute, though. I've just got an idea. There's a secret drawer here somewhere; Selby showed it to me once. Poor darling, he adores that sort of thing. He had it made a couple of years ago—for important papers, he said. I think I can remember..."

She was running the tips of her fingers down the side of the desk while O'Ryan stood anxiously watching her.

"I say, wouldn't he make a fuss if he knew you were rummaging about in his desk?"

"Don't be silly!" she laughed. "He showed me the secret drawer himself. There's a spring somewhere just about here."

There came a click as she spoke, and a small panel in the side of the desk flew back, revealing a compartment within.

"There we are!" exclaimed the girl triumphantly. "There's the secret drawer, and I don't mind betting —" she stooped, thrust in her hand, drew out a legal-looking document and stood upright—"and I don't mind betting that this is your lease."

She unfolded the document and glanced at it. "Deed Poll," she read. "What's a Deed Poll, Frank?"

"I don't know," said O'Ryan impatiently. "Something you change your name by, isn't it?"

"Change your name?"

He nodded.

"Popular device with shady gents," he grinned, "whose real names have become a handicap."

She glanced again at the document, her brows puckered in a frown.

"Know all men by these presents,' she read, 'that I, Dennis Selby Clive Sanderby, commonly called Dennis Sanderby, will in future be known as Selby Clive '"

She stopped abruptly and stood staring at O'Ryan with bewildered eyes.

"Frank, what—does that mean that—that Selby—"

"Changed his name! Good God, why on earth—did you know? Did he ever tell you?"

She shook her head.

"Dennis Sanderby? But why—I don't understand." O'Ryan took the document from her hand.

"Let's have a look," he said. "What's the date of it?—1913—twenty years ago, by Jove! Executed at Edmonton on the fourth day of March, 1913. Well, I'm damned!"

Nita's face was grave and her eyes troubled.

"It's—odd, Frank, isn't it? What made him do that, I wonder?"

"It's certainly queer."

She took the document, glanced at it again, and then, replacing it in the secret drawer, closed the panel.

"Changed his name," she repeated thoughtfully. "I wonder why he never told me that."

"Why don't you ask him? Hang it, you're his wife, and you've every right to know a thing like that. After all, a man doesn't change his name for nothing."

She was shaking her head.

"If Selby wants to tell me, he'll tell me. I shan't ask."

"That's for you to decide, of course," said O'Ryan; "but if I were in your shoes I'd tackle him about it straight out. Have another look for the lease, though, Nita—just to relieve my mind."

She appeared not to have heard him. She walked across to the French windows.

"Dennis Sanderby," she repeated. "How very strange! I wonder why he has never told me that."

"He wouldn't carry it about with him, would he?" She glanced around at the other as though she had suddenly become aware of his presence.

"What? Oh, the lease! I really have no idea, Frank. Bother the lease! When Selby comes back I'll ask him for it, if you like."

"No, don't do that, Nita," he said hastily. "I don't want to make it look as though I'm using you."

"Using me?" She laughed. "Frank, you really are the most naive man I've ever known. Don't follow me, will you? I want to think."

O'Ryan smiled.

"Of me?"

She shook her head.

"I've thought enough of you lately—too much, perhaps," she said, and went out into the garden.

## CHAPTER IX

NITA made her way slowly across the lawn and seated herself in a deck chair. "Know all men by these presents that I, Dennis Selby Clive Sanderby—" She seemed still to see the words quite clearly, as if, when she had stood staring at the document, they had been photographed onto her eyes. Selby had changed his name—twenty years ago—long before she had ever heard of him—and he had never said a word to her about it. It was—well, queer, anyway. A man didn't change his name for nothing. There must have been some reason—some very compelling reason—for doing a thing like that. There would be, at any rate, in Selby's case; he did nothing without a reason, without having thought it all out, step by step, beforehand, in that calculating, unemotional, cold-blooded way of his. And a man wouldn't trouble to change his name unless there were attached to the name he was abandoning something he was anxious to have forgotten, something shameful, something which would injure him if it were associated with his name.

"A popular device with shady gents whose real names have become a handicap," Frank had said. Perhaps. But somehow the description did not seem to fit Selby. Still, there did seem something shady about it. At the best, it was rather a contemptible deception—foisting yourself on the world as someone else, disowning your past, cheating people of their right to judge you by your past actions, which were all they had by which to judge you at all, deliberately shirking consequences, putting on an overcoat to hide a shabby suit. After all, a man couldn't hope to forget his past by changing his name; if that were possible the lawyers would have little time for anything but preparing the necessary documents. All he could hope for was to persuade other people to forget it, or, at any rate, not to think of it in connection with him; and why, if there were nothing shady in it, should he want to do that?

She found herself wondering what there had been in Selby's life that had made it necessary to change his name, what he could have done that he was so anxious to conceal from the world, what action it had been of which he had not had the courage to face the consequences. It was all very well to tell herself that she could not imagine Selby being guilty of anything dishonourable, but in reality she had no very sound reason for saying so. She had known him for no more than three years—only a small fraction of his life—and of his life before she had known him he had told her practically nothing. An occasional laughing reference to his mysterious past was all she had ever had from him, and she had never ventured to question him. She had not, as a matter of fact, ever felt much curiosity about it, and had been content to take him very much for granted. Most women, she supposed, would have been equally indifferent to his past if they had seen a chance of

a future which included a share of Selby's income. A woman only insisted on a moral character in the man who wanted to marry her when there was nothing about his income to attract her. Frank, for instance. If Frank had had Selby's income, would she have bolted the door last night? Probably not. Frank was probably right—"Mean little swine!"

She jerked her thoughts back to her husband. Why hadn't he told her? She had thought that he was incapable of a dishonourable action, but surely changing his name—surely it would have been more honourable to tell her that he had changed it before asking her to share it? And if he was capable of that dishonourable action, of what else might he not have been capable in the past—and of what might he still be capable? It had occurred to her vaguely before, but the thought struck her now, with shattering force, that she did not know Selby, that to all intents and purposes she had been living for the last three years with a stranger of whom she knew but little more now than when she had first met him. It seemed suddenly a horrible thing to have done. She wished that she had not tampered with that secret drawer.

And now that she had tampered with it, what was she to do? Tell Selby what she had discovered and demand an explanation? She shook her head. She would never carry that through successfully. If Selby wanted to tell her, he would tell her; if he did not want to tell her, then nobody—not even Muller—would make him. She wondered if the lawyer knew. Probably. He had known Selby for more than twenty years. Perhaps if she tackled Muller ... She smiled at that. Muller, however much Selby might be in the wrong, would stand by him. Men were like that—lie like hell to a woman rather than let each other down. "Playing the game," they called it....

Lane, bringing out the tea table and arranging the chairs, disturbed her; and as Lane went back to the house she saw O'Ryan coming towards her across the lawn.

"Well, Mrs. Sanderby?" he grinned.

She frowned.

"That's rather bad taste, Frank, isn't it?" she said. "It doesn't strike me as amusing."

He flung himself on the grass.

"That's because you've no sense of humour, darling. I've often told you so, haven't I? It strikes me as quite passably funny. Here are you, a nice, pure-minded, smug little Puritan with a passion for bolts and the seventh commandment, and a holy horror of any other sort of passion—"

"Frank!"

"Here you are, being what you are," he went on, "with all the most beautiful characteristics of a Sunday-school teacher and the spotless mind of a Mother Superior, tied up for life with a bloke who, for all you know, may have poisoned his mother, pinched the poor-box, defrauded widows and orphans, blackmailed his brother, been arrested in Hyde Park, and generally booted the Decalogue to blazes. Excuse a smile, won't you?"

"You're just—beastly, Frank."

"Oh, I know what you're telling yourself," he replied: "all that might be true of other men, but it couldn't possibly be true of Selby. He's one of the nicest men you've ever met, and has all the qualities that any sane woman likes. He's so nice that you could quite easily fall in love with him, and, that being so, of course he couldn't possibly have poisoned his mother. Good God, Nita, why don't you face facts?"

"Don't I?"

"No, you do not. You're a rotten little hypocrite, really—walk right up to the fact and then bolt the door against it. That's hypocrisy—to lead a man right up the garden path and then dump him on the rubbish heap and go to bed thanking God for helping you to keep yourself pure and holy. You make me tired. What are you going to do about it, anyway—tackle him?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing?"

"It's all very well to talk, Frank, but what can I do?"

"Met me at the Laffan tonight. Good heavens, it's the only thing to do, and you know it, really. You've got to cut adrift now. Nita darling, will you? Forget what I've just been saying—I was only fooling, anyway—and promise that tonight—"

"Tonight?"

"Why not? The sooner the better."

"You seem pretty sure about the lease."

"Well, you say it's signed, and he's almost certain to hand it over to me today, and as soon as I've got it—"

"Suppose he doesn't hand it over to you today, Frank. Still—tonight?"

"Oh, well, in that case, I couldn't. You see, Nita, until I've safely landed the lease—"

She got up suddenly from her chair.

"And I'm the hypocrite, am I?" she said, and turned to leave him.

As she did so she realized that her husband was coming up the drive, and that with him was Sir Ralph Whitcombe. With a sigh she returned to her chair.

Sir Ralph Whitcombe, K.C., tall, white-haired, dignified, with a ponderous manner that somehow conveyed the impression that his most trivial remark was backed by all the weight of a House of Lords decision, had probably caused more women to sigh at the sight of him than had any other member of his profession. Many of them, with less self-control or less politeness than Nita, yawned; and it was said among his former colleagues that, since his retirement from his practice, he was in constant demand in Harley Street as a cure for insomnia.

But Nita on this occasion had sighed merely from force of habit when she saw him coming up the drive with her husband. Actually she was glad to see him. Just at the moment she felt that half an hour with Selby and O'Ryan—the three of them together, trying to be natural, pretending that everything was normal between them, skating all the time on the thinnest ice, was more than she could face. With Sir Ralph there they would all be relieved of the necessity—and the chance—of talking.

As the two men came towards her across the lawn, her gaze was fixed on her husband. She had a vague, half-formed idea that, now that she had made that astonishing discovery about him, he would in some way appear different, that she would notice points about him which she had not noticed before, that in meeting Dennis Sanderby for the first time she would receive a fresh impression, like him or dislike him, be attracted or repelled or indifferent, as she would be in meeting any other stranger. Perhaps, now that she knew his secret, she might detect some clue, which had passed unheeded before, that might lead her to understand why Selby had changed his name, why he had so carefully concealed the fact from her, why he had not dared to trust her with the knowledge of his past, why he had chosen to masquerade....

"Here's Whitcombe, my dear."

She glanced up, smiling.

"How do you do, Sir Ralph?"

Sir Ralph placed his small leather attache case on a chair, deliberately took off his glove and gave her his hand.

"How d' do, Mrs. Clive?" he said, as if a precise knowledge of her state of health were of the most momentous significance. "And how are you, O'Ryan? Down here for the week, I presume? I am staying with the Boscombes—rather a noisy lot of young people. They never seem to go to sleep."

"I should have thought, Sir Ralph," smiled Nita, "that with you staying in the house—"

"Quite; a little inconsiderate. I ventured a mild protest, but it has had no effect. They assured me that they were doing their utmost to oblige me by falling asleep not later than 10 p. M. but were unable to do so. I have an idea, however, that it is a case of insomnia aforethought, with, perhaps, a touch of malice."

Clive waved him to a chair.

"Jerry will be back tomorrow, Nita," he said. "He's doubtful about getting back tonight."

"That would be the man you had with you?" inquired Sir Ralph. "Quite a respectable kind of American, I thought. He did not contradict me once."

"He's my lawyer—Jerry Muller—a Canadian."

"Really! I once went to Canada—before I took silk. An interesting country, I thought."

"God's own country," said Clive.

Sir Ralph raised his bushy eyebrows.

"Indeed? So many of these places are. A deity with a geographical bias—an interesting speculation, perhaps. But I have always said, Mrs. Clive, that this country is quite good enough for me."

"Oh, was it you who said that?" asked Nita innocently.

"A great friend of yours, I gathered, Clive?"

"Jerry?" Clive nodded. "Yes, I've every reason for calling Jerry my friend, Whitcombe. He saved my life once."

Nita glanced quickly at him.

"Saved your life, Selby? But I had no idea—I mean, how terribly romantic!"

Clive shook his head.

"There was nothing at all romantic about it, my dear," he said. "It was all rather—horrible. I don't care to think about it even now, and it happened twenty years ago. It was the sort of nightmare that's best forgotten."

He was silent for some moments, frowning thoughtfully.

"And if they had killed me," he added slowly, speaking, it seemed to Nita, more to himself than to the group around him, "I should have got what I deserved." He rose suddenly from his chair. "Ready for tea, my dear? I'll tell Lane."

He went off towards the house, and Nita, glancing at O'Ryan, saw his rather cynical smile and turned away again. If only she had been alone with Selby, she might have taken that chance, asked him to explain, led him, perhaps, to tell her about that nightmare in his past which he was anxious to forget—so anxious, she had no doubt, that other people should forget that he had changed his name and left Canada—"God's own country" he had called it—and come to hide himself in England where no one knew him or anything about him. He might, perhaps, have given her some explanation which would have swept her mind clean of all the doubts and fears and suspicions which now lay thick on it; he might have convinced her that, in changing his name, and in keeping the fact from her, Selby had been guilty of nothing more than indiscretion, of nothing, at any rate, which could undermine her faith in him. She realized that she was desperately anxious to be convinced.

Her gaze had wandered, as it always did when she sat in the garden, to the riot of rambler roses, and she was only dimly aware of the sound of Sir Ralph's voice as he droned on; and she realized with a start that Lane had brought the tea things and that Selby was back in his chair.

"... I seldom go into court nowadays," Sir Ralph was saying. "I've made all I wish to make out of the law, and the bench does not appeal to me. No, I am very happy in my work."

"Sir Ralph writes books now," explained Selby. "I believe I read one of them, Whitcombe—what was it called?"

"An Examination of the Ecclesiastical Laws?" said Sir Ralph. "That was one of my less important works—hardly more than an elementary textbook."

Clive smiled.

"I don't think it was that. I can't quite see myself buying—"

"You didn't, Selby," said Nita; "Sir Ralph was kind enough to give you a copy."

She had realized that Selby's eyes were watching her with a strange, questioning look in them, and made an effort to appear natural.

"I'm sure I read a book of yours, too, Sir Ralph," she added, as she busied herself with the tea things. "It was about—er—anyway, I know I found it terribly fascinating."

"A Digest of the Law Relating to Canals and Waterways, perhaps," suggested Sir Ralph. "A most interesting subject, Mrs. Clive. I am told that it is now recognized as the standard work on the subject."

Nita shook her head.

"I don't think it was that," she laughed. "Sugar, Sir Ralph?"



"If you please. No milk."

"Cream?"

"That is poison to me."

"And to Nita," said Clive, "but she hasn't your strength of will, Whitcombe, and persists in poisoning herself. Cream is the one thing she should never take. The doctor told her—"

"Selby, please!" she interrupted rather wearily. "There's no need to be physiological."

"I am now engaged in the compilation of a much lighter work," continued Sir Ralph. "Seventeen Famous Trials, I am calling it. A most absorbing study. It is only when one comes to make a study of crime, Mrs. Clive, when one starts to probe into the actions of individuals and touch the hidden motives, that one begins to realize what tremendous consequences may follow, I will not say a wrong action, because we must go further back than that and realize that a wrong thought, harboured in the mind for, perhaps, only a few seconds—"

"Lane, where's the cream? You've forgotten it."

"He hasn't," Clive told her. "I saw it on the tea tray and removed the temptation. If you harbour the thought of cream in your mind only for a few seconds, Nita—"

Nita sighed.

"Why be so silly, Selby? Fetch the cream, please, Lane."

The servant went towards the house.

"He won't find it, Nita. I hid it—in the dairy."

"Then don't do it again, Selby, will you? You did it once before, and it was rather embarrassing. I'd much rather my digestion wasn't made a tea-table topic." Clive got up from his chair.

"All right—if you insist—I'll get it," he said. "But you know it's awfully bad for you. You remember what the doctor—"

"Selby—please!"

He shrugged his shoulders and strode off after Lane. "As I was saying," began Sir Ralph again, "I am finding my Seventeen Famous Trials a most absorbing study. At the moment I am dealing with one of the most extraordinary crimes—or, more correctly, series of crimes—ever committed. I have my notes in my case. You would, perhaps, be interested—"

He picked up his attache case, opened it, and began rummaging inside. Nita, watching him, noticed that on top of the papers in the case was a small

flask-shaped bottle full of some greenish liquid; and Sir Ralph, glancing at her as his hand hastily covered it, saw that she had noticed it and held it up with a smile for her inspection.

"Not to be used as evidence against me, Mrs. Clive," he said. "You will never guess what this is. Nor you, O'Ryan."

"Looks like Chartreuse," said O'Ryan.

Sir Ralph shook his head.

"You'll never guess. It's vodka. I am rather susceptible to chills, and a Russian doctor—a most interesting and intelligent man, I may say—strongly recommended me to try vodka. I must say I have found it most efficacious. I never move without it."

"You mean you drink it?" inquired Nita.

"In small quantities, Mrs. Clive—only in extremely small quantities," he told her, replacing the bottle in the case and continuing his rummaging. "It is a very potent spirit and Ah, here are the notes I was mentioning."

He pulled out a sheaf of papers, placed his attache case at his feet, put on his glasses and peered over the top of them, first at Nita and then at O'Ryan.

"This—ah—is the case," he began. "I may say that in all my investigations, which have been not inconsiderable, into the records of crime, this particular case has impressed me as being altogether remarkable. Remarkable, I mean, for the extraordinary subtlety of the criminal and for the coolness and cold-bloodedness with which he carried out his—ah—his dastardly scheme."

He glanced up at his audience, was satisfied, apparently, that he held their attention, and proceeded.

"The brief essentials are as follows. A man is married to a woman who has a lover. He is a rich man, cultured, charming, incapable, one would say, of a dishonourable action; in fact, a gentleman. His wife is under the impression that he does not know about her having a lover, but she is mistaken. He does know. The woman's mother also knows and connives at the intrigue."

"It sounds very sordid, Sir Ralph," said Nita, "and very ordinary."

He nodded.

"I admit the aptness of both the adjectives—so far, Mrs. Clive."

"What happened?" asked O'Ryan.

"They died," said Sir Ralph—"all three of them: the wife, the lover, and the mother—one by one. And they died at his hands."

O'Ryan grinned.

"Thorough sort of bloke, Sir Ralph."

The older man nodded.

"Observe the uncanny subtlety of the criminal mind," he went on. "This placid man of thirty—rich, highly respected, with all the outward signs of a cultured gentleman—was the most ingenious murderer. Apparently all his victims died natural deaths. The wife was found dead with a broken neck; seemingly she had had an accident and fallen out of a window. The lover died of anthrax, and there is no doubt whatever that his razor had been doctored. The mother-in-law was killed by drinking something that must have been full of deadly bacteria."

"Did they hang him?" inquired O'Ryan. "Unfortunately, no," replied Sir Ralph. "Nothing at all could be proved against him. That was where he showed his—ah—diabolical cleverness. He had warned each one of his victims before witnesses; he had warned the wife against the insecurity of the window—warned the lover of the danger of using an old razor—warned the mother-in-law of the risks she ran in drinking unscalded milk, I think it was. That was, naturally, a big point in his defense, of which his counsel took full advantage. The man practically admitted that he had committed the murders, it seems, but it was the law's business to produce the proof of his guilt, and the law couldn't do it."

"I don't seem to remember having read about it, Sir Ralph," said Nita. "Do you, Frank?"

O'Ryan shook his head.

"You would hardly be interested in such things at that time, Mrs. Clive," smiled Sir Ralph. "It happened twenty years ago. And one is obliged, of course, to treat the matter delicately. You see, the man was not convicted. I remember that at the time one of the newspapers in Canada—"

"Canada?"

"The crime was committed in Canada," explained Whitcombe—"in Edmonton. The man was defended by an extremely clever young lawyer named—by Jove, the same name as that man whom I met just now with your husband."

"Muller?"

"Yes—Muller—that was the lawyer. I wonder if by any chance they are related. He might be able to give me certain information. There are one or two points about this Dennis Sanderby case which—"

"Dennis Sanderby?"

The words came from Nita in little more than a whisper. Once again she felt that terrible weakness assail her which she had felt in the office at the Laffan; only this time it seemed intensified tenfold. She sat staring at Sir Ralph with wide-open, horrified eyes, her hands gripping the arms of the wicker chair, her teeth biting into her lip. She wrenched her gaze away from

Sir Ralph's impassive face and looked at O'Ryan. She saw that his face had taken on the colour of chalk.

"One can't help feeling a certain pity for the woman and her lover," Whitcombe was saying—he was a very long way off, it seemed to Nita. "However much one may censure them, as a strict moralist, for their indulgence in such a liaison, one must, as a human being, sympathize with them in the terrible position in which they had placed themselves. From the moment the husband discovered the intrigue, they were doomed, though they were blissfully ignorant of the fate awaiting them. This suave, charming gentleman—who continued as suave and charming as ever—how could they suspect him?"

Clive, cream jug in hand, was coming across the lawn. Nita watched him with fascinated eyes. He was smiling. She had often seen him smile; but this time—if only he would stop smiling! If only he wouldn't be so suave, so charming, so much the perfect gentleman! He had probably smiled like that when ...

"They could do nothing to avert their fate," Sir Ralph was saying. "They had not the least idea that the husband even suspected an intrigue. He warned them, it is true—always in the presence of witnesses—but they had no reason to see in his warnings anything more than a natural solicitude for their safety. They did not attach any unusual importance—"

Clive paused beside his wife.

"Here's your cream, my dear," he said. "It's a most dangerous beverage—as far as you are concerned, anyway—but I suppose you must have your own way. But don't say I didn't warn you."

He stooped over the table, tilted the jug, and was about to pour some cream into her cup; but suddenly the cup was covered by Nita's hand—a shaking hand—and she was shrinking back in her chair, staring up at him with panic in her eyes.

"Selby—thank you—I don't think I want it—now." He glanced at her, and the slightest frown puckered his forehead. She tried to meet his gaze without flinching, tried to smile at him; but the smile was a pitiful failure, and as he stood looking at her with those steady, questioning eyes of his, her glance wavered and suddenly fell.

"But, surely, Nita—after I've fetched it for you. You mustn't take too much notice of what I said just now. After all, it's your funeral, isn't it? Just a drop?" He waited, with the cream jug still poised above her cup, for her reply. She wanted to look at O'Ryan—desperately—to see if he realized her danger, to let her eyes send him a message that he must come to her aid. But she knew that she dared not look at him. She knew that, with her husband's eyes watching her, to send that message would be to confess her guilt. If only Frank would do something—say something! He must surely understand....

"Come along, my dear," urged Clive. "After making me tramp all the way to the dairy and back—"

His left hand moved as if about to grasp her wrist and lift her hand from her teacup. She felt that if he touched her she would scream. She sprang suddenly to her feet and stood, teacup in hand, facing him.

"Selby, I—I don't want any cream!" she exclaimed, and her voice held a note of hysteria. "I won't have any cream! Why on earth—you must make—all this stupid fuss—"

He smiled at her.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said penitently. "I didn't mean to upset you; it was stupid of me." He turned from her, and, as she sank back into her chair, he strolled across towards O'Ryan. "All the better for you, O'Ryan," he smiled; "you can have a double dose. Hold out your cup."

O'Ryan's cup moved an inch or two back.

"Thanks, sir, I—I don't—don't take cream," he stammered.

Clive raised his eyebrows and glanced at Sir Ralph. "You seem to have converted them both, Whitcombe," he laughed. "What has he been telling you, Nita—how many bacteria can lurk in a teaspoonful of cream?"

Nita forced herself to smile.

"You're still being rather ridiculous, Selby, aren't you?"

He shrugged.

"Well, if Whitcombe has really put you off cream," he said, "he has rendered you a very great service." He went to the edge of the lawn, emptied the cream jug onto the flower bed, filled it with hot water from the spirit kettle, emptied it again, and scraped the soil over the spot with his foot.

"Second thoughts aren't always best, my dear," he laughed, as he returned to his chair. "You might have been tempted to change your mind."

"You make such a fuss about nothing, Selby," replied Nita. "Mustn't I even change my mind now? It's dreadful waste—all that cream on the flower bed." He shook his head.

"I don't want you poisoned just yet, darling," he said, "so we'll let the cream kill a few weeds."

## CHAPTER X

ONCE he was fairly launched on a subject, Sir Ralph Whitcombe was not easily diverted into any conversational side channel, and no sooner had the little breeze over the cream jug subsided than he proceeded with his subject.

"As I was saying, Mrs. Clive," he began, "it will be necessary to exercise extreme care and treat the matter with the utmost delicacy—"

"Please, Sir Ralph," Nita interrupted, "we won't discuss my digestion any more, if you don't mind. Selby makes such a fuss about me, but I do exercise extreme care. Have you noticed our ramblers? Lovely, aren't they?"

"Charming," agreed Sir Ralph, without looking away from his teacup. "Most—ah—decorative. I fancy, however, that without stepping beyond the bounds of fair comment I can so present the case—"

"More tea, Sir Ralph?"

And so it went on—interminably, it seemed to Nita. Dennis Sanderby—she must not let him talk of Dennis Sanderby. In the first rush of panic which swept over her when Sir Ralph had mentioned the name, the thought had flashed into her mind that Selby must not know that she was aware of the existence of such a man as Dennis Sanderby. At the moment she had not known why, but as she grew calmer she saw very clearly that her swift flash of intuition had been right. That hideous story—Selby must get no inkling that she had heard of it. His ignorance that she was aware of his real identity, and of the incidents which had made him so anxious to conceal it, was her greatest safeguard. Something warned her that if Dennis Sanderby came to know that she knew him for what he was and realized his intentions, the result would be not to make him abandon them but only to make him act the more swiftly. And if Sir Ralph, with Selby sitting there, were allowed to speak of Dennis Sanderby, she felt that she could not trust either herself or O'Ryan to give no sign of what was in their minds. Selby would only have to glance at them to realize that somehow they had stumbled on the truth, had learned his secret, and understood the danger in which they stood. Sir Ralph must somehow be silenced.

She fought valiantly to silence him, interrupting him time and again as he swung back, like the needle of a compass, to his subject, heading him off, talking as she had never talked before—incessantly, rapidly, desperately—pouring out a flood of flippant chatter in the hope that in Sir Ralph's mind all thoughts of the Dennis Sanderby case might be drowned in it. Once or twice she saw her husband glance at her in obvious surprise, but she took no notice. She felt that she must talk and talk and keep on talking, that if she paused for a moment Sir Ralph would seize on that moment to blurt out some word which would tell Selby all she was so anxious to keep from him.

If only Frank would help her! But O'Ryan seemed incapable of saying anything—even of looking at her. He sat staring at his teacup, frowning. Thinking about the lease, she reflected bitterly—thinking about himself—leaving her to fight for both of them.

He must surely realize now that Selby knew—had known, perhaps, for months, had watched the affair from the very beginning, seen it gathering impetus—and waited. She had warned him that that was exactly what Selby would do. He had done it before—twenty years ago—in Canada, and he was doing it again now—the suave, charming gentleman, attentive, considerate, fussing about her health, and all the time coolly and carefully and ruthlessly planning her punishment....

Clive seemed disinclined to be hurried over his tea. Long after the others had finished he sat there sipping it, stirring it, asking for a little more milk, another lump of sugar; but she did not dare to leave him with Sir Ralph and O'Ryan. Sir Ralph, though she had at last steered him onto the safe topic of the noisy young people at the Boscombes', might at any moment switch back to his Seventeen Famous Trials, and she must stay there to prevent him. And as soon as tea was over she must get him to herself and silence him for good. She had no idea how it was to be done, but it must be managed somehow. Frank, too—she must talk to Frank. They must come to some decision. Thank God she had looked in that secret drawer of Selby's desk! Thank God even for Sir Ralph Whitcombe! They knew now where they stood, what was threatening them, what sort of a man they had to deal with. Those others, perhaps—twenty years ago—if they had only realized that they had been found out! But, no; she didn't suppose, from what Sir Ralph had said of Dennis Sanderby, that knowing would have saved them.

At last her husband set down his cup, and she got up eagerly.

"Come and see my catch-pit, Whitcombe," said Selby. "You, too, O'Ryan. Jerry says it's entirely wrong, and I'd like your opinion." He turned to Nita. "You've seen more than enough of it, my dear," he said. "We'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'll come too, Selby," she said.

They were almost an hour in the lower garden. Sir Ralph, having detected some analogy between catch-pits for storm water and canals and waterways, prosed on and on; and when at length he went off down the drive with his precious attache case, Nita had had no chance of a word with him alone.

And no sooner had he gone than Frank, avoiding her eyes, pleaded an urgent business appointment at Windsor, begged to be excused from dinner, and went off in his car. Throughout the evening she wondered about that

appointment at Windsor. It was a strangely opportune appointment. As likely as not Frank would not come back.

But he was back at ten o'clock—the man, he said, was away and would not be home until tomorrow—and for an hour the three of them sat in the drawing room. Selby seemed immovable tonight. As a rule he went to his study promptly on the stroke of ten and remained there for a couple of hours, reading and writing, but this evening, though Nita went almost beyond the limits of discretion in her efforts to dislodge him, he remained obstinately in his chair. And Frank, though she hinted until she dared hint no more that she wanted the chance of talking to him, was obdurately unresponsive, and at length suddenly bade them good-night and went up to his room.

And then Selby must needs want her to go with him into the garden. They went together onto the terrace, rested their elbows on the parapet, and gazed at the moonlit garden. She felt her husband's arm go round her shoulders, and it was almost more than she could do to let it rest there, but she gave no sign of the wave of repugnance that swept over her except that her fingers suddenly crisped.

It was some moments before Clive spoke.

"Nita, darling," he said softly, "do you remember —three years ago—that first night of our honeymoon? It was just like this. The moonlight, the terrace of the hotel, the garden—I shall never forget. You were rather afraid of me that night—very beautifully afraid."

He was silent for a time, gazing thoughtfully across the garden; and then he turned to her again.

"You're not—not afraid of me now, my dear?"

She shook her head.

"Silly," she laughed nervously.

His arm tightened around her shoulders.

"I remember asking you the same question then, Nita," he said, "and you made the same reply. 'Silly,' you laughed—exactly as you did just now. And then I remember that I drew you close to me like this—and kissed you like this—"

She felt herself drawn against him, saw his lips approaching, and suddenly, thrusting him from her, she wrenched herself free. She wanted to scream, to turn and rush away from him; but somehow she managed to control her limbs and to steady her voice.



"Selby—please—I'm sorry, but I'm terribly tired. Good-night!" She went swiftly across the terrace, into the house, and up to her bedroom.

She got quickly into bed, switched off the light, and lay there very still, rigid, her eyes closed, her fingers tightly gripping the bedclothes, her teeth pressed hard against her lower lip. And then suddenly she relaxed and buried her face in the pillow.

Dennis Sanderby—and that! Dennis Sanderby with his arm around her, drawing her close to him, pressing his lips against hers—wanting her! She would have screamed if he had kissed her. Idiotic, but she could not have helped it. When she had felt his arm tighten round her and seen the look in his eyes as he drew her towards him—she shuddered. It had been so unexpected, so unlike Selby. She had behaved meanly to Selby, but he had never complained, had never shown any resentment. He had been hurt, perhaps, a little wistful sometimes, but never resentful, never even importunate, and certainly never leading her to fear that he might insist on her being less mean to him or demand a less one-sided bargain.

But that had been Selby Clive; and since yesterday Selby Clive had become Dennis Sanderby—to himself, perhaps, no less than to her. Until yesterday, whatever he might have suspected, he had no sure proof of anything more than an easy-going sort of friendship with, perhaps, the usual harmless touch of flirtation, between Frank and her, and he had remained Selby Clive. But now, if Muller or the manager of the Laffan had told him, he had proof enough and to spare; and Selby Clive had become Dennis Sanderby—charming, suave, as much the gentleman as ever, but coolly, calmly, with diabolical subtlety, plotting the punishment of his unfaithful wife and her lover. And suppose ...

As the thought struck her she suddenly sat upright in bed, staring with horrified eyes into the darkness. Suppose, before he punished her, he should decide—had, perhaps, already decided—that she should no longer be allowed to be a mean little swine, that the bargain must be less one-sided? Suppose he made up his mind that, before breaking his plaything, he might just as well get a little amusement from it? That would be exactly what was to be expected from a Dennis Sanderby—torture and then the sacrifice, degradation and then the knife-thrust. Tonight, on the terrace, she had had a hint of what she might expect, and the next time, no doubt, he would not be content to let her thrust him from her and bid him good-night. Suppose he should decide ...

She slipped out of bed, groped her way to the door, fumbled for the bolt, found it, and pushed it silently across.

As she turned to make her way back to the bed, she paused abruptly and stood motionless, listening. Selby—coming up the stairs. She heard him switch off the light on the landing and come slowly along the corridor. She heard his footsteps pass his own room and pause outside her door, and caught her breath sharply. There came a tap—very soft—at her door. She did not move; she stood there rigid, staring towards the door, holding her breath. Another tap, and then she heard the handle turned, and her nails dug deeply into her palms. Suppose he asked her to open the door....

"Nita!"

She could not answer.

"Awake, Nita? Good-night, my dear!"

She made a tremendous effort.

"Good-night, Selby."

"Are you in bed?"

"Silly," she called. "Of course. Good-night, Selby."

He went slowly back along the corridor, and she heard his door closed.

She got back into bed. She saw quite clearly now what she must do. She must go—leave Selby. If only she had not come back this morning! Serve her right, perhaps, for being a smug little Puritan. She supposed she was. It looked as though she had no idea of playing fair with a man, anyway. Selby and Frank—she had treated them both pretty badly, let them both down. It would be her own fault entirely if neither of them wanted her now. But she must leave Selby. This afternoon she had known, after the incident with the cream jug, that she would have to go now. Frank, after all, would get his own way; he was in a position now to dictate his own terms, and she had no choice but to accept them. She should have gone tonight—gone with him to Windsor and stayed away; but she had not thought of that. But she must go in the morning—first thing—before Selby was about. There was no time to be lost; another scene like tonight's on the terrace, and she would not answer for what she might say or do. She must slip away before such another scene could occur, before Selby realized that she had discovered his secret, before it was too late ever to get away. Frank must take her in his car—first thing in the morning. Somehow she must let him know. She had had no chance to talk to him tonight, and she might have no chance in the morning. Besides, Frank had never been known to appear for breakfast before ten o'clock, and they must be gone long before that. She must speak to him somehow tonight....

For a moment she thought of knocking at his door and telling him to dress and meet her in the garden, but she instantly dismissed the idea. Frank's

room was opposite to Selby's, and she could hardly knock without Selby hearing. Perhaps if she wrote a note and slipped it under Frank's door But she dismissed that, too. She must speak to him, make him realize that there was no time to be lost, that she was terrified, that she was relying on him to get her away beyond the reach of Dennis Sanderby, and she could not trust a scribbled note. He might not find it until the morning.

Again she sat upright. The telephone. There was an instrument in every bedroom—thank God for Selby's thoroughness!—and the switchboard was in Lane's room. If she could slip downstairs, switch the telephone through from her room to Frank's ... It was the only way. Perhaps they could leave tonight... .

She got out of bed again, slipped on her dressing gown and slippers, noiselessly drew back the bolt and opened the door. She stepped outside and glanced along the dark corridor. There was no sign of a light in her husband's room, but a thin bright line showed beneath O'Ryan's, and a faint smell of Turkish cigarettes told her that he was still awake. Good! The merest tinkle of the telephone bell would be enough.

Very cautiously she tiptoed along the corridor, just touching the wall with the tips of her fingers. She dared not switch on a light, and it would never do to stumble. It was one of Selby's boasts that if a fly settled on the house at night he would hear its footsteps and wake.

Her hand, traveling waist high along the wall, found a gap. Frank's door. She paused for a moment, groping for the guidance of the wall again. Her fingers touched something—smooth, cold—and there came a slight click. The door- handle. Clumsy! And then, just as she found the wall again, the door of Frank's room was opened, a flood of light poured into the corridor, and Frank, resplendent in a dressing gown of florid design, was staring at her in amazement.

"Nita—you!" he whispered. "I heard something—touch my door."

"Frank, I—I must talk to you—now—before tomorrow—"

He opened the door a little wider, stood aside, and signaled to her to go in.

"Quick, Nita!"

She shook her head.

He grasped her arm and tried to draw her in.

"It's perfectly safe. We can talk in here, and I promise—"

She wrenched her arm free.

"For God's sake, Frank, don't be a fool!"

She caught a sound behind her, spun round, and saw the door of her husband's room open and Clive standing in the doorway.

"It's—it's all right, Selby."

He glanced from her to Frank, then back at her.

"I saw the light—under my door," he said. "Is there anything—wrong?"

"Nothing—of course," Nita told him hastily. "Frank was awake—smoking—and he heard someone passing along the corridor, and as he had run out of matches—see?"

Clive nodded.

"I've a box here I can spare you, O'Ryan," he said, took a box from the pocket of his dressing gown, and tossed it across to him.

"Thanks very much, sir."

"But a man who sits up to this hour of the night for the sole purpose of smoking Turkish cigarettes deserves all he gets, you know. I'd cut it out if I were you. But I expect it's too late to start reforming now."

Nita could not repress a start.

"What—what do you mean, Selby—'too late'?"

He smiled.

"He's probably been doing this sort of thing all his life, my dear," he laughed, "and he probably couldn't stop if he tried. Good-night, O'Ryan."

"Good-night, sir; good-night, Nita," replied O'Ryan, and his door closed.

"Good-night, Selby—sorry I disturbed you," said Nita, and moved towards her door.

He laid a hand on her arm.

"Nita?"

"Well, Selby?"

"Where were you going?" He spoke very quietly, very gravely.

"I was restless, Selby. I was going downstairs for something to read. But I don't think I'll bother. I'm really dreadfully tired."

"Is that the truth, Nita?"

"Of course it's the truth!" she exclaimed irritably. "Where do you suppose I was going—to a secret meeting with Lane?"

"I only wondered, my dear. I wondered whether—you might have been coming—to me."

She drew back from him.

"Book, dear—I told you—downstairs," she said nervously. "Good- night, Selby."

She sped back to her room, bolted the door and got into bed. He hadn't believed her. Frank and she—together—at the door of Frank's room—Matches! When Frank had a lighted cigarette between his lips. "Too late to start reforming now." Of course he hadn't believed her. Why on earth had Frank opened his door? If Dennis Sanderby required further proof, he had it now—the evidence of his own eyes. She must get away—first thing in the morning—before he had a chance.... It was almost dawn before she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER XI

NITA was calmer the next morning. She awoke at eight o'clock and spent half an hour before she dressed smoking a cigarette and trying to reason things out. She must not, she decided, allow herself to be stampeded into doing anything rashly. She had been foolish last night; it would have been much wiser to wait until this morning, and that awkward encounter with Selby in the corridor might have had serious consequences. It might still have serious consequences. She was not at all sure that Selby had believed the explanation which she had given him. He had asked her if it was true, and it was unlike Selby to doubt her word. But she saw now that, whatever she might decide to do—and she could decide nothing until she had had an opportunity of talking to O'Ryan—she must do it deliberately, seeing clearly ahead what the results would be, and not allow panic to rush her into some fatal mistake.

After all, Selby might suspect nothing. Yesterday she had taken it for granted that he had somehow come to hear that she had been at the Laffan with Frank; in the state of mind she was in yesterday there had seemed no other explanation. But she had, perhaps, jumped to conclusions too hastily. It was so easy, when your conscience was not quite clear, to imagine things, to read a meaning into words which was never intended, to work yourself up into a terrible panic, and then find that all the time there had been no cause for alarm. The telephone call to the hotel might have been a lucky guess on Selby's part. Muller, with his ambiguous remarks, might not have meant her to take them in any but their commonplace meaning; Selby's questioning of Frank about his movements on the previous evening, and his constant references to the Laffan Hotel, might have been nothing more than ordinary conversation. It was difficult to say anything nowadays which could not be twisted into meaning something different from what was intended. In any case, it was absurd to jump to the conclusion that Selby did know. At the best, he knew nothing; at the worst, there was no more than the possibility that he might know something.

There still remained Dennis Sanderby. But if Dennis Sanderby did not suspect her, she was in no danger. She might be shocked—as she was—at the knowledge that for three years she had been the wife of a man who actually, if not legally, was guilty of murder; she might feel—as she certainly did—that she could not possibly continue to live with him; but she had no cause for fearing him any more than she had feared him during the past three years. And if she feared him, he must never be allowed to know of her fear.

Outwardly she was her usual self when she went downstairs to breakfast; outwardly, too, she could detect no difference in Selby. Only O'Ryan seemed

uneasy, restless, inclined to be irritable; and no sooner was breakfast over than he announced that he was off at once to Windsor in his car and would not be back until lunch time.

"Why not go with him, Nita?" suggested her husband. "I've some writing to do this morning, and if Frank has not already had too much of your company—"

She noticed that O'Ryan frowned, but he murmured his willingness to take her; and a quarter of an hour later his Welsh-Willis two-seater was roaring along the road towards Windsor.

For some time neither of them spoke. Then: "Frank!"

"Yes?"

"I'm wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"Whether you really have to go to Windsor, or were just hoping to make a good get-away."

He shrugged.

"Thanks," he said drily.

"You didn't invite me to come with you, did you?"

"Be reasonable," he exclaimed. "How could I invite you? What would Selby have thought?"

"But Selby himself suggested that I should come with you."

"Quite," said Frank curtly; "I'm wondering why." He drove on for some distance and then suddenly pulled in to the side of the road and brought the car to a standstill.

"Won't you be late—for your appointment—at Windsor?"

"Damn Windsor!" he exclaimed viciously. "There is no appointment: I saw the man last night. He had promised me three thousand pounds for the syndicate, and now he has backed out. Just my luck! As if I hadn't got worries enough, without being let down right and left."

"Then this morning—it was a get-away? Sorry to have intruded."

"There's no need to be offensive about it." His tone was surly. "It wasn't a get-away; I intended being back for lunch, as I said. But if you expected me to stick a whole morning in that infernal house, with that damned murderer watching everything I did Good God, Nita, I suppose you realize, don't you?—Selby knows!"

"Does he?" She said it very calmly. Frank was excited—almost panic-stricken—she told herself, and she must somehow manage to keep calm. Someone must be able to think clearly.

"Of course he knows. If you've been persuading yourself that he doesn't—"

She shook her head.

"I've been trying to think things out clearly," she said, "without persuading myself of anything. Selbymay know, but I'm not at all certain that he does. It's so easy to imagine things."

"I'm not imagining Dennis Sanderby. There's no doubt about that, anyway. Just as well you went routing about in his desk, or we might never have realized what we were up against. And then old Whitcombe coming out like that with the whole ghastly story—you don't doubt that, I suppose?"

She shook her head.

"But there's no reason, Frank, if he doesn't suspect us, why Dennis Sanderby, even if everything Sir Ralph told us about him is true, should—"

"But he's doing it! He does suspect. It's as clear as daylight. Yesterday—at tea—that cream jug. You thought he suspected then, didn't you? You went as white as a sheet when he tried to make you have some cream. You knew as well as I did what he was up to. Just what old Whitcombe had been saying about him—warned you first that cream was a dangerous beverage, and then—"

"But we don't know, Frank, for certain that the cream—that there was anything wrong—"

"We know enough to satisfy me, anyway," O'Ryan interrupted. "And we know he was mighty careful to empty the cream away, don't we? If that's not evidence, I don't know what is. And what about the catch-pit? Perhaps you've forgotten that?"

She glanced at him, frowning.

"Frank, you don't think that—that the catch-pit—"

"That's exactly what I do think," said O'Ryan. "Catch-pit—for storm water! From what old Whitcombe said—you heard him yourself—a kid could have made a better job of it. It wasn't intended for storm water, that's why. It was intended for you to fall in and break your neck. Didn't he warn you not to go into the lower garden?"

She nodded. There was fear in her eyes again now.

"I—I never thought—I didn't connect the catch-pit—"



"And you aren't certain that he suspects! Get it into your head, my dear, that Selby Clive is Dennis Sanderby, and that Dennis Sanderby is a criminal lunatic who has decided that there's something between you and me. After last night, can you wonder? If he didn't suspect before, you did your best to make him then, didn't you? That was just damn silly, Nita. Damned inconsiderate, too. If you had changed your mind again, you might have thought twice before—"

"I hadn't changed my mind."

"Then where was the sense in fooling around my door at one o'clock in the morning? I might believe that you had only come to say you thought it was going to be fine tomorrow, and that it was just another instance of your beautiful, childlike innocence—heaven knows I've reason to believe it!—but you could hardly expect your husband to be quite so credulous. He wasn't, either. He didn't believe a word—"

She cut him short with a gesture.

"The point is, Frank, what are we going to do?"

"I know what I'm going to do: I'm not staying in the same house as Dennis Sanderby a second longer than I can help. It makes me sweat to think of it! I'm getting that lease at the first possible moment, and then I'm clearing out."

"And leaving me here—to face the music?"

"For heaven's sake, Nita, don't make things more difficult than they are by being awkward. What can I do? I can't do more than I've already suggested. The moment I've got the lease I'll go, and you can follow me."

"Run away from him?"

He made a gesture of impatience.

"My dear girl, what else can you do? You can't stay on here. It isn't safe, apart from anything else. When you're up against a criminal lunatic like Dennis Sanderby, there's only one thing to do—bolt. You know I'm right."

"I thought so yesterday," she admitted, "but I'm not so sure about it now. We don't know for certain that he even suspects; but if we run away—" She shrugged.

"We couldn't tell him more plainly that his suspicions are right, could we?"

"We should be out of his reach, anyway."

"Should we?" She shook her head. "If you think that, you don't know much about Selby. Running away wouldn't stop him. If Selby once makes up his mind to do a thing, he won't rest until he has done it. If he didn't know where we were, he would just start systematically looking for us, and it

would be no use hoping that he would give up looking before he found us. And he would find us one day. There's something terribly inevitable about Selby. I've a feeling that, if he has made up his mind to—get rid of us, we shan't be in any more danger here than elsewhere. You might just as well stay on at Sunningbourne Lodge and be put out without tiring yourself out first by running away."

"Nita, for God's sake! How can you be so callous about it?"

"I'm not," she told him. "But it's no use making a face over your medicine. Where Selby is concerned I've learnt that it saves a lot of useless effort to give way to him."

"If you're suggesting that I should hang around and be bumped off by a murderous madman for something I haven't done—it isn't just!"

She smiled faintly.

"You're rather delicious, Frank," she said. "I suppose your conscience is absolutely clear?"

"Why shouldn't it be? I've done Selby no harm."

"Well, mine's not," she told him; "and after all, it was I who shot the bolt. Blessed be bolts, for they deliver us from temptation and keep us pure as the driven snow, so that when we go to bed at night we can thank God that we have never stolen another man's wife!"

He jammed his foot savagely on the self-starter.

"If I could only lay hands on that lease, I'd be out of the house in five minutes. But until I get it, I suppose the only thing is to hang on and risk it."

"And you really think that Selby will give you the lease—now?"

He frowned at that.

"It's just that that's worrying me. But you never know. I mean, if he's got anything at the back of his mind, he won't want to rouse my suspicions, and he might hand over the lease to—well, sort of keep on friendly terms, mightn't he?"

"He might; I suppose if he—I mean, if anything happened to you, Frank—the land would be his again and—"

"I say, my dear," he interrupted; "it has just occurred to me. The lease is signed—he told you so—and it must be somewhere about, and you must know where he'd be likely to put it, and if you could find it and hand it over, I could clear off at once. London would be best. You could shove a few things in a bag and come along, too."

She hesitated.

"It's not very—dignified—sneaking out of the back door...."

He gave an exasperated sigh.

"You're the queerest woman I've ever struck. Who cares a hang about dignity? When you're running away from a madman with a chopper you can't stop to powder your nose. And Dennis Sanderby is a madman." Still she hesitated.

"Scuttling away—like a couple of frightened rabbits," she said. "If I'm going, I'd rather—"

"Face him and tell him so? A fine dramatic scene and a good strong line for the heroine as she sweeps haughtily from the room?" He shook his head. "Not for me, anyway, thank you. If Selby knows that we're going to make a bolt for it, you don't suppose he'll stand at the door and wave good-bye to us, do you? If we're going, we've got to get away before he has a chance to prevent us. And the sooner the better, because God knows what he may try on us next. If you can only find that lease! You'll try, Nita, won't you?"

She sighed.

"All right, Frank; I'll try," she agreed.

Relief showed in his eyes.

"I say, that's frightfully sporting of you—"

"I don't feel a bit sporting," she interrupted curtly. "I feel—oh, well, it doesn't matter. You'd better drive back now. Selby will probably be in the garden, and it's up to you to keep him there while I—do the pilfering. When a woman steals from her husband, what do they call it? Is it burglary or larceny or theft or—"

"Oh, forget it!" he said impatiently. "You're terribly unfair, you know. After all, I want the lease as much for your sake as mine. You know that, don't you?"

She smiled faintly but did not reply.

He let in the clutch and turned the car.

Nita, as the car roared along the road, sat frowning thoughtfully at the needle of the speedometer: twenty—twenty-five—thirty—she supposed there was no other way out of it; she must leave Selby and go with Frank—thirty-five—Funny that she should be hesitating now.

She had been in a panic to get away last night, and now, when Frank suggested it, she wasn't at all sure. They were doing forty now. Frank was in a dreadful hurry to get his lease and be off. There was that black dispatch

box in the library; she had often seen Selby put papers tied with red tape into the dispatch box. Perhaps she had better look there first. Forty-five now, and the needle was still creeping round the dial. A terrible noise the exhaust was making. She never had understood why a sports car must always have such an ear-splitting exhaust. Fifty-two now. The speedometer was only marked up to eighty. Suppose you went ninety—what would the speedometer do? It would be strange with Frank at first. A little flat somewhere, she supposed—furnished. But she could pack away everything she didn't like....

She felt the car give a sudden lurch, heard Frank's muttered, "My God!" heard the screaming of brakes, felt the car slithering sickeningly sideways, glanced up, saw a tree sweep past, terribly close to her face, and the next instant she was flung violently forward.

She righted herself, gripping the side of the car, and glanced around. The machine, she realized, had stopped, though the engine still roared; but it was tilted perilously, with two wheels in the ditch and its radiator touching the hedge. Frank, very white, was still clutching the wheel with hands that shook violently.

"Frank, what—what happened?"

He turned and looked at her.

"You're not hurt?"

She shook her head.

"Scared, that's all. That tree—I thought we'd hit it. Phew!" She closed her eyes for a moment, resting her elbows on her knees and covering her face with her hands.

"You're sure you're all right?"

She nodded and sat upright.

"Give me a cigarette." When he had lighted it for her: "What was it—a skid?"

"Steering, by the feel of it," he told her. "She suddenly started swerving all over the place—wouldn't answer the wheel and Thank God, I had good brakes! We were doing nearly sixty. I can't understand—"

He got out, walked to the front of the car, went down on one knee and peered underneath.

"My God!" he breathed.

"What is it?"

He stood upright and walked back to the side of the car, frowning.

"According to all the rules of the game," he said, "we should both be dead."

She shrugged.

"We're not, anyway. At least, I don't think so, but you never know. They say that lots of people, when they're killed suddenly, don't realize that they are dead. Funny if we are dead, eh, Frank? It would be rather a relief really, wouldn't it? I mean, we shouldn't have to worry any more about Selby or the lease or the Laffan Hotel or Dennis Sanderby—"

"Pull yourself together, Nita, and don't talk rot," he interrupted sharply. "We're not dead. The steering went wrong. There's a bolt missing. How the deuce it got loose I can't think. It's damned queer. My God!" he exclaimed suddenly. "We ought to be dead—I see it now—that swine—he meant us to be dead—meant us to be smashed up—"

"Frank!"

"Who suggested you should come with me, Nita? Selby, didn't he? Because he knew what was going to happen, because he had arranged that it should happen, because—"

"Frank, you're crazy!"

"Am I? Listen! That bolt—it couldn't have got loose—not in ten years—unless it had been tampered with. But it had been tampered with—by that murderous swine. I remember now: he was in the garage this morning when I went to get the car out—tinkering with his car, he said. He seemed a bit startled when I went in—said he hadn't thought we'd be starting quite so soon—and then he began talking about my bus—said he didn't care much for the Welsh-Willis cars—didn't like their steering. He had heard of several cases where the steering had gone wrong, and advised me to keep my eye on it. I thought nothing of it at the time—I was too anxious to get away to pay much attention to what he was saying, but—"

"You mean that he—warned you?"

He nodded.

"Just the same as he warned his wife and his mother-in-law and his wife's lover, the same as he warned you yesterday about the catch-pit and the cream."

"But—"

"Now don't start trying to kid yourself that it was an accident. It wasn't, and you know it as well as I do, but just because you're his wife you've the idiotic idea that you must try to believe the best of him—even when he's doing his best to murder you. The sooner you make up your mind that Dennis Sanderby is a cold-blooded murderer, who has killed three people already and means to kill us, the better it will be for you. For two pins I'd go straight to the police—"

"You're rattled, Frank. You must be—badly—when you talk like that. How could you go to the police?"

"No, of course—I know that. All the same, going back to that house ... if it weren't for the lease ... I've half a mind to drop the whole business and clear out now. But how the deuce can I? For heaven's sake, Nita, see if you can find it and let's clear off at once, before he tries anything else. I can't stand much more of this sort of thing. It makes me sweat to think what might have happened—what he intended to happen."

"But it might only have been an accident," she interrupted. "You're rattled—so am I—and it's easy to imagine things. After all, it's not the first time the steering of a car has gone wrong."

"Oh, rot!" snapped O'Ryan. "You know it's rot." She was very thoughtful as they walked back to Sunningbourne Lodge.

## CHAPTER XII

CLIVE was in the library when they got back to Sunningbourne Lodge. They could see him, as they crossed the lawn, seated at his desk, and Nita paused and laid a hand on O'Ryan's arm.

"Pull yourself together, Frank, for heaven's sake," she said. "If Selby is really trying—I mean, if he did take that bolt out of the car—"

"There's no 'if' about it, Nita. Look at the man—sitting there as calmly as you like—waiting to hear that we've been smashed to bits. It's—it's inhuman. For two pins I'd go in and tell him—"

"That you know he's Dennis Sanderby?" said Nita. "That you know he's trying to murder you, that you know he tried to break my neck with his catch-pit, and to poison us both with the cream, and to smash us up this morning in the car?" She shook her head. "You won't do that—for several reasons. For one thing, you haven't the pluck. Sorry, Frank, but I can't somehow see you facing Selby across that desk and accusing him of attempted murder. You see, if it isn't true—"

He made a gesture of impatience, but she took no notice.

"I'm not saying it isn't true," she went on. "I'm as scared as you are, really, but I'm trying not to get in a panic about it. All I'm saying is that, if it weren't true, and you strode into the library and confronted him and accused him of having tried to kill you—well, I know just what Selby would do. He'd stare at you, quite calm and undisturbed, and say: 'Why should I want to kill you, O'Ryan?' And of course, if it weren't true, you couldn't possibly tell him why you thought he wanted to kill you, because, if you told him that, you'd be giving him a perfectly good reason for wanting to kill you, and he'd be quite likely to start getting busy about it there and then."

"Oh, what's the use of arguing?" he exclaimed impatiently. "All we've got to think about is getting that confounded lease and clearing out at once."

"And if it is true," she went on, "and he really does mean to kill you, you'd only be making everything much more awkward. If he knew that you'd discovered what he was trying to do, he wouldn't stop trying to do it; he'd just do it all the sooner—before you could get away—and be quite sure that there was no hitch next time. It's no use letting him see that you're scared, anyway. He may only be trying, after all, to scare you away—to make you clear off and have nothing more to do with me."

"Oh, talk sense, Nita! If he only wanted to scare me off he wouldn't offer me poisoned cream, and he wouldn't try to smash us both up. You seem to forget that we're both in this. You're in just as much danger as I am."

"No, I haven't forgotten that, Frank," she said. "I'm only just trying to calm you down a bit before we go indoors and see him. Feeling better? Now somehow, if I'm to find that lease, we've got to get him out of the house, and it'll be up to you to keep him out. The longer the better. If I manage to find it I'll come out at once."

She saw Clive glance up from his writing, rise from his chair, and come sauntering towards them, puffing his pipe, across the lawn.

"Back already?" he said. "I hardly expected you so soon."

"We've had a smash, Selby," interrupted Nita. "At least, we nearly had a smash. The car's in a terrible mess, anyway."

"You're not hurt, Nita?"

She shook her head.

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed her husband fervently. "Nor you, O'Ryan?"

"Frank's all right," Nita told him. "He's a bit shaken—naturally. So am I. It was just as we were coming down the hill. I thought we'd hit the tree and—phew! I don't know how we missed it. You can thank Frank, Selby, that you've still got a wife."

He glanced at O'Ryan with a smile.

"Thank you for my wife, O'Ryan," he said. "I needn't tell you how grateful I am for what you've done, need I?"

O'Ryan's eyes searched his face.

"That's all right, sir," he said, as casually as he could. "After all, in a case like that, one acts from sheer instinct. Luckily, I did the right thing."

Clive nodded.

"Instinct? Yes, I suppose so—to some extent. But it isn't every man who has an instinct to do the right thing. It may seem a little unfair, because a man, I suppose, is not altogether responsible for his instincts, but if his instinct urges him to do a wrong thing he usually has to suffer for it."

"Selby," began Nita, "we don't really feel like listening to a lecture on psychology."

"I'm sorry, my dear. Prosing again, was I? What happened, O'Ryan?"

"The steering," said O'Ryan. "Quite suddenly—as we were going down the hill—the steering failed. We were doing nearly sixty at the time."

Clive nodded.



"Then you've really no right to be alive, either of you," he said. "I never did like the steering of the Welsh-Willis. I told you so, O'Ryan, didn't I? This isn't the first accident due to faulty steering."

"Accident!" exclaimed O'Ryan.

Nita glanced at him quickly. His lips were working; his hands clenched, and he was staring at Selby with eyes that were suddenly blazing with hatred. He surely wasn't going to be fool enough—

"Accident!" he repeated in a queer, strained voice.

"It was no more an accident—"

"Frank, don't be so stupid!" Nita cut in sharply. "Of course it was an accident; what else could it be?" She turned to her husband and hurried on. "Frank's all shaken up, Selby," she explained, "and won't have it that it was an accident. Not—not an ordinary sort of accident, I mean. He says it was—carelessness. The garage people can't have put one of the bolts in properly, and Frank says that's criminal carelessness."

She waved a hand towards the deck chairs on the lawn.

"Sit down, Frank," she said, "and keep quiet for a bit. You've had a nasty shock, but you'll soon feel better. Selby will stay and talk to you; you can tell him when I'm out of earshot just what you think of the garage people."

Clive took the younger man by the arm and led him towards the chairs.

"Take it easy for a bit, O'Ryan," he said. "I'm not surprised that you're feeling rather rocky. From all you've told me, I fancy you've both been as near to death as you ever will be." He took out his cigarette case, opened it, and held it towards O'Ryan as he sprawled in a chair. "You smoke too much, you know," he laughed, "and it's a bad habit. But you've deserved a smoke this morning."

O'Ryan's hand went towards the case; and then it suddenly paused, and he sat for several seconds staring at the case, frowning, as though he suspected that if he touched it, it would sting him.

"Thanks, sir, but I won't smoke," he said, and thrust his hand into his pocket.

With a shrug, Clive turned to Nita.

"You, Nita?"

She shook her head.

"My own specials," he told her. "Very strong and very bad for you, but one of them would calm your nerves."

She shook her head again.

"They're poison, Selby," she laughed. "You've often told me so. I'm going up to my room for a bit. Take care of Frank, won't you?"

She went into the house and up to her bedroom. She took off her hat, spent some minutes at her dressing table. She could not rely on O'Ryan, she felt, to occupy Selby for very long; he was far too frightened for her to be able to depend on him for anything. She was frightened herself—frightened of Selby, of Muller, of Lane, and very frightened of Dennis Sanderby. She was afraid to stay on at Sunningbourne Lodge, yet afraid of what the future might hold for her if she left it. Two days ago she had felt that she could not face a future in which Frank O'Ryan had no place, and the feeling that she would be injuring her husband had been swamped by the thoughts of the happiness which was going to be hers. But Frank, when they were having dinner together at the Laffan, had suddenly dispersed the haze of glamour through which she had been viewing the future and made her see clearly what lay ahead. And the landscape had been so different from the fairyland to which she had imagined that Frank would take her that she had faltered and turned back. Once or twice, since her return, she had faintly regretted that she had not mustered up the courage to hide her disappointment and go on. The landscape, perhaps, might have proved more attractive on closer inspection; life with Frank, she had felt, even on his terms, could scarcely be less attractive than life at Sunningbourne Lodge.

But the regrets had only been vague regrets—shadows that passed over her mind so swiftly that she was scarcely aware of them, and the more she realized that circumstances were forcing her towards a future which included Frank and excluded Selby, the more reluctant she became to set out on that road. Shocked as she had been by the discovery that she was the wife of Dennis Sanderby, and realizing, as she did more and more clearly, that her only safe plan was to leave Sunningbourne Lodge at once, she caught herself remembering not so much her horror of Dennis Sanderby and the danger which threatened her as her admiration for Selby Clive and the sense of security which he had brought to her. There would be no sense of security with Frank, no relying on him as she had come to rely on Selby. Life with Frank would be a risky, haphazard business....

She got up suddenly and hurried downstairs. It was absurd to start getting sentimental over Selby. Selby Clive, to all intents and purposes, no longer existed; she had to deal with Dennis Sanderby now, and there was no time to be lost. The lease must be found, and they must go. There was no other way out of it all. Another night in the house with Dennis Sanderby ... She shuddered.

She went into the library and cast an anxious glance towards the garden. O'Ryan and her husband were still there, sitting in the deck chairs, their

backs towards the house, and with a sigh of relief she crossed to the writing desk and began hastily searching through the papers that lay on it. There was no lease among them, and she turned her attention to the drawers, hurriedly taking out the bundles of papers, glancing through them and replacing them carefully. She spent ten minutes searching the desk; but the lease was not there, and she began to go through the papers in the black dispatch box that stood on the floor beside the safe, pausing every now and then to shoot a hurried glance at the two deck chairs on the lawn.

She closed the dispatch box and stood, frowning, beside the desk. The lease was not there. Queer. Selby had distinctly told her that he had signed it. But she knew of no other place to look, and Frank would not budge without it, and she could hardly run away herself and leave Frank to face the music alone....

Her glance fell on a small key that lay on the desk. She picked it up, frowning thoughtfully. It was the key of Selby's secret "Safe Deposit," as he called it—a small steel safe built into the wall and hidden by a picture, specially for her jewelry. Selby, no doubt, had had it open to put away the bracelet—eight hundred pounds' worth of bad taste. She had not given a thought to the jewelry, but if she were going away she would need money for herself—and Frank, too, probably—and there was jewelry worth several thousands in the "Safe Deposit." She could hardly ask Selby for it. She rarely wore any of it, and he would wonder why she should suddenly want it. He must not be allowed to wonder. If they were to get away in safety, he must be given no cause to suspect.

She crossed the room swiftly, raised the picture, and inserted the key in the lock. And then, just as she was turning it, she heard footsteps, withdrew the key, replaced the picture, and went towards the French windows, tossing the key onto the desk as she passed. O'Ryan and her husband were crossing the terrace.

"Just coming to find you," she said. "Better, Frank?"

He nodded.

"And you, Nita?"

She read the question in his eyes and gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

"No luck," she said. "I've got a fiendish headache—nearly as bad as if we had hit the tree."

Clive picked up the key from the desk, slipped it casually into his pocket, and lolled against the mantelpiece.

"I've been thinking, O'Ryan," he said. "As your car is out of commission, you had better use my Packard, if you want one."

"Thanks very much, sir."

"I can promise you that won't go wrong. I'm something of a motor mechanic myself—I can do my own repairs at a pinch. If there's anything wrong with a car when it goes out, I generally know."

"I'm sure of that, sir," said O'Ryan.

"Then it's a pity you didn't look at Frank's before we took it out this morning, Selby," said Nita. "As it is, he has missed his appointment at Windsor—something important about that land you're leasing to him—and now he'll have to make the trip tonight. You'll take me, Frank, won't you? We could go after dinner. I daresay Selby will be glad to get rid of us—eh, Selby?"

"Go by all means, my dear—if you're not nervous. And that reminds me, O'Ryan. I'm expecting to have that lease today. Muller took it up to the Canadian government office for registration, and it will be coming along some time today. Muller realizes that it's urgent."

"Thanks very much, sir. Then I—I shall be able to get busy right away?"

Clive nodded.

"It's awfully good of you, Selby," said Nita. "Taking all this trouble, I mean. Frank was telling me this morning that he's terribly grateful."

"No trouble at all, my dear," he smiled. "I like to give a start to a good fellow. There are so few young men nowadays one feels inclined to help. Most of those I've met lately seem to have no other thought than sport and women—usually married women."

"I didn't realize that you studied young men so closely, Selby."

"Oh, I know a few. Bright specimens they are, too! Still, I don't blame them so much as the women who encourage them. Of course, it isn't so—I know that from experience—but you'd think that if a woman had a husband and a decent home she'd be satisfied with life and wouldn't always want to be chasing after something fresh."

Nita laughed nervously.

"Women are queer creatures, Selby, and if you understood them a little better I daresay you might blame them less. A woman often gets blamed for things she hasn't done. Men are only too ready to think the worst of her."

She was speaking bitterly, with unusual vehemence, and her husband glanced at her in surprise.

"Sorry, my dear," he said. "But I'm not blaming you for something you haven't done, so don't take what I said to heart. It's all this modern tendency among young people to dynamite the common decencies of life that I can't stand." He paused as he strolled towards his desk, and clapped a hand on O'Ryan's shoulder. "But you're not the philandering sort, eh, O'Ryan?"

"I hope not, sir."

"I'm sure." He picked up his hat from a chair and went towards the door. "I'm going down to the plantation, my dear," he said. "The gardener says there's a hawk giving trouble down there—he took three of the young chickens the other day. Care to stroll down with me?"

"No—er—no, Selby, if you don't mind, I—I'd rather not. I've got a splitting headache."

"Headache? Then I've got the very stuff for you, my dear." He went to the writing desk and began searching in a drawer. "A man recommended it to me the other day; he told me it was wonderful. Where the devil did I put it? Ah, here we are—Neurolin. You ought not to take more than one tablet; it's rather bad for the heart if you take too much. In the right dose, it's miraculous. I'll get you a glass of water."

"No, Selby, please—don't trouble. Perhaps I'll take it later."

"No time like now when you've a headache, my dear."

She shook her head.

"I'd rather not—please. I'll have a cup of tea."

"As you like." He replaced the small bottle in the drawer and again went towards the door. "There was something I wanted to say to you, O'Ryan," he said, pausing with his hand on the knob. "It has been at the back of my mind ever since you came back, but I can't for the life of me remember Oh, yes, I know; that was it. So you stayed at the Laffan the night before last, eh?"

"The Laffan?" O'Ryan nodded. "Quite a good spot. I thought I told you, sir."

Clive smiled.

"No; you were so diplomatically vague when I inquired where you had stayed that I thought it indiscreet to press you. Jerry Muller was on the telephone to me this morning, and he happened to mention the fact. The floor valet told him. He knows you, apparently."

"But—but so was I, Frank," said Nita. She forced herself to say it, but her voice was strained as she spoke, and her eyes sought O'Ryan's anxiously "If only I'd known, we might have had dinner together."

"Quite," replied O'Ryan. "But it's a large place, and I had no idea you were there. I thought you were still in Scotland."

"Enormous place," agreed Clive. "Staying there is like being a member of the Royal Automobile Club—you don't know your fellow members until you run them down. Nice hotel, though. That continental system of intercommunicating rooms—very convenient, eh, O'Ryan?"

O'Ryan shrugged.

"Can't say, sir," he replied. "I only had one room." The older man smiled.

"Innocence!" he laughed. "You'll do, my boy!"

For some moments after he had left them neither Nita nor O'Ryan spoke.

Then:

"Nita?"

"Well?"

"You heard that—about the Laffan?"

She nodded.

"But it doesn't—necessarily—mean anything," she said nervously. "He's absolutely childish about the Laffan and its suites. I've told him a dozen times that they are the same in every big hotel, but he has never stayed anywhere else but the Laffan."

"Damn the Laffan!" exclaimed O'Ryan viciously. "I wish I'd never seen the place." He began restlessly pacing the room. "He doesn't necessarily mean anything, you say, Nita? Well, you can believe that if you like. As a matter of fact, you don't really believe it any more than I do, but you're scared stiff and you're trying to persuade yourself that you do! Why don't you face facts?"

"As calmly and coolly and unflinchingly as you do, eh, Frank?"

"And the biggest fact you've got to face"—he ignored the irony—"is Dennis Sanderby."

"I don't doubt that fact, Frank. It would be idiotic to doubt that Selby is Dennis Sanderby."

"And yet you wonder if he means anything when he talks like that! You can take it from me that he means every word he says—and a damned sight more. He's just playing with us, puzzling us, trying to get us rattled, wondering how much we can stand without giving the game away, keeping us guessing how much he knows. It's devilish. And all the time he's—what was it Whitcombe called him? Suave—a suave, charming gentleman. He's suave enough!"

Nita sighed.

"I wish to God you'd go now, Frank, and leave me to it," she said wearily.

"The lease will be here today." He laughed scornfully.

"Here today! You don't believe that yarn, do you? I don't believe he has ever signed it; and if he has signed it, I'll bet any money you like it has never left the house."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm not a fool, Nita," he went on, "not half such a fool as Selby seems to think me, anyway. He thinks he's being frightfully subtle, but it's as clear as daylight what game he's playing. I see the whole idea now, though I'm hanged if I see how to cope with it. That story about Muller taking the lease up to London for registration—it's all bunkum—lies—just an excuse for keeping me hanging on here so that he can try out some other ingenious scheme for doing me in. It's a jolly sort of feeling, isn't it—never knowing when he may have another cut at us?"

"Then why wait for the lease?"

"Because I must have it—you know that. Besides, what would he think if I went off suddenly without it? It would be as good as confessing. I can't go."

"Then if you mean to stop here," said the girl, "for heaven's sake, pull yourself together and don't make it quite so clear to Selby that he has got you badly rattled. That cigarette—in the garden. You stared at it as if it were some poisonous reptile, and I was terrified that Selby would notice. Why on earth didn't you take one?"

"Why didn't you?" sneered O'Ryan. "And why didn't you take a Neurolin tablet for your headache? I'll tell you why: because you were afraid that if you did you'd never have the chance of getting another headache. You were probably right, but, for heaven's sake, don't sneer at me for being rattled when you're just as badly rattled yourself."

For some time he paced the room in silence, and then he suddenly halted.

"Hang it, Nita!" he exclaimed. "It's all so damnably unfair. I'm being blamed for something that never happened. I wouldn't care so much if he had any sort of reason for having a grudge against me, but he hasn't."

"Hasn't he?"

"Nobody knows that better than you do, Nita."

"I wasn't thinking of that," she said thoughtfully. "I was thinking that he might very well have quite a different grievance against you. Suppose he knows that, besides trying to swindle him over his wife, you're also doing your best to swindle him over the Tamagari property?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Don't you?" She smiled. "More innocence, eh? Very well. Then suppose Selby knows all the time that there is silver in the land, and knows that you know it?" O'Ryan glanced at her uneasily.

"I never thought of that. Of course, I don't know for certain," he added hastily, "that there is silver there, but there may be, and Selby isn't a fool. If he was wise enough to have the land prospected ... What makes you say that, Nita?"

"It struck me as possible, that's all," she replied. "Selby is wise, and Muller's wiser. Muller believes there's silver in the land; he told me so—asked me to see if I could stop Selby presenting you with a million dollars. Selby of

course does do the most quixotic things, but I can't see even him, just because a young man isn't of the philandering sort, giving him a million dollars. I shouldn't be at all surprised if the lease is only a bait. If Selby knows about the silver, and thinks you know about it, he will know that you won't easily be persuaded to clear off until you've got it, and that if the car accident wasn't successful, he will have plenty of time, provided he hangs up the lease, to try some other method."

"H'm! I shouldn't wonder—oh, of course you're right. But can't we do something? Hang it, there must be something we can do."

She shrugged her shoulders and went listlessly towards the door.

"I say, Nita, where—where are you going?"

"I really don't know," she replied carelessly; and then she swung round and faced him. "What does it matter to you where I'm going?" she demanded.

"You don't want me to stand by you and hold your hand all the time, do you?"

"That's offensive. But we're both in this, and it's no use quarrelling. And it's no use getting scared and letting this Sanderby fellow have everything his own way. I don't intend to, anyway. If anything happens to you, I'll make it my business to see that he doesn't get away with it."

"Many thanks. That's tremendously comforting. And if anything should happen to you, don't worry, will you? I'll tell Selby how terribly unfair he has been." O'Ryan frowned.

"Cheap sarcasm doesn't help," he remarked, strolling towards the windows.

"You seem to think I'm scared of Selby: well, I'm not. I was a bit rattled just now—anybody would be after a narrow shave like I had—but I'm not scared, whatever you may think. I don't mean to let the swine have everything his own way."

"You make me feel almost safe, Frank."

He leaned against the French windows, gazing out across the lawn with a confident smile. As he did so, a shot rang out in the garden.



### CHAPTER XIII

O'RYAN started violently and cringed back.

"My God! What was that?"

As he spoke there came the sound of a second shot. "Frank—quick—stand away from that window!" He turned a scared face towards her and stood motionless, staring at her helplessly, and she stepped quickly forward, grasped his arm, and pulled him back into the room. He was trembling, his face deathly pale, his lips twitching.

"Somebody—fired at me."

"You're not hurt?"

He shook his head.

"The moment I appeared at the window they let fly—two shots—"

She turned from him, crossed to the fireplace and pressed the button of the electric bell.

"That swine!" muttered O'Ryan. "He might easily have got me. If I had gone out onto the terrace ... Look here, Nita, I can't stand much more of this sort of thing."

The door was opened, and Lane came in.

"You rang, madam?"

"What was that shooting, Lane?"

"It was Mr. Clive, I fancy, madam—down at the plantation. I noticed that he took his gun with him."

"Gun? Rot!" exclaimed O'Ryan excitedly. "Somebody fired a rifle—two shots." Lane turned and glanced at him in surprise, and a faint smile flickered across his face.

"A gun, sir," he repeated. "I heard the reports. A rifle makes quite a different noise. And Mr. Clive would hardly use a rifle—"

"All right, Lane, thank you," interrupted Nita. Lane went out, and she glanced across at O'Ryan. "You heard, Frank? It was a shotgun. Selby is probably after rabbits."

"You can't tell me, Nita. That was a rifle. I don't care a hang what Lane says. Of course Lane wouldn't give him away: he's in with him—like Muller. Nita, for God's sake—first the car, and now this. You—you've got to do something."

"What do you suppose I can do?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's no use asking me. But there must be some way of putting things right. Couldn't you—talk to him? Hang it, you're his wife, and you must have some sort of influence. I mean, he'd be more likely to listen to you than to me. It's all so damnably unreasonable."

"And you're suggesting that I should try to reason with him? Let's try to be practical, Frank. Do you really believe that if I tell Selby the truth—that I went to the Laffan without telling him, that I met you there, that my room was next to yours—booked by you—with a communicating door, but that it was all perfectly innocent because I shot the bolt and ran away first thing in the morning—do you really believe that he'd swallow the story? He'd swallow all except the innocence, and you couldn't blame him."

"I'm not suggesting anything of the sort," snapped O'Ryan. "But you could—well, sort of suggest to him that everything is all right. Between you and him, I mean. If you were a bit more demonstrative—let him see that you're terribly fond of him—he might realize that he's making a ghastly mistake. Try, Nita, won't you? If you could get him alone—it should be dead easy. When he comes to your room—"

"He doesn't come to my room."

At the sound of footsteps she turned her head and saw Clive, with a gun under his arm, coming across the terrace.

"Got the brute with the second barrel," he announced, setting his gun in the corner. "No more will he kill my little chickens."

"It was you shooting, Selby?"

He nodded.

"I told you I was going down to find him, didn't I? I say, Nita, I'm sorry—I forgot your headache. What a brute I am!"

"Oh, that—that didn't matter at all, Selby. I—I—the headache's gone. A hawk, was it?"

"A kestrel. I hate 'em—all things that prey on their fellows. They're just like some people I know—never happy unless they are hurting and tearing and maiming for the love of it. If I had my way I'd treat people like that in the same way—only I'd use a rifle."

"You must be a pretty good shot, sir," remarked O'Ryan. "A kestrel takes some hitting. Have you ever used a rifle?"

"Often," Clive told him. "But I'm not such a good shot as I used to be—unfortunately. That's a nice head of moose in the billiard room. I got him up in northern Ontario. Fond of shooting?"

"When he's behind the gun, Selby," laughed Nita, "and not in front of it."

Clive smiled.

"Like the bolts at the Laffan, eh, O'Ryan? It depends on which side of the door they are. Well, you'll find plenty of good shooting on the Tamagari land—if you ever get there."

"But why—why shouldn't he get there, Selby?"

"Well, you never know, my dear," replied her husband; "he may not go out there himself. A man who owns coal mines doesn't necessarily live down the pit." He went towards the windows. "I'm going to have a go at the new pergola, Nita," he said. "If it's left to the workmen, it won't be done this year, by the look of things. If you're feeling energetic, O'Ryan, you can come and lend a hand."

"Sorry, sir, but I've a phone call to make, if I may," said O'Ryan. "About the car. I must arrange with the garage to fetch it in, or I shall have the police after me." Clive nodded.

"Telephone in the hall," he said. "Hamlin's is the best garage. But you needn't worry yourself about the police around here; they're more than half asleep. There were burglaries all over the place last year, but the police were too absorbed in measuring the number plates of cars to take notice of burglaries. I've always said—haven't I, Nita?—that if I wanted to commit a murder I should lure my victim into this police area before I set about killing him."

Nita watched him as he crossed the lawn until he disappeared behind the bank of rambler roses, and then she turned and glanced at O'Ryan. He was standing by the door with a hand on the knob, frowning thoughtfully.

"I say, Nita, I was just saying, when Selby came in—"

"I'm not likely to forget what you were saying."

"Well, it's worth thinking over. I believe you could put things right if you tackled him properly—vamped him a bit."

"Go and telephone, Frank." There was a warning note in her voice and a warning look in her eyes, but he did not notice them.

"After all," he went on, "Selby's pretty fond of you—naturally. Who wouldn't be? And if you play your cards properly—let him see that—that you're willing—"

Nita sprang to her feet.

"For God's sake," she exclaimed angrily, "go and telephone! Do you hear? Get out of this room before I ring for Lane and have you thrown out!"

"Good heavens! What on earth—you don't understand—"

"Oh, you needn't fear that I haven't understood," she interrupted. "Your meaning is perfectly plain—disgustingly plain. So long as your skin is saved, it doesn't matter what foul thing I do. So long as Selby can be persuaded that you're the faithful friend and spotless gentleman, you don't care what beastliness—" She paused abruptly, turned from him, and seated himself in her chair again. "Just get out—that's all," she said.

She heard the door opened and closed and gave a sigh of relief. So that was Frank's solution! She was to lay herself out to be pleasant to Selby—"vamp him a bit"—lure him on, make him realize that she was quite prepared to stop being a mean little swine to him and was ready to fulfil her part of the bargain. She was to dangle a tempting morsel in front of him, play on his feelings until passion swamped his reason and made him either tolerant of her lapse or forgetful of his suspicions, and then, she supposed, when she was quite sure that Frank was no longer in danger, Selby was to have his reward. And Frank was willing that she should so degrade herself; it struck him as a happy way out of the mess into which they had landed themselves that she should barter herself for his safety, play the prostitute to save his precious skin and secure his precious lease. And only two days ago she had believed that he really loved her, had been willing, because of his love, to sacrifice everything for him. Well, so much for Frank's love!

But he was right; something must be done. Her thoughts turned to her husband. Suppose she were to go to him and make a clean breast of the whole business? She felt that it would be putting a severe strain on his credulity. If she could have done it at once—before he had heard of it from some other quarter—he might possibly have believed her; but now, when he must surely know that she was aware he suspected her, he could hardly fail to look on her story as a ruse to appease him and avert the consequences. It was hardly the sort of ruse that would impress Dennis Sanderby.

Yet she was, she discovered, desperately anxious that Selby should know the truth and believe it. Whether or no she could avert the consequences was not, strangely enough, the most important question at the moment. What mattered was that Selby should believe her, that he should readmit her to his confidence, that he should not think badly of her. She had a feeling that in forfeiting his confidence she had suffered an irreparable loss, and the fact that Selby and Dennis Sanderby were one and the same person did not lessen the loss. She wondered whether even now it might not be possible to repair the damage. If she had never looked into that secret drawer of his desk she would never have known of Dennis Sanderby, and she wondered whether, if she had not come to know that secret of her husband's past, she could have told him everything and trusted him to understand and forgive. Probably she could. Selby was nothing if not just. It was this knowledge that he was Dennis Sanderby that was holding her

back. Yet Dennis Sanderby, she supposed, was just; ruthless, perhaps, but surely his revenge had a touch of justice about it. And for twenty years Selby had been Selby Clive, not Dennis Sanderby. Perhaps even now it might be possible to forget that he had ever been Dennis Sanderby, whom she had never known, to think of him only as Selby Clive, whom she had always admired and respected, upon whom she had always relied, who had so many points about him that any sane woman desires in a husband, whom she had so often felt that she might so easily love....

Her thoughts were interrupted by the return of O'Ryan.

"Cooled off, Nita?" he inquired.

"Feeling quite frigid, thanks."

"Sorry I upset you, but there was no need to boil over like that. After all, there's nothing to shock even your Puritan mind in the suggestion that a wife should play the game with her husband. When all is said and done, it's pretty tough for old Selby."

"May I suggest, Frank, that you should mind your own business?"

"Isn't it my business? You've a queer way of looking at things, Nita. I'm to run the risk of getting a bullet in my head for something I haven't done, simply because you don't feel inclined to take the one course which would convince your husband that he's the only man in the world you care for, and it's not my business. It's pretty rotten for me, feeling as I do about you, to have to agree to that sort of thing, but I'm sensible enough to see that I've got to grin and bear it. Selby is your husband, and I realize that he has first claim—"

She had sprung to her feet and was facing him with furious eyes. Then, as suddenly, she turned from him. "Frank," she said calmly, "you make me feel sick." There came a tap on the door, and Lane appeared. "Sir Ralph Whitcombe, madam," he announced. Nita nodded.

"Show him in here, Lane," she said. "And you need not disturb Mr. Clive; he's busy in the garden."

Lane disappeared, and a moment later Sir Ralph, attache case in hand, came into the room.

"Ah, good-morning, Mrs. Clive. Good-morning, O'Ryan. A rather untimely visit, I'm afraid, Mrs. Clive, but you will, I am sure, make allowances." He tapped his attache case, smiling. "We writing folks are inclined to believe that everything must be sacrificed to our work, and there are several points in this Sanderby case—points connected with Canadian police methods and so on—in which I thought your husband—"

O'Ryan cut him short.

"I don't imagine Mr. Clive would be of much help to you, Sir Ralph."

"Indeed? You surprise me. I should have thought that, having spent so many years of his life in Canada—"

"Oh, it's not that, Sir Ralph," interrupted Nita. "I suppose Selby must know all about Canada, but—well, he hates anything horrible or sordid. He will never even read the accounts of murders in the newspapers because they always depress him terribly."

"Indeed," repeated Sir Ralph, raising his bushy eyebrows. "I should not have thought of your husband as a particularly sensitive man, Mrs. Clive."

"He is—dreadfully—about that kind of thing. I meant to ask you yesterday, Sir Ralph, when you were telling us about that awful Sanderby man, but it slipped my mind. Will you promise, Sir Ralph, as a great personal favour to me, never to mention this Sanderby case—or any other gruesome case like it—to my husband?"

"My dear Mrs. Clive—certainly—I will on no account mention the matter. We lawyers, I'm afraid, come to look on these things in such an impersonal and coldblooded way that we are apt to forget that there is anything horrible about them. I hope I did not distress you yesterday."

"Not a bit," she laughed. "Mr. O'Ryan and I are tremendously interested, aren't we, Frank? Did Selby expect you this morning, Sir Ralph?"

"Well, no, I did not say definitely that I should be coming over—merely that I might. As a matter of fact, I was hoping that Mr. Muller would be here; he is the person I am really anxious to see. A very intelligent type of Colonial, I thought him. And your carnations, Mrs. Clive—I am very anxious to have a glimpse of them. I may be a duffer at law, but I do know something about carnations."

Nita smiled.

"You can see the carnations, Sir Ralph—if you'll promise to be complimentary; but I'm afraid Mr. Muller isn't here."

"Ah! Most unfortunate," said Whitcombe. "There is a little lacuna in my data concerning this—er—these Sanderby murders—though I've no right to call them murders, I suppose, since the man was not convicted. I was hoping that your Canadian friend might be able to give me some guidance."

"There's the British Museum," suggested O'Ryan, with a hint of impatience. "You'd probably find all the details you want in the library."

Sir Ralph nodded.

"An excellent idea," he agreed. "But I want to know very little really. This man Dennis Sanderby is reported to have changed his name. I have no proof of that, but there seems a strong probability that he did so."

"Sounds likely, anyway," said O'Ryan.

"I want, if I can, to secure some sort of confirmation on that point," the elderly lawyer explained. "You have no idea, Mrs. Clive, how absorbed one can get in a subject like this Sanderby case. Even in bed I find myself lying awake and thinking out the various problems it presents. The more one studies it, the more remarkable the case appears. A curious point is that the man Sanderby seems to have faded entirely out of view."

"He's probably dead," remarked O'Ryan.

Sir Ralph shook his head.

"No," he said. "Had he died, there would be some record of his death. Fortunately Bennett, of the Home Office, is staying with the Boscombes, and I have been able to ask his advice. He suggests that I should approach the Royal Canadian Police for information. For all we know, the man may be in England, living under an assumed name."

"Hardly likely, is it, Sir Ralph?" said Nita.

"Why, Mrs. Clive?" replied Whitcombe. "In my opinion, nothing is more likely than that he should have come to this country. I always say that if we could get a list of everybody who is living in this country—or in London alone—we should be astonished at the names that would appear on it—some famous, some infamous. We never know, when we pass along a London street, who the person may be who jostles us. He may have occupied a throne or a condemned cell—there's no telling. That is the fascination of London. This man Sanderby, three times a murderer—we may have actually rubbed elbows with him—met him, even! He may be living among us as a rich man, an honoured citizen, or he may be skulking among the denizens of the underworld—"

Nita cut short the harangue.

"Have you written to the Canadian Police?"

"I have done better than that, Mrs. Clive: I have telegraphed—at deferred rates. I prepaid a reply and am hoping to receive an answer today. If the man is in England—dear me—yes, it would be most interesting if we could trace him and get into touch with him. He could no doubt give me much interesting matter. A murder trial from the point of view of the prisoner in the dock, his emotions during the ordeal—a fascinating psychological study."

"What sort of man was Sanderby?" inquired O'Ryan. "What position did he hold?"

"He was a—ah—man of substance, apparently," said Sir Ralph; "a landowner with large interests in city property in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton."

"And a suave man, eh?"

"Suave? Curious that you should say that, O'Ryan." He opened his attache case and began rummaging inside. "I've still got my little chill-destroyer, Mrs. Clive," he smiled, holding up the small flask-shaped bottle of vodka.

He replaced it, took out a bundle of newspaper cuttings, and began looking through them.

"Ah, here we are," he went on. "Listen to this: it is a description, written during Sanderby's trial, by a reporter—evidently quite a superior kind of reporter. He says: 'Dennis Sanderby was the only person in court who was not affected by the medical evidence. He leaned back in his chair and spoke smilingly to the officer by his side. A good-looking man with a ready smile, a pleasing manner, a disarming air of innocence, it was difficult to imagine that this suave man was accused of sending these people to their deaths.'"

Nita rose.

"It's all rather—nasty, isn't it?"

"Frightfully interesting, though," said O'Ryan. "Go on, Sir Ralph; let's hear some more about the blighter."

Sir Ralph hesitated, glancing at Nita.

"If this distresses you at all, Mrs. Clive ... I can assure you that there is nothing unpleasant in this—no gruesome details."

"Very well, Sir Ralph," she smiled; "I'll trust your judgment. Please read on. Frank has a terrible taste for horrors."

The lawyer returned to the newspaper cutting.

"It was impossible to conceive that Sanderby had daily intercourse with his victims, joked with them, had the appearance of genial good-fellowship, and never once betrayed himself, never once aroused their suspicions that he had discovered their secret. A ruthless man pursuing his inexorable way, unmoved by pity, not to be turned aside from his purpose—"

He paused and peered at them above his glasses. "That is perilously near contempt of court. The reporter's eloquence, I am afraid, ran away with his discretion. Had I been conducting the defense of Sanderby I should certainly have objected to that sentence. However ... 'He smiled when the coachman



gave evidence that the wheels of Mrs. Sanderby's carriage had been tampered with before she took a drive on a very dangerous hill."

O'Ryan started.

"The wheels—tampered with? Good God!" He caught Nita's eye and checked himself. "Pleasant sort of bloke, by the sound of things," he said. "And he got away with it! Just because he had a clever lawyer to defend him, a man like Sanderby is let loose on the world to do the same sort of thing again—"

He paused abruptly as Selby Clive came in from the terrace.

"Hullo, Whitcombe!" he said pleasantly. "Sorry Jerry isn't back yet, but he'll be along later. What's happening? O'Ryan giving a lecture?"

The lawyer gathered up the newspaper cuttings, hastily stuffed them into his attache case and closed it.

"I was just reading an extract from my book, Clive—my forthcoming book," he explained. "Your wife was good enough to pretend to be interested."

"Well, carry on," urged Clive. "I'd like to hear it. What is it this time? Some more of that light and airy stuff about Canals and Waterways?"

"No—er—I—as a matter of fact—" He saw that Nita, behind Clive's back, was shaking her head and frowning, and hurriedly picked up his attache case. "Some other time, Clive," he said. "I really came to see that Canadian friend of yours, you know. There are one or two points concerning Canadian affairs on which I should like to consult him. You might phone me if he returns, will you? Or perhaps you could tell me—"

"I'll phone you, Sir Ralph," interposed Nita. "Selby never remembers anything."

"That's hardly true," smiled her husband. "The trouble with some things is not to remember them but to forget them. If there's any information I can give you about Canada, Whitcombe—"

"Some other time, please, Selby," said Nita. "Sir Ralph is going to see my carnations now. Carnations are much more interesting than Canada."

"Ah, yes—the carnations," said Sir Ralph, obviously relieved. "I'd forgotten them for the moment. One gets so absorbed in these—er—dear me, yes, the carnations."

"Mr. O'Ryan will show them to you—won't you, Frank? And you may pick the best, Sir Ralph—provided you tell me what you really think of them. I don't want compliments."

O'Ryan stepped eagerly towards the French windows. "This way, Sir Ralph," he said.

The lawyer, following him, paused as he stepped out onto the terrace.

"I warn you, Mrs. Clive," he said, with a smile: "after all I've heard of your carnations I'm expecting a great deal, and I'm a very severe critic."

She nodded.

"Men always are, Sir Ralph," she laughed.

## CHAPTER XIV

WITH a sigh of relief Nita sank into the corner of the Chesterfield and glanced up at her husband as he stood lolling against the mantelpiece, absorbed in filling his pipe. If only she dared tell him everything—now—while she had him alone! After all, why shouldn't she? If she had not known that he was Dennis Sanderby, she would not have been afraid to tell him, and the fact that she had come by that knowledge had not changed him from the man she had known. She wanted badly to put things right with him; and she wanted it, not because, if he came to believe in her again, she—and Frank—might be free from danger; it would, incidentally, have that effect, but that was not her chief object. She was sure of that. She felt that, if she were to attempt to win back Selby's confidence, she must be sure of that first, satisfied beyond all doubt in her own mind that it was not fear that prompted her. Frank, of course, should she succeed, would never believe her. He would believe, at the best, that fear of what might happen to her had forced her to do it, and that she was only salving her Puritan conscience by pretending that she had acted from the purest motives. But it did not matter much what Frank thought. If she could bring herself to broach the subject, to say those first few words...

She felt her heart throbbing furiously, and her throat ached. She drew in her breath sharply, held it, pressing her teeth against her lip as she gazed at Selby, still busy with his pipe. Her lips parted.

"Selby!"

He glanced up at her.

"So O'Ryan has special privileges, eh, Nita?"

"Frank? You mean from me?"

He nodded.

"He's privileged to act as guide to the carnations. I've never known you let anyone show off your carnations before—even me."

"Oh—that! He was talking to Sir Ralph, and I didn't want to interrupt them."

"Wouldn't you rather go and show them off yourself?"

"No, Selby, I'd rather stay here with you."

She saw the quick look of surprise that he shot at her, and hurried on:

"At least, I've had more than enough of Sir Ralph, and I was quite glad of an excuse—"

She hesitated, frowning. Why had she added that? She hadn't meant to. That was just the way she had always treated Selby—offered him something and instantly withdrawn it before he had time to accept.

"An excuse to escape from the lecture? Poor darling! What is this book he's writing?"

"Oh, some law book or other. I really didn't pay very much attention. I always treat Sir Ralph rather like the wireless—just let him go on and on because I haven't the energy to switch him off. But I didn't mean that; I meant that I was glad of an excuse to get a few minutes alone with you."

"Pulling my leg, Nita?"

She shook her head and patted the seat of the Chesterfield invitingly.

"Sit down, Selby—just for a few minutes."

He seated himself beside her and laid a hand on hers.

"Nita darling," he said, "you've been terribly nice to me the last day or two. Or is that only my fancy?"

"Aren't I always nice to you, Selby?"

"Ye-es," he admitted doubtfully.

"You don't think so?"

"Yes—of course—always nice, Nita. You've never been anything but—pleasant; you're too much of an angel for that. But it isn't always easy, is it?"

"I don't think I understand."

"I think you do," he smiled. "I'm a difficult sort of creature to get on with at the best of times, and sometimes I know I must irritate you terribly. It's not that I mean to be awkward, but—well, the fact is, I suppose, that I shouldn't have married you."

"Silly!" she laughed. "Why not?"

"You said something the other day," he went on, "which set me thinking. At the time it hurt me pretty badly, but when I came to think it over—after you'd gone to Scotland—I saw that it was a perfectly natural thing for you to have said. Remember? You told me not to be so old."

"Oh, that! You should have known better than to take any notice, Selby. I was in a dreadfully bad temper, wasn't I?"

"That's when we usually let out the truth—when we're in a temper and don't pause to think what we're saying. I think you were perfectly right, my dear. I had a good look at myself while you were away, and I realize that I'm—well, rather old-minded, I suppose. If things aren't just so, I'm worried."

"And aren't things—just so?"

"Darling, you know. Things aren't—well, not as I'd like them to be. But I'm not grumbling. You give me all that you feel able to give me, and I'm grateful for that. You've given me a great deal this last day or two."

"And this last year or two, what have you given me?" she said. "Or rather, what haven't you given me? Do you realize that until I was married I dressed on fifty pounds a year?"

He made a deprecating gesture.

"Oh, yes—material things—I've given you those. But there are other things—"

He got up from the Chesterfield, crossed to the mantelpiece in search of matches, and lighted his pipe. She waited, scanning his face anxiously. She was getting closer to him, breaking down that barrier of reserve which had stood between them for so long. She had not talked to him in this intimate way for a long time. She felt a strange elation, an inward glow of satisfaction. She was anxious to get still closer, to put things absolutely right between them, to establish this intimacy as something permanent. She must not let it slip away again....

He tossed the match into the grate.

"You've known young O'Ryan quite a long time, haven't you, Nita?"

"Since we were both so high," she smiled. "I've known his people all my life."

"Sweethearts when you were kids, eh?"

"No, never that. Just good friends."

His pipe was drawing badly, and he was staring at it resentfully, prodding it with a pencil.

"I suppose, if he had been in a position to marry—"

"Oh, nonsense, Selby!" she exclaimed. "There was never any question of that. Until we met him at Ascot last year, I hadn't seen him for years—not since I was about sixteen. And then I found him—well, amusing, that's all. He is rather amusing, isn't he?"

"Yes," he nodded. "He's a nice-looking fellow—and young. I've sometimes thought ... Well, young people belong to one another."

"I thought—I belonged—to you."

He gave that rather wistful smile of his—the smile that always made her want to give him a pat of comfort. "I like to have that illusion, Nita."

She rose and went to him, and stood fingering a button on his coat, avoiding his eyes.

"Illusion, Selby?" she said. "Are you talking quite a lot of nonsense—imagining things?"

"Perhaps," he admitted. "I've been telling myself how terribly nice you've been to me since you came back. Have I been imagining that?"

"Perhaps I like you better, Selby," she said softly. "Liking—love—whatever you like to call it—doesn't stand still, does it?"

"It either grows or withers, Nita—I suppose that's true."

He drew her hand away from the button, turned from her, and began pacing the room, frowning thoughtfully and sending clouds of smoke from his pipe. And then he suddenly paused, laid a hand on her shoulder, and stood gazing at her with keen, searching eyes.

"If I were sure of something, Nita," he said at last, "it would make a great difference to you and me. If I were convinced—one way or the other... ."

She forced herself to raise her head and meet his gaze. "What—what is it, Selby?" she asked in a low voice. "If there's anything—anything you want to ask me— I'll tell you—the truth."

For some moments he made no reply, still gazing at her thoughtfully, as if trying to read something in her face, and then he shook his head, and his hand dropped from her shoulder.

"No—it isn't fair to ask you, my dear," he said. "We'll let it go. I'll find out for myself."

She had a feeling that she was losing something, that he was retiring again behind the barrier, that she was being cut off, excluded, and she knew that she must not let it happen.

"Is that quite fair, Selby?"

"Fair? By my way of reasoning—yes. I'm afraid I'm a bit of a moral coward sometimes. There are some things I can't face."

"But you may be wrong," she persisted. "It's so easy to be wrong. And if you won't face it—whatever it is— that's worrying you—how are you to know whether you're wrong or right?"

He shrugged.

"One can only rely on one's intelligence—and one's eyes."

"Then—then you're not—sure?"

He shook his head.

"I was two days ago. But now—no, I'm undecided." She returned to the settee and sat down with a sigh. "Tell me something, will you, Selby?"

"Perhaps."

"I'm not a moral coward, and I'm not afraid to ask you. Do you—absolutely—trust me?"

"Why ask me that, darling?"

"Because, sometimes, just lately, I've thought that you don't."

"It's easy to imagine things," he smiled.

"If you do trust me absolutely, why did you say just now that you shouldn't have married me? That was an odd thing to say."

He seated himself on the back of the settee. "Old-minded," he repeated, "old-fashioned, with an old-time prejudice against modern notions. Crabbed age living with modern youth—and making rather a mess of it. Antiquated ideas about woman and how she should behave and the right way to treat her when she doesn't—"

"Your first marriage, Selby," she interrupted. "I've never asked you anything about it, and you've never told me. Was it a happy one?"

"Not particularly."

"It was unhappy?"

He nodded.

"Somewhat disastrous for all concerned, Nita. It began very happily—most marriages do, I suppose— but it ended—" He shrugged. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"Sorry," she said. "But because your first marriage wasn't a success, that's no reason why this one shouldn't be, is it? We've been married for three years now, and it hasn't been very awful, has it?" She took his hand and held it, watching his face anxiously.

"It has been wonderful, Nita—in some ways."

"But not what it should have been, eh, Selby? Oh, I know. I haven't been awfully nice to you, have I? I've taken everything and given nothing—I've been a shirker. Some men wouldn't have stood for the shirking."

He cut her short with a gesture.

"I have very definite views on that subject, Nita," he said; "old-fashioned views, perhaps. It's repugnant to me that a woman, when she becomes a wife, should not remain mistress of her own life. In matters that concern her own comfort the decision should rest with her."

She smiled at him.

"The trouble with you, dear," she said, "is that you're rather too nice."

"I may be old-fashioned, darling, but I'm not primitive."

She nodded, and was silent for some moments. She had only to speak now, to say what it would be easy to say to him, just to smile at him and beckon ... Beckon to Dennis Sanderby? Because she was afraid, because, even at that price, she must buy safety for herself and Frank, because she could see no other way of quieting his suspicions? She was sure that it would not be for these reasons, whatever Frank might think. She would not be beckoning Dennis Sanderby; she would be beckoning Selby Clive—her husband.

"Selby, the other day—before I went to Scotland—you said that we were drifting, that the gap between us was getting wider. Remember? I wouldn't talk about it then. But I've been thinking quite a lot up in Scotland, and I see now that you were right. We don't see much of each other these days, do we? We live under the same roof, but we're not much more than strangers."

"I'm sorry, Nita, but—"

"Oh, I know; it's my fault—partly. Chiefly, perhaps; but not entirely. At nights, for instance, I never even know nowadays whether you're down here working or whether you're in bed. And that's your fault, Selby. Once upon a time you always used to come and say good-night to me,"

"Well... yes, I did, Nita. But then—"

"I understand," she said. "But I still like to know where you are and what you're doing, that you're about the place somewhere."

"Developing nerves, darling? There's nothing to be nervous about. I'm usually within calling distance, and you've a bolt on your door. If anything alarmed you—"

"Bolt?" She gave a shrug. "Bolts are only useful, Selby, when you want to—keep someone out."

She knew that he had turned his head and was gazing at her; she knew, too, just the expression that was on his face—surprise, doubt, wonder, hope; but she could not bring herself to look at him. She waited, her heart thumping, for his next words. Surely she had understood? Surely—now—he must believe ...

She felt his hand beneath her chin, raising her head until she had no choice but to meet his eyes.

"And don't you want to keep someone out, my dear?"

Almost imperceptibly she shook her head.

"No, Selby—I don't—think—I do."

His arm slipped round her shoulder.



"Nita, darling," he said, "I can hardly believe—"

He paused, and she saw that he was staring out into the garden. "Here's Whitcombe back again," he said. "They always say that there's no escaping the law."

He got up from the settee and went towards the window, and Nita sighed. Why on earth must Sir Ralph choose that particular moment to interrupt them? She had been so very close to Selby—his arm around her shoulders, his lips near to hers. Just a few more seconds and she would have been sure of him. She had only to get just a little closer, and she could have told him everything, without fear that he might not believe her, freed herself of her burden and been able to look him in the eyes again. But now, thanks to the old lawyer, she was not sure. Had she made him understand? She thought so, but with Selby it was always so difficult to be sure. "I can hardly believe—" he had said. What was it that he could hardly believe? That she intended to have no more to do with shirking, that she would in future be as ready to give as to take? Or had he meant to say that, if all she had just been telling him were true, if her feelings towards him were really such as she had been hinting, if she were honestly anxious to make their marriage a success, he could hardly believe that she would have made that appointment with O'Ryan at the Laffan, that the two stories did not tally, and that since he knew her visit to the Laffan to be a fact, he could only assume that the other was fiction?

Frank, following Sir Ralph into the room, shot her an inquiring glance and received in exchange an uncomprehending stare.

"The pride of the garden, Mrs. Clive," said Sir Ralph, pointing to the carnation in his buttonhole.

"I warned you that I should pick the best, and here it is. What colour! What fragrance! Altogether a wonderful collection!—"

Nita smiled.

"Not a very severe critic, after all, Sir Ralph," she said. "Will you stay and criticize lunch?"

"Many thanks, Mrs. Clive, but I'm afraid I mustn't do that. I have promised faithfully to be back to have lunch with those noisy young people. They insisted on it. I was telling them at breakfast about that case I mentioned to you, and they are anxious for me to continue. They seem to take rather a morbid interest in the—"

He saw the warning look from Nita and stopped abruptly.

"What case is that, Whitcombe?" inquired Clive. "Oh, a—er—case, Clive, in which I—er—took part many years ago." He glanced at Nita, obviously in

search of her approval. "O'Ryan has been conducting me round your estate," he went on. "You've improved it immensely. More roses, eh, Mrs. Clive?"

"We've been inspecting the new pergola," O'Ryan explained.

"Ah, yes—the pergola," continued Sir Ralph. "Quite typical of your husband, Mrs. Clive—a very thorough and substantial job. I like those big baulks and beams, Clive—something solid and British about them."

"Rather heavier than I intended," said Selby, "and those workmen are the most careless devils. I noticed that they've just balanced a couple of the beams without fastening them at all. I shall have a word to say to the foreman when I see him. It's not safe."

The lawyer glanced at his watch.

"Dear me! I must be getting along. I'd like to come over again tomorrow, Clive, if I'm not too much of a nuisance, on the off chance of seeing Mr. Muller. Quite an exceptionally intelligent American—"

"Canadian," laughed Clive. "Come over to dinner tonight, Whitcombe, if you'd care to. Jerry is sure to be here this evening, and you can have a chat with him."

"Thank you—yes—I shall be delighted. But I must hurry back now. The post will be in, and a friend of mine is sending me some fresh newspaper cuttings about this case of—er—dear me—yes, good-bye, Mrs. Clive, for the present. I'm looking forward to criticizing the dinner tonight." He pushed the flower in his buttonhole. "Charming—exquisite!" he smiled, picked up his attaché case, and hurried out.

Clive followed him, and as soon as the door was closed O'Ryan went eagerly across the room to where Nita stood by the fireplace.

"Nita, did he say anything?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Say anything? Who?"

"Why, Clive, of course. I saw him talking to you."

"Then presumably he did say something."

"For heaven's sake, Nita, don't start in with cheap sarcasm. All things considered, it's rather bad taste. There's nothing to laugh at, you know."

"I'm not laughing. I don't feel in the least like laughing," she said.

"Did he give you any idea that he—well, did he tell you anything?—"

"Nothing—that concerns you."

"Did you tell him—I mean, did you talk about the Laffan or anything?"

"I believe we did mention the Laffan."

"And did you convince him—I mean, if you did as I told you—led him on to think that you are his and that sort of thing... Things seemed to be going fairly well, I thought. I was watching—from behind the rambles—and I could see you were pulling it off all right. I mean, sitting there and holding your hand and pitting his arm round you—"

"Frank!"

She was white to the lips, facing him with blazing eyes. He stared at her in bewilderment.

"What have I said now? You're the queerest woman I've ever struck. One minute you're as right as rain, and the next you're up in the air spitting sparks like a rocket. I only want to know how you got on with Selby and—"

"You're terribly afraid of Selby, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"I—I don't know."

"Well, Dennis Sanderby is not the sort of man I'm anxious to meet in a country lane on a dark night, if that's what you mean. But never mind that. Did you convince him?"

"I don't know that either. I thought I had, once, but I'm not sure." She frowned thoughtfully. "A ruthless man, pursuing his inexorable way, unmoved by pity, not to be turned aside from his purpose—"

"That was the bit old Whitcombe read, wasn't it? You think that's right, Nita? I mean, you know Selby and can size him up better than I can. Do you really believe that's true of him—that once he gets an idea fixed in his head nothing will turn him from it? Do you—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Frank! How do I know what he was thinking? I only wish I did! But I don't, so it's no use plaguing me with idiotic questions. If you want to know what he thought about it, ask him yourself."

O'Ryan turned away with a shrug.

"Damned helpful, aren't you?" he said peevishly. "I'm hanged if I know what's come over you. You've scarcely a civil word Hullo! Where did this come from?" He stooped, picked up a slip of paper from the floor, and stood gazing at it intently.

"What is it?"

"A newspaper cutting," he told her. "Old Whitcombe must have dropped it." He turned it over. "From the Edmonton Star."

"A cutting—about what?"

"What would it be about?" he grinned. "What does old Whitcombe dream about, talk about in his sleep, chatter about at breakfast, lunch, tea, and dinner? The Sanderby case, of course. When he dies they'll find 'Dennis Sanderby' graven on his heart. Shall I read it?"

She nodded.

"Bit of somebody's evidence, apparently. Listen: 'She saw Mrs. Sanderby the morning before she died. She told witness that her husband had been very nice to her and had brought her a piece of jewelry from Edmonton.'"

He paused and glanced across at the girl. She was standing rigid, her hands clenched, her lips set, staring at him. With a shrug he turned again to the slip of paper in his hand.

"She thought it was from a jeweller's store near the Hudson's Bay Company. She—Mrs. Sanderby—told witness that she thought she had regained her husband's confidence at last. They were going to share the same room again. That night she was taken ill '"

## CHAPTER XV

"FRANK!"

He had a queer sensation that the word came hurtling at him across the room, that it actually struck him a physical blow which shook him and made him catch his breath. He stopped abruptly in his reading and glanced at Nita. She was still standing there, like a statue, her lips tightly compressed, staring at him fixedly. There was a look in her eyes that almost frightened him. He did not want to look at them, but somehow they held his glance, compelling him to look.

He laughed nervously.

"Pretty ghastly, Nita—what?"

She made no answer, and he shifted uneasily.

"Giving you the jim-jams?—"

Her lips parted, but still she did not speak.

"Good sensational stuff for the newspaper, but not particularly cheerful reading for us in the circumstances, is it? Still, the more we know about his methods—"

He wrenched his eyes away from hers and glanced again at the slip of paper in his hand. "Where was I? Oh, yes, here we are: '—shared the same room. That night she was taken ill '"

"Don't read it!"

It was a command, a warning, a threat; a supplication, too. Again he looked at her.

"Don't read it!" she repeated. He frowned and made an impatient gesture.

"Don't be silly, Nita. Why the deuce shouldn't I read it?"

"Because I say so." She stepped swiftly towards him and held out her hand.

"Give it to me."

"My dear girl, don't be so childish," he said. "And, for heaven's sake, don't start getting tragic. If you don't want to be taken ill like the late lamented Mrs. Sanderby, you'll set your teeth and face facts, and learn as much as possible about the sort of thing you're up against."

Suddenly her hand shot out, the slip of paper was whipped from his grasp, and she was tearing it across and across. She turned from him, tossed the fragments into the waste-paper basket, and then swung round and faced him.

"Frank—you beast!" Her cheeks were flushed now, her lips quivering, her eyes moist.

"For God's sake, Nita, what's wrong with you?"

She turned from him again, seated herself on the couch, and covered her face with her hands. He went to her and stood gazing down at her with bewildered eyes.

"Look here, Nita, I'm hanged if I understand."

"You wouldn't!"

"Not sufficiently intelligent?"

"Not sufficiently—decent." She uncovered her face. "Oh, don't stand there looking pained and puzzled!" she exclaimed. "If you can't see how foul you are, then God help you! Shall I tell you? That man Sanderby—kind, pleasant, suave—making up his quarrel with his wife, giving her presents, making love to her, agreeing to share the same room—and it was all lies—foulness, beastliness.... You thought so, didn't you, when you read that Dennis Sanderby had done it?"

"Nita," he said sharply, "pull yourself together. The man was foul. If you can think of anything fouler—"

"And that's what you asked me to do with Selby!" she interrupted furiously. "To do just what Sanderby did to his wife—lie to him, lure him on, play on his passion, shed every bit of decency you've let me keep. And you see nothing beastly in that! You don't understand what's the matter with me! I'm his wife, and it's my duty to my husband! And my duty to you, eh, Frank? Because you were generous enough to offer me a sordid, back-stairs intrigue in some sordid, backstreet flat, you take it for granted that I'll fall in with any filthy scheme you may suggest to save you a little unpleasantness. You think so much of me, love me so beautifully, that you're willing to let me ... Love! My God!" She made a hopeless, despairing gesture. "It's no use talking to you, Frank. You'll never understand."

Her hands went back to her face, and for some moments he stood gazing down at her with anxious eyes. Then:

"I say, Nita, you're not—not in love with Selby, are you?—"

"Mind your own damned business!"

"You always led me to believe you didn't care a hang about him."

"You always led me to believe that you cared quite a lot about me."

"So I do. Hang it! I've got myself into a pretty bad mess on your account, anyway. And now, when I ask you to lend a hand to get me out of it, you just sit there and spit venom. You're a hypocrite, Nita, and the grouse is all

on my side, really. If you're in love with Selby, it was a mean sort of trick to lead me right up the garden—"

She got up suddenly.

"We won't discuss Selby, please. What did Sir Ralph say about the carnations?"

"Oh, hell! What did he say about the carnations? I don't know what he said. He just blithered on; I didn't listen to him. Look here, I'm just about fed up with all this; I'm going back to town—tonight."

She nodded.

"I should if I were you. Telephone to Aldershot."

"Aldershot?" he echoed, puzzled.

"They might lend you an armoured car."

"That's pretty cheap," he sneered. "I can't make you out, Nita; I've never known you like this before."

"And I've just realized, Frank, that I've never known you at all before. Funny, isn't it? As far as I remember, you weren't a particularly objectionable little boy. The only thing I really didn't like about you was that you always expected someone else to do your dirty work. Remember the old gentleman in the next-door garden who used to chase us with a stick if we went over the wall to fetch our ball? And if you sent the ball over, you always wanted me to go after it. That sort of meanness is bound to crop up again later on in life, I suppose. I often used to wonder—"

"Do you know what I'm wondering?" he interrupted. "I'm wondering how I ever came to make such a fool of myself over you."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Don't you know?" she said quietly. "I can tell you that: you made a fool of yourself over me because you thought it would help you to get that lease."

His face flushed angrily.

"Look here, if you're suggesting that I—"

There came a rap on the door, and Lane, with a long envelope in his hand, entered.

"There's a district messenger from London, madam," he said. "He has brought this for Mr. Clive." He handed her the envelope and went out of the room.

"I say, Nita!"

She was examining the envelope, turning it over and over.

"Well?"

"What—what's that?"

"I'm sure I don't know. It's for Selby—a letter of some sort." She tossed it onto the writing desk. "Why?"

"I wondered whether—I mean, Selby said he told Muller it was urgent—and he might have got it registered and sent it down at once."

"Oh, the lease!"

He nodded.

"Couldn't you—open it and see?"

She shook her head.

"It's addressed to Selby."

"But I don't suppose he'd mind." He went to the desk, picked up the envelope, and inspected it closely. "I say, Nita, it is!" he exclaimed eagerly. "There's the seal here—the Canadian Government Office—on the back. This is the lease, right enough—what luck! That's got Mr. Dennis Sanderby beaten!"

With a smile of satisfaction he pulled open his coat and was about to slip the envelope into his breast pocket when the girl's voice made him pause.

"Frank!"

As he looked quickly across at her and saw the expression on her face, his self-satisfied smile faded.

"Well?"

"Put that envelope down."

"Eh? Don't be silly! This is my chance. I've been hanging about all this time, risking God knows what, waiting to get hold of the lease, and now I've got it I'm off. I'm not spending another hour in this infernal house."

"Put that envelope down, Frank."

"But you're crazy! If you expect me to miss an opportunity like this—I'm not missing it, and that's flat. I'm off, and once I'm away Dennis Sanderby can do what he likes. If you've any sense left, you'll come with me."

He thrust the envelope into his pocket and moved towards the door.

"Frank!"

She said it very quietly, and as he glanced at her, with his hand on the door knob, he saw that she was faintly smiling—a queer, hard sort of smile. She shook her head slowly.



"Oh, no," she said; "it's not quite so simple as that. Either you put that envelope back on the desk, or I shall call Selby and tell him."

He stared at her aghast.

"I mean it," she went on. "Of course, I know what you're going to say to me—that not so long ago I was willing to do just what you want to do now, that I even searched Selby's desk to find the lease so that you could take it and clear out and take me with you. But quite a lot has happened since then, and I'm not going to argue with you about it. And I'm not going to let you walk out of the house with a million dollars of Selby's money in your pocket. Still, try it if you like; Selby is only in the garden."

"Nita, you wouldn't—I know you'd never dare—"

"Then why don't you go?"

He hesitated and then took several steps towards her, gazing at her intently.

"My God!" he breathed. "I believe you mean it! Of all the mean, low-down twisters—"

She waved a hand, still faintly smiling, towards the desk.

"Where you found it, please, Frank."

"But—but it's mine," he protested. "Selby intends to give it to me—"

"Then let him," she broke in. "If he chooses to be that sort of a fool, that's his own affair. But you're not going to take it and slink off without his knowing." He stood for some moments hesitating, glaring at her angrily; and then he took the envelope from his pocket and flung it on the desk.

"Damn you, Nita!" he exclaimed furiously. "It'll serve you right if—"

She had crossed to the mantelpiece, and now she pressed the bell-push.

"All right, Frank," she said quietly; "say just whatever you feel like saying. I've had my say, and it's your turn. But whatever you may say, I'm not going to let you get away with that lease unless Selby himself gives it to you."

"A sudden spasm of honesty?" he sneered.

"Perhaps."

"Or are you thinking of turning King's Evidence? That won't come off, Nita, you can take it from me. If you're hoping to get into Selby's good books by telling him I tried to take the lease—"

The door opened and Lane came in.

"You rang, madam?"

"Yes. Mr. O'Ryan will be leaving tonight."

For a moment O'Ryan was too surprised to speak. "He'll be going to the station in the Packard, Lane."

"Very good, madam."

"I'm—er—not absolutely sure, you know, Nita," began O'Ryan, but she cut him short.

"See that the car is at the door at six, please, Lane." As the door closed behind the servant, O'Ryan turned angrily to the girl.

"Look here," he said, "I'm not going to be bullied and ordered about like a school kid. I'll go when I see fit to go. If you refuse to let me take the lease, it stands to reason that I can't go until Selby hands it over to me. Why the deuce you need interfere ... Why, you needn't know I've taken it. He would never suspect that you had anything to do with it. As a matter of fact, he doesn't even know yet that the lease has arrived, and if I went now—"

"It's no use, Frank," she interrupted with a shake of the head. "You're not taking it, and that's final. But you said you were going, and you are going—at six o'clock, in the Packard. If you're nervous of a car you can walk."

"But why on earth—"

"Because I want you to go—that's the reason. I want to have this out alone. You asked me just now whether I'm in love with Selby. Well, I think I am. I'm not going to argue with you about that or try to explain it. I'm not sure that I can explain it to myself. But I'm quite sure that I don't want you here any longer."

"I suppose you think that if I clear out Dennis Sanderby may call off the vendetta?"

"I'm telling you to go—that's all."

"But," he protested, "how can I? How can I possibly explain—"

"I'll tell a few more lies for you to Selby."

"And what about the lease?"

Before she could reply, her husband came in from the garden.

"They're doing wonderful work out there," he laughed. "I saw three men working at the same time on the pergola, and there are only nine of them on the job."

Nita waved a hand towards his writing desk.

"There's a letter for you there, Selby," she said. "It arrived a few minutes ago—by special messenger." He nodded, picked up the envelope and examined it. "From Jerry," he said. "He told me he'd make them get a move on." He held up the envelope and smiled across at O'Ryan. "You know what

this is?" He opened the envelope, took out a document, and began glancing through it, while O'Ryan stood watching him anxiously.

"I say, sir, is that—is that the lease?"

"Yes, it's the lease all right—signed, sealed, and delivered. Almost delivered, anyway." He folded the document, returned it to its envelope and tossed it onto the writing desk. "I want to have a chat with you about this syndicate of yours, O'Ryan," he said. "Jerry will be back this evening, and we might all three have a talk after dinner."

"Frank won't be here after dinner," said Nita. "He has to be in town this evening. I've ordered the car for him for six o'clock."

Clive looked at O'Ryan.

"Nonsense!" he said. "What have you got to go to town for?"

"Well, as a matter of fact," began O'Ryan awkwardly, "it isn't really terribly important. You see, my—er—my old school is having its annual dinner, and I'm expected to be there."

He glanced at Nita doubtfully. She smiled.

"And Frank is such a distinguished Old Boy," she said, "that he can't possibly stay away. The dinner would be terribly flat without him. Do you have to make a speech, Frank? You can make quite amusing speeches when you're in the right mood."

O'Ryan frowned sullenly.

"As a matter of fact, sir, I've only just remembered that the dinner is tonight."

"Then miss it," urged Clive. "They can do very well without you," he added, slapping him on the shoulder. "I'm not letting you off this evening; you're staying here."

"But if he has promised to go, Selby—"

"I don't suppose it would be the first time he has broken a promise. Besides, he hasn't promised. He has only just remembered it. And I particularly want him here tonight. I've got a little surprise for him. Perhaps two."

O'Ryan smiled rather sheepishly.

"That's very kind of you, sir, and of course, if you wish it, I can give the dinner a miss—"

"You can't, Frank," interrupted Nita. "You must go. I'd rather you went."

Clive's eyebrows rose.

"Really! That's not very gracious, darling."

Nita was desperate now.

"Well, he must go, Selby. He has promised, and it isn't fair to expect him to disappoint his friends."

"Send them a wire, O'Ryan," suggested Selby, "like you do to an actor on his first night—hoping for the best and fearing the worst. It's usually the worst that happens, too."

For a few moments O'Ryan hesitated, looking doubtfully across at Nita.

"All right, sir, I'll do that," he said. "If you're quite sure my staying here won't be inconvenient—"

"As far as I'm concerned, it will be most convenient," his host assured him. "And it doesn't matter to you, Nita, does it?"

She turned away with a shrug.

"Oh, no, it doesn't matter to me," she said listlessly. "Nothing matters."

Again her husband shot her a serious glance.

"I'm afraid you're tired, my dear," he said. "You don't look quite yourself, either. I've thought so ever since you got back from Scotland. Don't you agree, O'Ryan?"

"Well—yes—I think she does look rather tired, sir," agreed the young man. "Perhaps that accident with the car—"

"I noticed it before that," Selby interrupted. "When she arrived yesterday morning she looked so fagged out that I found it difficult to believe she hadn't been travelling all night. Yet she had had a good night's rest at the Laffan."

Nita turned abruptly towards him.

"For goodness' sake, Selby," she said irritably, "please stop discussing me."

Her husband smiled.

"That's more like your old self, my dear," he laughed. "Very well, O'Ryan and I won't talk about you any more; we'll get right down to business instead." He turned again to O'Ryan. "Now, about this lease. I'll look it over, and you can have it tonight if everything is satisfactory. You've arranged the finances, haven't you?"

"I thought I had, sir," replied the other. "But just at the last moment one man has backed out. It has put me in rather a difficulty."

"The man at Windsor? I had an idea that he wasn't to be relied on. How much was he supposed to be putting up?"

"Three thousand," said O'Ryan. "Of course, it isn't a vast sum."

"But you can't raise it yourself?"

"No, sir; I'm afraid I can't."

Selby Clive nodded.

"Well, we'll talk about it later. I had an idea that situation might arise." He glanced again at Nita, saw that she was sitting in the corner of the Chesterfield with her face buried in her hands, and went quickly to her.

"Nita!"

She started and raised her head.

"You're not feeling ill?"

"No, Selby."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Oh, please don't fuss!" she begged. "I'm not ill. There's nothing whatever the matter with me."

He stood for some moments gazing at her anxiously. "In the opinion of a mere husband, my dear," he said, "you're in sad need of a good strong tonic. Something with arsenic in it."

"Thanks, Selby; but the mere husband is wrong. I don't want any medicine at all."

"Arsenic," he repeated. "It's the finest pick-me-up in the world."

"I won't have it!" she interrupted impatiently. "I don't want to be picked up—not in that way, anyhow." She forced herself to smile. "It sounds too much like being picked up by a golden chariot—out of the world."

"Well, we'll see about it," said Clive, turning from her and crossing to his desk. "You may not like the idea of a tonic, my dear, but I may decide that it's my duty as a husband to see that you have one." He picked up the lease and flourished it at O'Ryan. "I'll put this in a safe place," he said, "until you and I have got things settled."

He went out, and Nita sprang to her feet.

"Frank, you fool!" she exclaimed. "Why are you staying?"

"Why shouldn't I? I've every reason for staying, haven't I? He's going to hand over the lease to me this evening."

"If you're capable of raising a hand to take it. It's as well to remember that. Can't you see what he's doing? You saw it quite clearly a few hours ago, and now, because you've set eyes on the lease, I suppose, and think he really means to give it to you, you've forgotten that—"

"I've forgotten nothing," he interrupted.

"Then you're crazy," she told him. "It's obvious what he's doing; everything he does and everything he says shrieks it at you. He's just playing you like a man plays a salmon—giving you line and reeling you in—and if you haven't taken leave of your senses you'll break the line before you're gaffed. You'll go—now—at once—before he gets another chance—to your Old Boys' dinner or—oh, any old excuse will do as long as you get away from here."

O'Ryan smiled.

"Frightfully touching, darling, this sudden solicitude. But if I'm in danger, so are you, aren't you?"

"That's my affair. But I don't want—if anything should happen to you—I couldn't bear to think that he ... But it's no use trying to explain. Do as I ask you, and leave me to cope with this alone. In case you're really anxious about me, I can quite well look after myself."

"So can I, Nita," he said. "Look at this." He pulled from his pocket a small revolver and showed it to her. "If Mr. Dennis Sanderby tries any tricks—"

She made a gesture of impatience.

"Would that have helped you when the steering gear failed?"

"Oh, that!" he said easily, slipping the revolver into his pocket. "After all, that may have been an accident."

"You didn't think so at the time. I don't suppose you think so now really. If you really believe it was an accident, why be frightened of Selby? And if you're not frightened of Selby, why the revolver?" She frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think there can be much doubt," she said, "that there is silver on that land. I mean, of course, that you know that there's silver there."

"I've told you, Nita, there's always a chance—"

"Oh, yes, I know what you've told me," she cut in, "but it's a pretty big chance, isn't it? You're not the sort to risk what you're risking for anything that's far short of a certainty. It's the silver that's making you so brave, Frank. I see that now. You must have that lease even if you do have to stay on here and spend your time sweating with fear, with your hand on your revolver—"

"There's no need to be offensive about it," he snapped. "If I think it's worth it, that's my business. Besides, we've probably exaggerated the whole thing. I mean, suppose he was implicated in that Canadian affair—he may have been perfectly innocent. Old Whitcombe said that they could prove nothing against him and had to let him off, and you don't get acquitted on that sort of charge unless the case is pretty weak against you. And even if he did slaughter his whole family, it's hardly likely that he'd attempt the same kind of thing again, is it?"

She smiled.

"All very comforting, if you can really bring yourself to believe it. And you do believe it? Why, of course you do! Hence the revolver! I wonder if you'd ever have the pluck to fire it. Do you know what I believe Selby would do if you threatened him with a revolver?"

"I don't care, anyway."

"I believe he'd laugh," she told him. "He hasn't an enormous sense of humour, but even he would be obliged to laugh at that. You'd look so terribly funny, Frank—not quite sure whether you were more afraid of the revolver than of Selby—"

"Oh, dry up, for God's sake!" he exclaimed savagely. "I can't understand you. You don't seem able to see a single decent point about me nowadays, and you do nothing but make yourself as offensive as you can. And to think I kidded myself that I wanted your love!"

"Did you?" She shook her head. "You did nothing of the sort. You never wanted my love and never even kidded yourself you did. That's the humiliating part about the whole wretched affair. You wanted the lease."

"That's a pretty beastly sort of thing to say."

"It's time we faced the truth, however beastly. You made me think that you wanted my love, but you never deceived yourself. I thought, too, that your love was worth having, that it was worth sacrificing everything for; but I realize now that all I really wanted was a rather cheap sort of thrill, and I probably deserved just what I got. I should have known better, understood you better, recognized that your love showed all the signs of a cheap fake. The signs were fairly obvious, weren't they? For years you didn't come near me; and then the question of this land came up, and you found that it belonged to Selby, and it struck you as a very bright idea that, as I was Selby's wife, you could probably make use of me."

"I don't know what sort of a swine you must think me."

"Oh, the same sort as I think myself," she interrupted, going towards the French windows. "Just a mean little swine, Frank."

At the windows she paused.

"Please go," she said.

"Afraid Selby will hurt me? But I don't matter a hang to you now, so why worry about me?"

Her voice was very low as she answered:

"I'm not thinking of you, Frank."

"Afraid I may hurt Selby, then?" he grinned, tapping his pocket significantly. "I'd be terribly sorry to have to do it, just when you're growing so fond of him. But you needn't worry too much about that, either; I won't hurt him unless I'm obliged to."

"I'm not even worried about that," she said. "I'm afraid you won't understand, but why I want you to go is that I—I don't want—Selby—to hurt himself." She turned abruptly and went into the garden. She had some vague idea of finding her husband and seeing if she could persuade him to give O'Ryan the lease at once and let him go. But Selby was not in the garden, and for some time she wandered round the paths, pausing every now and then to admire the flowers or nip off a dead blossom, hardly realizing what she was doing.

She had finished with Frank, anyway, she told herself. In the last few minutes she had definitely made that clear both to him and to herself. The last lingering wisps of glamour had been swept away from that affair, and it stood revealed in all its repelling crudeness. She was surprised and humiliated by the thought that she had allowed herself to be deceived by the glamour and had not from the first recognized it for what it really was. She was puzzled to understand how she had ever come to consider Frank as a possible substitute for Selby, how she could ever seriously have thought of abandoning her husband and all he stood for in her life, why she had not from the first suspected that, when Frank so suddenly reappeared on the scene, he had done so with the definite purpose of making use of her to do his dirty work for him—just as in the past he had made use of her to climb the wall to recover the ball and risk an encounter with the old gentleman with a stick. Selby or Frank? She must have been mad ever to imagine that there could be any question as to whom she should choose.

And now that the choice lay between Frank and Dennis Sanderby, was there still any doubt? She forced herself to face that question. She reminded herself of all she knew concerning Dennis Sanderby, and asked herself whether, in face of all that, she could still honestly say that there was no question of a choice between them. Since she now knew that Selby was Dennis Sanderby, did he still stand for all those things in her life which were most worth preserving? The episode with Frank was definitely over. She was glad of that: it meant one less problem to be solved, one less decision to be made. She knew now beyond any further question that, whatever might happen, she would never go with Frank, and she could rule that possibility out of her calculations. But should she, in view of what she had learned, leave Selby?

She had no doubt as to what most people would advise. Knowing what she now knew, she would be more than justified in leaving him; realizing, as she



now did, the risk she ran in staying at Sunningbourne Lodge, she would be idiotic to remain there an hour longer. Either she should go, they would say, or she should tell Selby what she had discovered and have the whole thing out with him.

Yet she felt strangely reluctant to take either the one course or the other. Certainly she did not want to go, and just as certainly she could not picture herself facing Selby over the mystery of his past, admitting to him that she believed him to be a criminal who had changed his name.... She dismissed the idea as impossible. Besides, the question of his past was quite beside the point. She had told Frank that she believed she loved Selby, and if that was true, the fact that he was Dennis Sanderby, with that individual's past, did not enter into the question. Love, surely, took no account of past or future. If she loved Selby she loved him for what he was now; and what he had been twenty years ago—long before she had even known of him—could make no difference to her love. That, at any rate, was her idea of love. Frank, of course, would laugh at that; and he would certainly call her crazy if she told him that, even if the catch-pit had been intended for a less innocent purpose than collecting water, if the breakdown of the steering gear had not been accidental, if there had been a very good reason why Selby had poured the cream on the flower bed—to kill the weeds—and been at such pains to wash out the cream jug—even if all these things were given their worst possible interpretation, not even that could affect her love. Frank would never understand that love was inevitable, ineluctable, unaffected by expediency. If she loved at all, that would be the nature of her love. And she had told Frank that she might easily love Selby, that she thought she did love him....

O'Ryan, at any rate, must go. Whatever else might still be hazy, that fact stood out clear-cut. She must somehow persuade him into going—frighten him into going—get him somehow beyond the reach of Dennis Sanderby—"a ruthless man, pursuing his inexorable way, unmoved by pity, not to be turned aside from his purpose." For Dennis Sanderby had become Selby Clive—her husband—and she could not bear the thought that he should again become Dennis Sanderby. "Unmoved by pity." But unmoved, too, by love? She wondered....

## CHAPTER XVI

AS Nita went across the garden, O'Ryan stood watching her, frowning, saw her pause by a rose bush and stoop to smell one of the blooms, and turned impatiently away. He was not without experience of women—no man who was totally inexperienced could have brought Nita Clive to the point of sending that telegram—and it was just that inconsequent way of carrying on, he reflected, which he could not stand. Smelling roses—now! And when he had been desperately anxious for her to tell him how things had gone in her interview with Clive, she had wanted to know what that old fool Whitcombe had said about her carnations! Didn't she realize how matters stood, or didn't she care?

But it was no use trying to discover what she, or any other woman, thought or felt. You could never be certain of them. He would not have dreamed that Nita would round on him like that, but she had done it—first at the Laffan, and now over the lease—refusing to let him take it, threatening to tell Clive, suddenly shying at what, only a few hours ago, she had been quite ready to do; telling him to go and leave her there, when only yesterday she had jumped down his throat for even hinting that he might clear out. But yesterday she had been scared—just as scared as he had been—and today she did not seem nearly so terrified—not at all, in fact. Since she had had that talk with Clive she had seemed calmer, cooler. He smiled wryly. She was cooler towards him, anyway. He could call that episode definitely closed, he supposed, catalogue it among his rare failures as a case which could only be explained by assuming a sudden access of virtue.

But was that the only possible explanation? Nita had changed so suddenly. It was not his unfortunate blunder during dinner at the Laffan that had caused her to swing round so completely and range herself against him. She had, as a result of that, slammed the door in his face, but he knew enough about slammed doors to realize that they can be coaxed open again, and that the door that is most furiously slammed is usually the most readily reopened, and he had felt confident that the Laffan affair could be smoothed over and would prove to be only a temporary setback. It was something, he felt, other than that which had induced Nita to change sides, or, if she had not actually done that, to refuse to side any longer with him. She had been different to him after that talk with Clive this morning, about which she had been so reluctant to tell him anything. Suppose she had told her husband....

It was a disturbing thought and set him restlessly pacing the room, his hands thrust into his trouser pockets and cigarette glowing constantly. She might have done it. She was terribly scared of what might be going to happen to her next, and she might easily have lost her nerve and told Clive everything, trusting that confession might get her off the consequences. It

didn't seem likely that Dennis Sanderby would be put off by a confession, but you never knew. If Nita had somehow persuaded him that her story was true—pitched a yarn, perhaps, in which he figured as a gay Lothario with a touch of Rasputin, and she as an innocent maiden who was terribly shocked at his wickedness—and if, as a result, they had patched things up between them, that would explain her sudden change of front. It would explain, at any rate, why she would not let him take the lease and clear out when he had the chance. She was working, perhaps, with Clive now, planning his punishment, keeping him here until her husband had a chance ...

But that wasn't likely, because she had begged him to go. She had seemed very anxious just now that he should get away at once before anything could happen. Perhaps she knew what Clive was planning, knew what was in store for him if he persisted in staying, was trying to give him a hint, to do him a good turn without openly betraying Clive's newly won confidence in her....

He glanced round the room, and then, crossing to the fireplace, rang the bell and continued his pacing. If he stayed on here—and he must stay on until he had his hands on that lease—he would have to be damnably careful—watch Clive—Nita, too, perhaps. If she had turned spiteful ...

As Lane came in, O'Ryan paused in his pacing.

"Bring me a drink, Lane, will you?" he said. "A whisky-and-soda."

"Very good, sir." He crossed to a small corner cupboard and took out a decanter of whisky, a glass, and a siphon of soda, and set them on the table.

"There is always whisky in this cupboard, sir," he said. "Mr. Clive keeps a decanter here for visitors."

O'Ryan picked up the decanter, removed the glass stopper, and sniffed at the neck, frowning.

"A very good whisky, sir," remarked Lane, with an air of disapproval.

O'Ryan held the decanter up to the light and peered at it for some moments.

"How long has this been in the cupboard, Lane?"

"A couple of days, sir, at the most," the servant informed him. "It was yesterday morning, as far as I remember, sir—just before you arrived. Mr. Clive told me to bring him a fresh bottle, and he filled the decanter himself."

O'Ryan glanced at him sharply.

"Does he usually—fill the decanter himself?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I can't remember that he has ever done it before."

O'Ryan set down the decanter.

"Can you get me an unopened bottle, Lane?" Lane's face showed his astonishment.

"It's never quite the same, you know," added O'Ryan hastily, "when it's been in a decanter for a few days, and if you have a fresh bottle—"

"Certainly, sir—if you wish it," replied Lane reluctantly. "I will ask Mr. Clive for the key of the cellarette."

"Oh, no—if it means troubling Mr. Clive, it doesn't matter, Lane."

As the man went out, O'Ryan tipped some whisky into the glass, splashed in some soda, picked up the glass, and peered into it suspiciously. Dipping in the tip of his finger, he touched his tongue with it and frowned.

"Hullo! Having a drink, O'Ryan?"

It was Selby Clive, watching him, with an amused smile, from the French windows. O'Ryan set down his glass.

"I was going to," he said, "but I—I don't think I will."

"Something wrong with it? I saw you tasting it as if it were a dose of nasty medicine."

O'Ryan laughed uneasily.

"I was just trying—seeing if I could guess what brand it was."

"You won't guess," Clive assured him. "It's a special brand of my own—rather potent stuff. Put that drink down and see how you like it."

"Thanks, sir, but I'd rather not."

"Afraid it might be too strong?"

"No, sir; it's just that I—I've lost my desire for it."

"Well, I haven't," smiled Selby. He mixed himself a drink, picked up the glass, and held it up to the light. "I thought it looked—well, rather a queer colour, sir," said O'Ryan, "and it tasted a bit queer—"

Clive held out his glass.

"Mine's all right," he said. "Try this one. It may have been something in the glass. Lane's a careless devil at times—"

There came a scream, a high, piercing scream of terror, from the garden, and Clive set down his glass with a bang.

"Good God! What on earth—"

He went striding across the room, out through the French windows and onto the terrace. O'Ryan, with a scared look on his face, hesitated a moment and then went striding after him. And as he reached the terrace he saw Nita

come running towards the house and pause at the foot of the terrace steps where Clive was standing. She was deathly pale; her hair was dishevelled; her dress was covered with dust. Her hands were opening and closing with quick, convulsive movements, and there was a wild look in her eyes.

"Selby—you devil!" she gasped.

He stepped towards her and grasped her arm. "Nita darling, what in the world has happened? You seem terribly distressed."

She wrenched her arm free and stepped back from him. "Happened!" she exclaimed frantically. "You know what has happened—what you hoped would happen, what you planned should happen!"

"Nita, my dear, try to calm yourself. I have no idea—"

"Don't lie, Selby! It's no use your lying to me any more. I understand now—everything—since I came back—everything you've said and done—nothing but lies—telling lies, acting lies—"

He grasped her arm again and, though she tried to free herself, held her fast.

"Pull yourself together, Nita," he said sternly. "You don't know what you're saying. Pull yourself together and tell me—"

"Your trap!" she gasped. "I walked into your trap—as you intended that I should."

"Trap?" he echoed.

"Yes—trap," she repeated. "I had no idea—I wasn't thinking—and a great beam of wood fell.... It missed me—just. If I hadn't stepped back it would have struck me—killed me—"

"Good God! The pergola! I told you it wasn't safe, didn't I? I warned you only this morning—"

"Warned me? Of course you warned me! You would, wouldn't you? That's part of your system. You warned the others, didn't you? But that didn't save them. You're too foully clever not to warn me. But you won't deceive me any more with that sort of hypocrisy."

"Nita, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you let me go out there—deliberately—knowing what was waiting for me, hoping that the trap would catch me, that you'd find me later on—crushed, with my head battered in—"

"You must be mad, Nita. I had no idea that you were going to the pergola. I left you in the library with O'Ryan. You're frightened, my dear, and don't realize what ghastly accusations you're making."

"I'm not mad, Selby. I'm perfectly sane. And I know what I'm saying. I'm saying that you planned it all—prepared it all—tried to murder me—"

"Nita, don't be a fool!" It was O'Ryan's voice, and she swung round and faced him.

"Mind your own business, Frank," she exclaimed. "This happened to me, not to you, and I know what I'm saying. I caught my foot in a wire—I wasn't thinking where I was going—and the whole thing fell."

"But it was all an accident, Nita," urged O'Ryan soothingly. "You mustn't jump to the conclusion—"

"Accident! My God, Frank, can't you see it now? The catch-pit, the car, and now this! And there's no knowing what other murderous schemes he has in his mind. And it may be your turn next, Frank. Don't forget that. You'd much better clear out at once—before it's too late."

Clive dismissed O'Ryan with a nod.

"Leave this to me, O'Ryan, please," he said.

The other turned and hurried across the terrace into the house.

"Now, listen to me, Nita," said her husband firmly. "You must go up to your room and lie down for a bit. I'm terribly sorry this has happened—"

Again she wrenched her arm free.

"Sorry? Of course you're sorry—sorry your plan failed, sorry the beam didn't fall where you meant it to fall, sorry that I'm alive—not even hurt—"

"But why should I hurt you, Nita? After all you said to me in the library this morning—how could I possibly want to hurt you? You made me very happy this morning—happier than I've been for many a long day."

"For God's sake, Selby, don't go on lying!" she stormed. "That sort of thing won't work any longer. You tried to kill me. You tried yesterday, you tried again this morning. And now—now ... Oh, for heaven's sake, Selby, leave me—don't touch me—get out of my sight." She covered her face with her hands and stood there, trembling violently.

Clive stood for some moments regarding her, his brow puckered, his lips set in a thin, straight line.

"If I thought that you realized what you've been saying, Nita—" he began.

"Oh, please go, Selby. I do realize."

"That I tried to kill you?"

She nodded.

"Then you're stark mad!" he exclaimed angrily. "Mad—wicked—deliberately wicked. I refuse to listen to any more. And now pay attention to me. I've been patient enough—God knows!—but there are limits to my patience, and you have passed them. For nearly three years I've done everything in my power to make you happy, and had nothing in return but coldness, indifference, contempt, a sort of patronizing, sneering tolerance. Think back a bit, and you'll realize that what I'm saying is true. You told me yourself this morning that you'd been a mean little swine to me, and you never said a truer thing."

Her shoulders heaved convulsively.

"Please go!" she breathed, but he did not move.

"I haven't complained," he went on. "I've endured it all, tried to take no notice, hoping that things might right themselves. I thought that we might eventually find some formula for happiness, but apparently that is out of the question, and we may as well face the fact that we have never been happy together and never shall be."

"Selby, it isn't my fault."

"And now you make this horrible accusation against me," he continued, disregarding her muttered interruption, "and I've reached the limit of my endurance. I know you're unbalanced, and you've said a great many things which no doubt you had no intention of saying, but it does not follow, because you did not mean to let them slip out, that you don't believe them to be true. You do believe them to be true. You have only said now what in your sane moments you have been thinking and have not dared to say, and if you can think me capable of the vile things you have suggested—" he made a quick, impatient gesture—"I'm through with you, Nita."

She took her hands from her face, saw him suddenly turn from her abruptly and go striding away. For a few seconds she stood watching him as he went across the terrace towards the library. Selby was going—leaving her—she was losing him.... Again that sense of irreparable loss swept over her. She took a quick step forward, hesitated, opened her lips to call to him but found that she could not call. Selby was going, and she could not bear that he should go....

Suddenly, as he stepped through the French windows into the library, her irresolution slipped from her. She ran up the steps, across the terrace, and into the room. He paused as she entered and turned to face her, his eyes cold, his lips grimly set.

"Selby!"

"I've nothing more to say, Nita."

She stepped swiftly up to him and grasped his arm.

"Selby, don't!" she implored. "Why do you do it? Why do you hate me? For God's sake, Selby, don't look at me like that. You've no reason to hate me, no reason to distrust me. I've never hurt you—never, Selby—never in all my life done anything—" She hid her face on his shoulder, clinging to him desperately, holding him, keeping him there, terrified lest she should feel him thrust her from him and see him go striding away from her again.

For some moments he stood motionless, frowning, with doubt and bewilderment in his eyes. And then slowly the frown faded, the grimness left his lips, his arm pressed her close to him, and he was stroking her hair, touching her cheek, trying to raise her head and look into her face.

"Steady, my dear!" he said gently. "Take it easy. You've had a bigger shock than I imagined, and your nerves are all to pieces."

She glanced up at his face and saw that he was smiling down at her—that wistful smile of his that always made her feel so ashamed of herself.

"Selby, I—"

"You're going upstairs to your room," he said firmly, "and you're going to lie down and try to sleep. An hour's sleep will work wonders. Come along! I'm going to tuck you up."

He took her arm and led her from the room, and she went without protest, glad of his support as they mounted the stairs, limp, listless, terribly helpless. As they reached the door of her room, however, she made an effort and withdrew her arm.

"All right, Selby—thanks—I shall be all right now." She opened the door, slipped inside, and closed it hastily. Then she shot the little silver bolt, flung herself onto the bed, and buried her face in the pillow.



## CHAPTER XVII

NITA did not sleep. For a long time she lay there motionless, conscious only of a terrible weariness. She had a strange feeling of isolation, as if all links between herself and the outer world had been snapped and only she and her weariness existed. Nothing mattered except that she should stay where she was and be called upon to make no effort, either physical or mental.

It was only gradually that sensation returned to her and memory began to seep back into her mind—a drop here, a drop there, unconnected at first and conveying no meaning to her: that beam crashing to the ground within an inch of her—Frank slipping the lease into his pocket—Selby sitting on the back of the couch with that wistful smile on his lips—Selby, grim, ruthless, angry, telling her that he had done with her, turning from her, striding across the terrace—out of her life....

Slowly the little drops crept together, amalgamated, and formed a stream of memory that flowed steadily through her mind. She still lay there, watching it flow by with only a languid sort of interest, until it bore into her thoughts that scene with Selby in the garden; and then she stirred uneasily and suddenly sat upright, pressing the palms of her hands against her temples. What had she done? All those wild words that fear had sent rushing from her lips, all those hideous accusations—what had Selby thought of them? Had he taken them seriously? Had he really meant it when he had said that he was through with her?

She got off the bed and glanced at her watch. She was surprised to find how late it was; she must have lain there for hours. She had a dim recollection now of having twice heard a soft tap on her door. Selby, she supposed, come to see if she was all right; but she had been too weary, too detached from everything, to feel any interest at the time. Just as well. She could not have faced him just then. But she would have to face him. At dinner, she supposed. She would have to nerve herself to it somehow. She must know what he was thinking, what he was intending, how far he had taken her outburst seriously, whether she had really lost him.

She crossed to the window and stood gazing across the landscape spread out below her. It was bathed in the soft evening sunshine, but away to the northeast a huge mass of black cloud hung, sullen and ominous, in the sky; and as she gazed at it a vivid streak flashed from it and was gone. They were having a storm, she reflected, in London. She could see the rain falling over there, streaming down like diaphanous drapery from the cloud. They would get it here at Sunningbourne later, no doubt. Selby would be glad of that: the garden, he said, needed rain; and it would be a good test of his catch-pit. It was ghastly the way her head was aching—as if an iron band encircled it, growing tighter and tighter. ...

She opened the window and breathed in deeply; but the air was heavy, stagnant, and with a sigh she seated herself in a chair close to the window in the hope that some little breeze might find her and cool her throbbing head. She saw Muller in the garden, walking up and down the path with Selby, puffing his cigar, talking earnestly, driving his points home with the bang of a fist against his palm. So Muller was back! She wondered if he had been there for lunch, and how Selby had explained her absence; whether he had told Muller of that scene with her in the garden, of the vile accusations that had leapt at him from her lips. They told each other most things, these two. She would have to meet Muller, too, with those shrewd eyes of his that seemed to see so much, to know so much. She wondered what he was saying to Selby now, what particular idea he was banging into his head. Telling him that he had endured more than any man could be expected to endure, perhaps, urging him to cut adrift, to leave her....

Always her thoughts came back to that point: had she lost Selby? She knew now that above all else she was afraid of that—more afraid of it than of Dennis Sanderby. She felt that she could face Dennis Sanderby's past, however much it might shock and repel her, but the future without Selby Clive she could not face. She knew now why she had all the time felt so reluctant to go from Sunningbourne, why she had felt, despite her fear and her horror, that something was holding her there, almost, it had seemed, against her will. Something had been holding her there—her love for Selby. She wondered now how she had failed to know that before; she saw how, throughout the tumult of the last few days, it had all the time been there, steady, persistent, like the hum-note of a bell, gradually growing in volume until now it filled her ears and dwarfed all other sounds into insignificance. Her whole being throbbed with it, casting out all other emotions, casting out fear. And now that she had come to understand, to recognize her love for what it was, was she to lose it? Had that sudden up-rush of fear, that hysterical outburst in the garden, robbed her finally of Selby's love? Surely the treason which she had contemplated could not require that penance. That foolish, vulgar little episode with Frank, regretted and abandoned almost before it had been begun, could not surely merit so heavy a punishment.

She wondered about Frank. She hoped that he had gone. Whatever she might have to face when she went downstairs, she felt that she could face it better for the knowledge that Frank was not there. With Frank gone from the house, there would be less to fear from Dennis Sanderby—less to fear for Selby. Frank—terrified, reckless, desperate—with that revolver in his pocket! She rose, crossed to her dressing table, and seated herself in front of her mirror, peering anxiously at her reflection. What a fright she looked! Still, thank God for make-up! She wished now that she had had her hair waved

this morning. She must look her best this evening. She gave a wry smile. She had read somewhere the the aristocrats in the French Revolution had dressed with meticulous care before paying their visit to Madame la Guillotine, and she might be paying much the same sort of visit herself. She went to her wardrobe and stood thoughtfully surveying the frocks that hung inside. Which should she wear? The black, perhaps. Selby had once told her that she always looked most beautiful in black....

She spent a long time dressing, surveying herself again in the long mirror, adjusting this, altering that, until she could find no flaw—or, rather, which seemed infinitely more important to her tonight, until she could find nothing which her husband might consider a flaw. She had sacrificed her own taste to his in every little detail. The little curl by her ear, which he thought rather vulgar—"fast" he had called it—was discreetly tucked away; there was only the merest suggestion of rouge on her cheeks and the faintest touch of lipstick on her lips, and round her neck was the diamond necklace which always made her feel that she was the wife of a provincial mayor who dropped his h's, called her "the missus" and rode in a Rolls-Royce bought from the profits of his butcher's shop. But Selby liked it—thought it her loveliest piece of jewelry.

There came a soft tap at her door, and she started. "Nita!"

It was Clive. But she did not want to see him yet—she wasn't ready to face him; she must have more time. "Are you all right, Nita?"

She tried to steady her voice.

"Quite all right, Selby."

"You'll be down for dinner?"

"Just dressing."

"Jerry's back. He's in the library. Go and talk to him as soon as you're ready."

"All right, Selby. I shall be down in a few minutes." She heard him go into his room and close the door; and then, after a final inspection of herself in the glass, she quietly opened her door, slipped along the corridor and down the stairs. She found Muller in the library, a glass in one hand and a cigar in the other. She smiled at him.

"I've been told to come and keep you company, Mr. Muller," she said. "Selby's orders."

He flourished his glass.

"I guess he's nervous about his whisky, Mrs. Clive. Sure he didn't tell you to see I wasn't too heavy-handed with the decanter?"

She shook her head.

"My orders were just to come and talk to you."

"And as a dutiful wife you've obeyed orders, eh? Well, I guess that's wisest in the end, with a guy like Selby."

She felt his keen eyes searching her face and turned away towards the window.

"Why—particularly—with a guy like Selby, Mr. Muller?"

"Well, you should know, Mrs. Clive," he replied. "I've disagreed with Selby more than once, and I haven't found it a particularly pleasant experience. He's as obstinate as a mule sometimes, and if you worry him too much he kicks like a mule. He's been kicking this evening. Still, I'm tough."

She glanced at him over her shoulder.

"About—about that lease?"

He nodded.

"He's crazy—chucking away a million dollars."

"I suppose he can do as he likes, Mr. Muller."

"Sure—as long as he knows what he's doing; and it's my job to see that he does know. I've managed it most times, but this time he just won't learn."

She turned again to the window, and for some moments neither of them spoke. Nita had an uncomfortable feeling that he was staring at her back.

"Mrs. Clive," he said at last, "there's something I'd like to ask you."

"About?"

"About young O'Ryan."

She caught her breath sharply.

"In that case, Mr. Muller, surely the right person to ask is Mr. O'Ryan?"

"I have asked him, but he won't tell me. You don't have to think me impertinent over this, Mrs. Clive. You have to remember that I'm your husband's oldest friend and his lawyer."

"And old friends and lawyers have a right to be impertinent to their clients—is that it? But to their clients' wives?"

"I guess I'll risk it, anyway," said Muller. "You know young O'Ryan pretty well, don't you? I know you do; Selby tells me you said gug-gug to each other before either of you could walk, and that being so, I shouldn't be surprised if he sometimes says things to you that he might not say to your

husband—things that he'd much prefer that your husband shouldn't hear him saying, eh?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Mr. Muller."

"Am I being impertinent?"

"Very."

"Well, I'm in the water now, so I guess I may as well keep swimming," he said. "I'm wondering whether he has ever said anything to you about that Tamagari property."

"He has quite often mentioned it."

"Has he mentioned, for instance, that there's silver on the land? He says he's going to farm it, but do you believe he's going to farm it? Don't you really believe, Mrs. Clive, that he's hankering to be a mine owner rather than a farmer? Can you see that guy farming? Sure—from an armchair in his club in the West End of London. Well?"

"Why ask me, Mr. Muller?"

"Because I don't trust young O'Ryan, and I'm looking after Selby."

"And why don't you trust Mr. O'Ryan?"

"Because I don't like him."

"Is that a sound reason?"

"Sure," he said. "I've always found it the best possible reason. If you don't like a man, don't trust him; if you do like him, still don't trust him. That's the soundest sort of philosophy for a lawyer, Mrs. Clive—and for a woman."

"Yet you expect me to trust you, Mr. Muller," she laughed. "But really I can't tell you anything."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't," she repeated. "Mr. O'Ryan has told me that there may be silver in the land—he says there's always a chance of it—but he does not believe that there is. Any more impertinent questions?"

He shook his head.

"Not even as Selby's oldest friend?"

He smiled.

"You must try to forgive me, Mrs. Clive," he said. "I'm anxious—that's my excuse. Forget it. You're all right again now, are you? Selby tells me you nearly had a nasty accident this morning."

She nodded.

"Yes—a rather close shave," she said—"too close to be pleasant. I'm afraid it upset me, and I rather made a fool of myself. Did Selby tell you that?"

"No, he didn't mention that. Trust Selby for keeping the family secrets to himself. So that crackerjack lawyer is coming in after dinner, specially to meet the respectable sort of American, eh? Selby told me that."

"Sir Ralph Whitcombe? He's very anxious to meet you."

"Wouldn't anyone else listen to him?"

There came a vivid flash of lightning, and Nita started violently and turned suddenly from the window.

"Nervous, Mrs. Clive? Forgive me if I'm being impertinent again, but you seem all on edge this evening."

"Yes, I—I am rather, I'm afraid."

"You're not afraid of thunderstorms?"

"No—not of thunderstorms."

"Fine," said Muller, "because we're sure going to have one. And I'm supposed to be getting back to London tonight. I only ran down here again to have a last glimpse of old Selby. I'm sailing tomorrow."

Clive and O'Ryan came into the room at that moment, and she glanced anxiously at their faces. Clive smiled at her; O'Ryan did not even look in her direction.

"Better, my dear?" asked her husband.

"Quite all right now, thanks, Selby."

"Fine," he said. "We're going to have a storm, Jerry, and you know what that means—you'll have to stay the night. The Packard has broken a spring, and if I know anything about weather you'll have to wade to the station if you try walking."

"Well, all right," agreed Muller. "I guess I'm not anxious to wade. If we get the storm I'll stay."

"Why can't you stay for a month or two? You just dash in for a few minutes every few years and then dash back to God's own country. If I had my way, I'd keep you here for good." He turned to O'Ryan, "You see this man, O'Ryan?"

"Oh, stop your kidding, Selby!" said Muller. "I know what you're going to say, but I've heard it all before." Clive smiled.

"You see this man, O'Ryan?" he said again. "Nothing much to look at, is he? But that only goes to show that you can't judge by appearances. If it hadn't

been for this unprepossessing specimen of man, I shouldn't be alive now. He saved my life—by talking—which is more than old Whitcombe's talking is ever likely to do. It's far more likely to end it." He turned to Muller. "You know, Jerry, I shall never forget that speech you made. I believe I could almost repeat it word for word—even after twenty years."

Muller made a gesture of impatience.

"For God's sake, forget it, man!"

"It's not easy to forget that kind of thing, Jerry. If you'd been a shade less convincing, a shade less clever, if you hadn't made the most of every scrap of evidence, I'd have been hanged."

Muller gave a shrug.

"I wish I could say that you didn't deserve it."

"Hanged?" exclaimed Nita tensely. "But, Selby, if that's true—oh, how can you talk about these things so lightly—make a joke of them."

"I can't," said Muller curtly. "Look here, Dennis—Selby, get off that subject, will you? I'm dead sick of it, and it's not the sort of thing you want to talk about in front of your wife."

"But, Selby, I'd like to know—" began Nita.

The dinner gong sounded at that moment, and Muller set down his glass with a bang.

"If that means something to eat," he said, "that's what I call real music."

Dinner was less of an ordeal than Nita had expected. Muller and her husband became engrossed in reminiscences, and she was free to think. So it was true—all that Sir Ralph had told her! She had the evidence from both Selby and Muller now. Selby would have been hanged if Muller had been a little less convincing, a little less clever. Sir Ralph had said that, too—the clever young lawyer who had got Dennis Sanderby off when everything looked black against him. And there was no doubt now—she had never really doubted it, she supposed, since she had found that document in the secret compartment of the writing desk—that Selby was really Dennis Sanderby. She had noticed Muller's slip when he called him Dennis, and seen the quick, warning glance that her husband had given him. Frank had noticed it, too. She had seen him start and glance in her direction. If only Frank would go! She was afraid only for him now—and for Selby. For herself she had no fear. She loved Selby, and surely love—the sort of love which had come to her—should be strong enough to wipe suspicion from his mind and convince him of her loyalty. Surely, whatever Muller might have urged him to do, the urging of her love should be stronger. Selby did not, after all, always take Muller's advice. He had not taken it over that lease for Frank. At

least—he did not seem to have taken it. But there was no knowing. Dennis Sanderby might only be playing a part, dangling the lease as a bait to keep Frank there....

She forced herself not to think of that. Frank knew what he was risking, and if he persisted in running the risk that was his own affair.

She turned her thoughts to Muller. The lawyer, she felt, did not like her. She had felt that from the first moment she had met him, and she had done nothing to lessen his antagonism. She had felt his dislike and resented it, and had shown him quite clearly that she was no less antagonistic to him. But she saw now that she had been foolish. Muller would be a powerful ally. If she could feel that he was on her side, that he understood and sympathized and had confidence in her loyalty to Selby, it might help enormously to win back Selby's confidence. Perhaps even now it was not too late....

They had just entered the drawing room when the storm broke. There came a brilliant flash of lightning, and almost instantly the thunder crashed above them and went rumbling slowly away as the rain beat furiously against the windows. Selby crossed the room, pulled back the curtains, and stood gazing out at the myriads of silver splashes dancing on the terrace.

"I never see a thunderstorm, Jerry, without thinking of that day when you saved my life," he said. "Do you remember? There was an awful storm that day, and the courthouse was struck by lightning." He turned from the window and strolled across to the fireplace. "What a little makes all the difference between life and death, eh, Jerry? A little cunning, a little guile, a few rhetorical periods, a slight twisting of the meaning of a phrase—" He stopped abruptly, with a self-conscious smile. "But I'm becoming sentimental."

"I guess you're blathering, if that's what you mean," said the lawyer. "And if it isn't what you mean, it's the same thing, anyway."

"But I don't think you're blathering, Selby," said Nita. "You've made me curious—you and Mr. Muller between you. Were you really in such terrible danger? When Mr. Muller saved you, I mean. I'd like to hear the story—"

"Don't encourage him, Mrs. Clive," interrupted Muller impatiently. "Not while I'm here, anyway. Get it out of him when you've got him to yourself." He turned to O'Ryan. "Do you play picquet?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid," said O'Ryan. "Rather badly, in fact."

"Fine! Then we'll play for money."



Muller and O'Ryan settled down to their cards, and Selby, after watching them for a few moments, pleaded that he had a letter to write and went off to the library; and some minutes later Nita followed him.

She found him struggling with a cuff link, attempting the difficult task of thrusting it through his cuff with one hand.

"Do this up for me, Nita, will you?" he said, holding out the cuff. "It has come undone—or perhaps I didn't fasten it."

She smiled and slipped the link in for him.

"I was in rather a hurry," he explained—"afraid of being late for dinner. I'd dressed in good time, and then I got my shirt all mussed up and had to put on another." He seated himself at his desk and smiled up at her as she stood beside him.

"Quite better, my dear?"

She nodded.

"You had a good long sleep?"

"Oh, yes—quite a good one." She picked up an ivory paper-knife that lay on his desk and stood toying with it nervously. "Selby!"

"Yes, my dear?"

"About—about this morning. I said all sorts of things —horrible things."

"Did you?"

"You know I did, Selby. I don't know why; I didn't mean to say them. I was frightened—terribly frightened—by that beam, and my nerves were all anyhow—"

There came another peal of thunder, and Clive waved a hand towards the window.

"That may save you from Whitcombe," he smiled. "He'd hardly come over in this downpour. I shall be interested to see how the catch-pit does its job—"

"Selby, please listen," she interrupted. "I'm trying to tell you that I'm sorry about this morning. My only excuse is that I didn't realize what I was saying. I didn't mean to hurt you. I expect I'd have said just the same to anyone I'd met at that moment, and unfortunately it happened to be you. When I remembered—upstairs—what I'd said to you, I hated myself."

"Don't worry your head about it, Nita. It's over and done with."

"And it wasn't true what you said, Selby," she went on. "You didn't really believe it was true, did you?"

"What did I say that wasn't true, Nita?"

"You said that you knew I was upset at the moment, but I was only saying what I really thought when I was perfectly normal."

"I said that?"

She nodded.

"It hurts me, Selby—terribly—if you really think that."

He shook his head.

"It sounds as though I wasn't particularly normal myself, my dear."

"And you aren't really taking any notice of what I said, Selby?"

"I've forgotten what you did say."

She sighed.

"I haven't forgotten what you said. You said that —that you were through with me."

"Oh, but I—"

"I don't blame you," she went on. "I can understand your feeling like that. I know I've treated you abominably, and you've stood it for longer than most men would have stood it. If you're through with me, it's only what I deserve. But I hoped—after our talk this morning—Selby, truly, I am going to be a decent sort of wife to you in future. I am fond of you—awfully fond."

"Are you?"

"Don't you believe it? Try, Selby, please. It's terribly important—to me. I sometimes wonder But you wouldn't ever—ever get ideas about me, would you? Nasty ideas, I mean—that you couldn't trust me, or—or—You wouldn't, would you?"

"It takes a whole lot to make me change my opinion, Nita. Ask Jerry. He says he'd rather be legal adviser to the army mules."

"Oh, I—I see," she said thoughtfully.

"Doesn't that answer your"

"Oh, yes—I suppose so," she said listlessly.

"Then think no more about it, my dear," he said. "Is O'Ryan still playing cards? He must stop for a little while, anyway. I want him in here. You might send him along, will you?"

"Something—important, Selby? I mean it's a pity to spoil their game."

"It's more important than that," he smiled. "There's a matter I want to get settled with him at once, and I promised to have a word with him this

evening. He'll understand if you tell him I want to see him. And keep Jerry in the drawing room, will you? I don't want him butting in."

With a nod she went out and returned to the drawing room.

"I've got a point of five," O'Ryan was saying.

"No darned good," growled Muller.

"I've a tierce major."

"I've a quint major, and if there's any law in this God-forsaken country that counts fifteen."

"I've three aces."

"Forget 'em; I've got four tens."

"And I've got a message for you, Frank," said Nita. "Selby wants you—in the library."

"Now, look here, Mrs. Clive," protested Muller; "don't say you're going to interrupt a good game. I'm just beginning to skin this guy—"

"Sorry, Mr. Muller, but Selby wants to talk to Mr. O'Ryan in private. He said you'd understand, Frank." O'Ryan had laid down his cards and was frowning at them as they lay on the table. Nita noticed that his hand was gripping the arm of his chair so tightly that the knuckles showed white through his skin.

"All right, I—I'll go," he said unsteadily. "Sorry, Muller." He got up from the table and went towards the door, and as he went his right hand was thrust into his pocket.

"Just my luck!" grumbled Muller. "Whenever I start holding cards somep'n' always happens. The last time I had a good hand I'm darned if the San Francisco earthquake didn't butt in."

Nita seated herself at the table.

"I'll play with you instead, Mr. Muller, shall I? Do we play for money?"

"Money, eh? How well do you play?"

"I play a better game than Mr. O'Ryan, anyway."

"Huh!" grunted Muller. "I guess the money's of no consequence. We'll play for love."

## CHAPTER XVIII

O'RYAN made his way slowly towards the library; outside the door he hesitated for some moments, and his hand once more sought his pocket. The touch of the revolver seemed to give him fresh courage, and with a shrug he turned the handle and went in. He entered almost jauntily, closed the door behind him, and paused, his gaze riveted on Clive as he sat at his desk.

"Nita said you wanted a word with me, sir."

Selby Clive nodded and waved a hand towards the chair beside his desk.

"Come in, O'Ryan, and sit down," he said. "Yes, I want to have a chat with you."

O'Ryan seated himself and glanced at Clive inquiringly.

"About this business of yours," Clive continued. "I've got the lease here—" he held up the document—"but before I hand it over to you I want to ask you one or two questions."

"I shall be happy to answer them, sir—if I can." Clive laid the document on the desk.

"If I have understood you correctly," he went on, "you mean to farm part of this land?"

"That is our idea, sir."

"There's a big section ready for cultivation, and you have certain timber rights?"

"Yes."

Clive leaned back in his chair, pursing his lips.

"Well, I'm going to be frank with you, O'Ryan," he said. "My opinion is that you're going to find it the devil of an uphill fight. Muller is of the same opinion. He knows every inch of the country, and he tells me that you'll be heading straight for bankruptcy—if you're going to farm, of course."

"We are, sir," O'Ryan assured him. "That—that's the whole idea."

"Of course, there may be silver in the property," added Clive. "I suppose you're counting on that, eh?"

"Well—no—not exactly, sir. Of course, there's always a sporting chance, but according to my engineer—"

"Quite," agreed Clive. "Take my advice, anyway, and don't count on that. If there is silver in the property, you can take it from me that you've a darned poor chance of ever getting it."

The younger man frowned. What the devil did he mean by that? If Nita, after all, were right—if Clive knew that there was silver on the land, if he suspected that O'Ryan knew ...

There came another heavy clap of thunder and Clive glanced towards the windows.

"Storm's swinging round," he remarked. "You want three thousand pounds, eh?"

"Well—yes, sir—as a matter of fact, we do."

"You want it?"

"Frankly, I do."

Clive picked up his pen and began drawing angular figures on his blotting paper.

"Is your life insured, O'Ryan?"

O'Ryan shot him a swift, nervous glance, but Clive's face told him nothing. If only he knew what the man was getting at....

"No, I—I'm not insured."

"Then you've no security to offer?"

"None at all, I'm afraid."

Selby Clive nodded.

"Very well," he said; "I'll lend you the three thousand pounds."

O'Ryan suddenly sat upright, staring at him, with doubtful, incredulous eyes. If only he knew what Clive was getting at, what was going on in that damnably subtle mind of his! If he was really willing to lend him three thousand pounds ... But was it likely—without any security? Selby Clive did the most quixotic things, certainly. But it didn't seem quite in keeping with what he knew of Dennis Sanderby. The latter would have some reason, some powerful motive. There was a snag somewhere....

"You don't seem particularly delighted, O'Ryan."

"Oh, yes, I am, sir," said the other hastily. "It's frightfully good of you; but I—well, it's a bit overwhelming, you know. I mean, I have absolutely no security to offer you—"

"We can get over that difficulty," interrupted Clive. "I've thought of that, and I'll tell you what you can do. You can insure your life in my favour for—well, say, twenty thousand pounds. That's a simple way out of it, isn't it?"

"Yes—of course—I suppose it is," agreed O'Ryan doubtfully. "But I'm afraid—twenty thousand pounds—I couldn't afford—"

"The premiums? You needn't worry about that. I'll pay the premiums on a short-term policy—for five years, say. It's not really good security at all, but I'm willing to take a chance on it. If you die within the five years I shall take twenty thousand for my three. But it's a gamble, because you may not die."

"Well, I—I hope not, sir," said the other nervously. "And you may not be able to return the three thousand—in which case I should be the loser." He smiled. "It would pay me much better if you should die, O'Ryan, wouldn't it? That's my proposition, anyway. See about the policy tomorrow, and as soon as that's done I'll let you have a cheque for the three thousand and hand over the lease."

"It's terribly good of you, sir," said O'Ryan. "I—er—hardly know how to thank you—er—really." He was thoughtful for a few moments. "I'm not absolutely clear, sir," he went on. "What would happen if I—er—died?"

"Well, it may seem a bit gruesome, but these things have to be thought of in business. If you die, I shall benefit to the extent of seventeen thousand pounds—less, of course, the premiums I've paid. Quite a good profit for me, but then, I'm taking a fairly heavy risk."

"Yes—quite—I really don't know what to say." Clive rose and patted him on the shoulder.

"I quite understand, my boy," he said. "A big relief and a bit overwhelming, eh?"

"Well, yes, it is rather."

O'Ryan got up and stood thoughtfully gnawing his knuckles. He saw the whole scheme now quite clearly. It was just the sort of devilish plan that he would have expected Dennis Sanderby to evolve. Suave, pleasant, pretending to do him a kindness, and all the time plotting his revenge. It was very awkward, though. He couldn't very well refuse to do as Clive suggested. Probably, if he did refuse, he would not get the lease at all, and he could give no reasonable excuse for refusing. Besides, he badly needed that three thousand pounds, and he couldn't afford to throw away the chance of getting it. There might be no snag in it. Clive might be genuinely anxious to help him; it might not be part of a fiendish plan....

"Of course," added Clive, with a smile, "you may not die. You're young, healthy, full of vitality, and in the normal course of events you should have many years of life yet."

"Yes—quite—in the normal way," agreed O'Ryan gloomily. "But I—I should have to see my doctor, shouldn't I? If he says I'm not fit—not a good life for insurance—"

"You needn't worry about that; you're fit enough," Clive assured him. "Then we'll count that as fixed, eh?"

"Yes, of course—thanks awfully, sir. I—I'll see about the insurance tomorrow."

Selby Clive nodded, took his pipe from his pocket and began to fill it.

"Do you know why I'm doing this for you, O'Ryan? Any idea at all?"

"Well—yes—I've got a sort of idea."

"I wonder if you have," said Clive thoughtfully. "As a matter of fact, I'm doing it because Nita—well, we'll say that she likes you, shall we?"

O'Ryan shot him a quick, nervous glance.

"I'll swear she doesn't, Mr. Clive—" he began impetuously, but Clive cut him short.

"I'm not a fool, O'Ryan—not a blind fool, anyway. Nita is—very fond of you."

"You're absolutely wrong, sir. I assure you—"

"You were friends when you were children; you grew up together; you belong to the same class and have many things in common. It's quite natural: I'm not reproaching you."

"You've absolutely no cause, sir."

"If you love Nita, I mean. I've always taken a broad, sane view, I think, of these affinities of spirit and taste. One can't, I suppose, be held entirely responsible for one's likes and dislikes; we are attracted or repelled without having any say in the matter. But you like Nita very much, don't you? I nearly asked her today to tell me how much she likes you, but I'm afraid I hadn't the courage when it came to the point."

"But I—I don't like her, sir," protested O'Ryan. "I mean—well, I like her, naturally; but I'm not in love with her. In any case, I wouldn't allow myself to fall in love with her. I do hope you'll get that idea out of your head, sir. I respect Nita—"

"Tell me this, O'Ryan," interrupted Clive. "If you had had the money, would you have married her?"

"Good God, no, sir! If Nita were the only woman in the world I wouldn't marry her."

Clive raised his eyebrows.

"It might be as well to remember, O'Ryan," he said coldly, "that you're speaking of my wife."

"Yes—of course—I'm sorry, sir. But you know what I mean, don't you? I'm fond of Nita—in a brotherly way, if you understand. But I've never been fond of her in the way you seem to think I have. And I'm dead certain Nita has never liked me in that way, either."

"You seem very sure of that, O'Ryan."

"I am sure."

"H'm!" said Clive thoughtfully. "Well, perhaps it is so, but I'm by no means so sure about it as you seem to be. I've had the impression for some time now that she has a very deep affection for you, and that you—"

"You're wrong, sir—absolutely wrong. She has no more that kind of feeling for me than I have for her. She has never given me the slightest reason to suppose—"

The door opened and Nita came into the room. She glanced anxiously first at her husband and then at O'Ryan. She had a feeling that they had suddenly stopped their conversation as she entered. There was an awkwardness, somehow, and it struck her that they both seemed ill at ease, that there was a sensation of strain. Clive looked terribly serious, and Frank couldn't keep his hands still, while his eyes shifted restlessly and refused to meet hers.

She smiled at Clive.

"Am I being a nuisance?"

He shook his head.

"Come in, my dear. O'Ryan and I have finished our business—for the time being, at any rate."

"Satisfactorily, I hope?"

"Well, yes—I think so—so far. Ask O'Ryan."

She glanced at him inquiringly.

"Oh, yes—rather—quite satisfactorily, thanks, Nita," he said, and stared out of the window. "It's still pouring down."

"The storm seems to be going round in a circle," said Clive. "Still, we can do with the rain." He glanced at Nita. "Whitcombe turned up yet, my dear?"

She shook her head.

"I thought he arranged to be here for dinner, Selby."

"He did. I suppose he saw the storm coming up and thought better of it. Just as well he did. It's hardly the night for a walk across the common—and it's a let-off for Jerry, anyway. But I'd have liked to hear those two together. Old Whitcombe can talk, but I think I'd have backed Jerry..."



She hardly heard what he was saying. She was watching O'Ryan; he was still standing at the window, staring out into the garden with his hands behind his back, his fingers laced together, working nervously, never still. Twice she saw his right hand move towards his pocket, hesitate, and return to continue wrestling with his left. Frank was nervous—worse than nervous; he was in a panic, struggling to control himself, trying desperately not to let Selby see. If only she knew what had happened, what these two had been saying to each other, what Frank had told Selby! If Selby had frightened him, as likely as not Frank had blurted out the whole story.

"Mustn't leave old Jerry alone," Clive was saying. "He's off to Canada again tomorrow, and I shan't have another chance of talking to him for a year or so. We'd better get back to the drawing room. Come along, O'Ryan."

He went to the door, opened it, and glanced back. O'Ryan was still standing at the window.

"Come along, my boy, and make yourself pleasant to Jerry."

Suddenly O'Ryan swung round. His face was pallid, his eyes unnaturally bright, and as he stood there staring at Clive his lips twitched.

"Mr. Clive—please—just a moment," he began breathlessly. "I—I've something to say to you."

Clive raised his eyebrows.

"Unless it's something particularly important—"

"It is. Please shut that door, sir. I—I must say it now."

With a shrug Clive closed the door and turned towards him.

"Well?"

"It's—it's about—this."

He picked up the lease from the desk.

"The lease? But I thought we'd fixed up everything."

"Yes, I know, but—but I can't take it; I can't accept the lease."

"Why not?"

For some moments O'Ryan made no reply. He stood gazing down at the document as his fingers twisted it this way and that.

"Why on earth can't you take it?"

"Because—I've been trying to tell you—all the evening, sir—but I—I don't seem to have had a chance. And it's a rotten sort of thing to have to tell you."

"You've been trying to tell me—what?"

"That—about the Tamagari land—that there's silver on the property."

"What makes you say that, O'Ryan—now?" asked Clive. "Has Muller been getting at you? He's got a bee in his bonnet about there being silver on the Tamagari land. But he's wrong: there's no silver there—none worth having, anyway."

"Muller's right, sir; there is silver there. There's a big lode—my engineer located it."

"When?"

"Well, he—he surveyed the place, but it was only today that I actually heard about the silver. I was on the telephone to London—"

"Today? I didn't know that you had been on the telephone today."

"Oh, yes—when you were out—just before dinner. It came as a complete surprise to me, and I—I had to tell you."

"You're sure about this, O'Ryan?"

"There's no doubt about it, sir, apparently. My engineer was quite definite about it on the telephone, and of course I can't—can't take the lease now."

He suddenly tore the document across and across, savagely, vindictively, and tossed the torn fragments on to the desk.

"There it is," he added sullenly, fumbled for his cigarette case, lighted a cigarette, and turned again to the window. "I wish to God the rain would stop. I can't possibly go out in this downpour."

Nita's eyes were troubled.

"Were you thinking of—going out, Frank?"

He turned and faced her.

"Well, yes—as a matter of fact, I was, Nita. I feel rather uncomfortable about that school dinner. You see, I promised to go, and I might still be able to look in before it's over."

"Nonsense!" interrupted Clive. "I'm not letting you go. You're staying here. And now about that lease. You've been very sporting about it—splendid. Don't you think so, Nita?"

She nodded.

"Oh, yes—very sporting."

"Many men would have kept quiet about the silver and taken the lease. Well, I'm glad to be dealing with a gentleman. I must tell Jerry about this. He'll be all cock-a-hoop that he's right again, and it'll be a long time before I hear the last of it."

He strode quickly to the door, opened it, and paused. "You've torn up the lease, O'Ryan," he said, "but I want you to realize—" He hesitated, smiling.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want you to realize," continued Selby, "that it won't make the least difference."

## CHAPTER XIX

FOR some time after Clive had closed the door behind him, O'Ryan stood staring at it fixedly, almost as if he still saw Selby standing there and smiling at him. Nita watched him, a rather contemptuous smile on her lips. At last he wrenched his gaze away and turned a white, scared face towards her.

"Nita—did you hear?"

"I've heard a lot of things this evening, Frank—some of them rather horrible and some of them quite amusing."

"But you heard what he said?"

She nodded.

"I'm glad I'm dealing with a gentleman.' That was one of the amusing things, Frank. Do you think he meant it, or was he just indulging in a little sarcasm?"

"Oh, how the devil do I know? You can never be sure what he's thinking, and you can't take a single word he says at its face value. He's too devilishly cunning to let you know for certain what he's driving at. That's part of his scheme, I suppose—to keep you guessing, wondering if he means what you're afraid he does mean. He enjoys it. It's like—like sticking a pin in a worm and watching it wriggle. That's what he's doing all the time—amusing himself by watching us squirm, keeping us on tenterhooks. He thinks that if he keeps it up long enough we shall give ourselves away—"

"Frank, for heaven's sake, pull yourself together. You're shouting; they'll hear you in the drawing room." He flung himself into an armchair and clasped his head in his hands.

"I can't stand much more of it," he said. "It's getting me down; I admit it. It's all so horribly—relentless. You heard what he said, Nita: 'It won't make the least difference.' What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"It's no use asking me, Frank."

"Of course, he may not have meant anything—anything rotten, may he? I mean, he was smiling when he said it, and he said it in quite a friendly sort of way. Oh, for God's sake," he exclaimed suddenly, "don't stand there sneering!"

"I'm not sneering, Frank. I'm just wondering what Selby can have said to you while I was playing cards with Mr. Muller in the drawing room to reduce you to the pitiful state of funk you're in now."

"Funk? Oh, well, perhaps I am. Aren't you? You were in a blue funk this morning, anyway, out in the garden. You gave yourself away pretty

thoroughly, didn't you? You were absolutely crazy with fright, and there wasn't much you didn't tell Selby. If you think he still doesn't realize that you know he's Dennis Sanderby, you're just a fatuous little optimist. Why the deuce you had to blurt out everything—"

"If anyone suffers for that, Frank, I shall, not you."

"Shan't I? That's just where you're wrong. It's entirely your fault—about tonight, I mean. Selby knows now that we've rumbled him, and that's why he's started getting a move on. He's scared stiff in case we give him away, and he means to put us out of harm's way before we have a chance of doing it. Hang it, you told him to his face that you knew he was trying to murder you—just the same as he did to the others."

"So I'm to blame, Frank? All right; it's no use quarrelling about whose fault it is. What did he want you for in here?"

"Oh, about that cursed lease," replied O'Ryan. "About the Tamagari business, anyway. He knew I needed three thousand for the syndicate, and he offered to lend it to me—on conditions. You bet your life there were conditions! I was to insure my life in his favour for twenty thousand pounds. A great scheme, wasn't it? Quite worthy of Dennis Sanderby! I insure my life in his favour, and then he calmly murders me and pockets a cool seventeen thousand on the transaction."

"But you don't know, Frank. He may really have meant to lend you the three thousand. It's just the sort of thing Selby would do, and you have no proof—"

"Proof? Isn't the fact that he's Dennis Sanderby proof enough? And what about the car and the catch-pit and the beam in the pergola? Isn't that enough proof? You thought so at the time, anyway! And now, just because he's been nice to you and kissed you and called you darling a few times, you swing right round—"

She cut him short with a quick, angry gesture.

"Miss me out, please, Frank."

"I've all the proof I want, anyway," he went on. "I suppose he thought I didn't see through his scheme, but he got no change out of me. He won't make his seventeen thousand at my expense. He can keep his damned lease. I've torn it up, and that's that."

"The sporting gesture, eh? You don't know how proud of you I felt when you ripped the lease across in that dramatic way. So Selby had discovered that you knew there was silver on the property, had he? I can't imagine your tearing up the lease for any other reason."

"You would say something rotten, Nita, wouldn't you?"

"Then why did you rear it up?"

"I tore it up for my own protection."

She nodded.

"That's what I meant," she said. "And you thought that would make a good impression. You're a bigger fool than I thought you, if you believe that. Do you really imagine that, if Dennis Sanderby knows you were trying to swindle him, tearing up the lease will make any difference? He said as much, didn't he? And you didn't really expect him to swallow that story about the engineer on the telephone, did you? You may have Dennis Sanderby rumbled, Frank, but he has certainly got you rumbled. Did he frighten you into telling him—everything? About the Laffan, I mean."

"I told him nothing at all," he said furiously. "But don't deceive yourself that he doesn't know. He tackled me about you—kept pumping me and trying to trap me into admitting that there'd been something between us and that you were in love with me. I told him it was all rot, but I could see he didn't believe me."

"You can hardly blame him for that, can you? And whatever you had told him, it would probably have made no difference. 'A ruthless man, pursuing his inexorable way—'"

O'Ryan sprang to his feet.

"My God! I see now, Nita—'It won't make the least difference'—I see what he meant now! But he won't get a chance. I'll see he doesn't!"

He strode quickly towards the door.

"Frank—where are you going?"

"I'm going to telephone—to Scotland Yard. I'm standing no more of it. They must send a man down here, and I'll tell him the whole damned story."

She went swiftly to him and clutched his arm. "Frank, you can't!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "You shan't do anything of the kind. I'll not let you!" He tried to shake his arm free, but she clung to it desperately.

"I'm through with the whole business," he raved. "I've nothing to lose now and everything to gain by putting the police on him, and I'm going to do it before it's too late. The man's a dangerous criminal—a maniac—"

"He's not! I know he's not. You're all wrong about Selby, Frank. He isn't as bad as you think. Whatever he did in the past—oh, what does the past matter? You can't judge a man by that. You don't know what sort of hell he may have been through...."

"I know the sort of hell I'm going through, and I've had as much of it as I can stand. Let me go!" Again he tried to wrench his arm away, but she maintained her grip.

"For heaven's sake, Frank, think what you're doing," she implored. "What—what about me? If my name is to be dragged into all this beastliness—"

"Your name!" he interrupted violently. "Damn your name! It isn't a question of names: it's a question of life!"

"Your life!"

"Yes, my life."

She stood for a moment gazing at him with scornful eyes; and then she suddenly released his arm and turned away.

"All right," she said; "go on. You know where the telephone is."

His hand was on the handle of the door, but he hesitated, glancing round at her irresolutely.

"The telephone's in the hall," she said, "just outside the drawing-room door. Selby's in the drawing room; so is Mr. Muller. But perhaps you don't mind their hearing what you say to Scotland Yard!"

O'Ryan's hand released the door knob.

"What are you afraid of?" she taunted. "It's a matter of life—your life! And you've a revolver in your pocket, haven't you?"

Slowly he moved away from the door.

"There's no need to talk like that," he muttered sulkily. "I'm doing this as much for you as for myself; you seem to forget that."

She smiled contemptuously.

"I'm glad I'm dealing with a gentleman, Frank," she said. "But please don't be chivalrous on my account. Ring up Scotland Yard, if you want to."

She watched his face anxiously. He was still undecided; she could see that. But somehow she must stop him. He must not go to the telephone. Her name? Damn her name! What did her name matter? It wasn't a question of names: it was a question of everything that was worth having in life, a question of happiness, of love—of Selby. She felt that, rather than let Frank go to the telephone, she could kill him with as little compunction as she would kill a mad dog. And he was still wavering, still half inclined to carry out his purpose.... "Well, Frank? Are you going to telephone?"

"I've half a mind—"

"Because, if you do telephone for Scotland Yard to send a man down so that you can tell him all about Dennis Sanderby, you really mustn't count on ever seeing him, Frank. Dennis Sanderby would certainly take steps to stop you telling your story."

"But there's no reason why he should know—or Muller either. They won't stay in the drawing room all the evening. I'll wait until the coast is clear."

"But he'll still know, Frank. The moment you try to telephone he'll know what you're going to do."

"I'm hanged if I see how—"

"Because I shall tell him."

"Nita!"

"I mean it."

"You wouldn't be such a—"

"I would. Try and see, Frank, if you don't believe me. Just go near the telephone, even, and you'll see just what I can be when I put my mind to it. Well?"

"I think you're crazy," he said sulkily. "You're defending him now, but a couple of days ago nothing was too bad for him."

"That isn't true."

"You're all on his side now, anyway—and against me. I don't matter much now, do I?"

"Candidly, Frank, you matter less than—other things."

"Less than Selby, you mean. Because you fancy that, after all, you're in love with him. You must satisfy that conscience of yours, mustn't you? So you try to persuade yourself that you're in love with him. It's so much more comforting than admitting the truth—that you're crawling and cringing to him because you're scared stiff, trying to get into his good books because you hope that in that way you may be able to wriggle out of a difficult situation—even if it does mean letting me down. You're terribly afraid of him, really." She shook her head.

"Not now."

"If you're not afraid of him, why don't you tell him everything? Tell him about the Laffan. Tell him you know he's Dennis Sanderby, who murdered his wife—"

"You don't understand, Frank."



"I understand enough to know that you daren't tell him. And that's what you'd have to tell him if you tried to stop my telephoning. The whole story would have to come out then, and you'd never dare to let it."

"You don't understand, Frank," she repeated. "You don't understand that there are some things for which it's worth daring anything. I'm not being heroic; I'm just stating a simple fact. I've got something—found something—which seems to me to be much more important than anything else—so important that I'm ready to dare anything for the sake of keeping it. It's just a question of values. To me it seems worth while to put up with anything, sacrifice anything—including you, Frank, if necessary—to prevent its being taken away from me. Just remember that—if you should happen to go near the telephone."

"Fine, Nita!" he sneered. "Wonderful stuff! But you can't persuade me you're not afraid."

She smiled.

"Well, perhaps I am—a little," she admitted. "But don't bank on my fear, Frank, that's all. Fear doesn't matter now. It's one of those things that it's worth while putting up with—" She stopped abruptly as Muller and her husband came into the room.

"Here's the fellow," said Clive, with a wave of his hand towards O'Ryan. "You'd better shake hands with him, Jerry, for proving you right again. I've explained things to Jerry, O'Ryan, and he is going to redraft that lease for you."

"Sure I am," said Muller—"with reservations."

"With no reservations of any kind, Jerry. That was a great gesture of yours, O'Ryan. I appreciate it more than I can tell."

"Fine!" said Muller. "I haven't seen one like it since Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"Jerry, behave yourself," said Clive curtly.

"A fine gesture!" repeated Muller. "I wonder if Sir Something Somebody has ever seen a finer. Wish he'd been here." He paused beside Nita and lowered his voice. "We'd have blubbered in each other's arms," he added.

She smiled.

"I wish he had turned up, Mr. Muller," she said. "You'd probably have liked him. Selby does. It was the rain that stopped him, I suppose. And it got dark very early tonight."

"He's a talkative old gentleman," Clive said, "but I find him very interesting. He's writing about some case or other and wanted to consult you about it, I

believe. What is this precious case he's writing up, Nita? He told you all about it, didn't he?"

"Several times over, I believe, Selby. But I didn't listen very carefully. Hasn't he told you?"

"No; he has been very mysterious about it with me, and as I'm really not very interested I haven't pressed him. Some murder case, I think." He crossed to the window and looked out. "Just as well he didn't come, perhaps. He always will insist on walking here across the common, and it's hardly a trip for an old man just now. I warned him of that this morning. All sorts of unsavoury people are beginning to gather for the racing next week, and as likely as not he'd have lost his watch. And I know you're thankful, Nita."

"Oh, I don't dislike him really," replied Nita. "He's rather an old dear in many ways, but—"

"But he talks too much?" suggested Clive. "There's an old saying amongst the Cherokee Indians: 'The man who talks too much has lived too long.'"

As Lane came into the room, Clive glanced at him over his shoulder.

"Yes, Lane?"

"Colonel Boscombe has phoned through, sir, with a message for Sir Ralph Whitcombe. I told the Colonel that Sir Ralph wasn't here."

"Well?"

"He seemed very surprised, sir. Sir Ralph, he said, had given him to understand that he was dining here this evening, and left to walk here across the common just before dark."

"That's funny," said Clive. "I didn't meet him." Nita gave a puzzled frown.

"You didn't meet him, Selby? But how could you have met him? You haven't been out this evening, have you?"

"Well—er—as a matter of fact, my dear, I did go out —just for a few minutes," replied her husband. "Didn't I tell you?" He seemed embarrassed, rather confused, she thought, by her remark; but she made no comment. "I walked a little way across the common," he went on, "thinking I might meet Whitcombe. This is a difficult place to find in the dark." He paused and looked thoughtful for a few moments. "I hope nothing has happened to him," he added.

"Happened? But what could happen to him, Selby?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"He's an old man, Nita, and he has no right to go wandering about alone on the common at night. If he fell and twisted an ankle he might be out there for hours before he could attract anyone's attention."

"I say, sir," began O'Ryan with alacrity, "shall I go and have a look round?"

Nita was conscious of a vague stir of alarm—a feeling, for which she could find no reasonable explanation, that all was not well; yet she could not suppress a smile as she saw O'Ryan's eager face and noted how he was already at the door, anxious to be off. He intended, of course, to get out of the house and not to return to it—was grasping desperately at this chance of making his escape. If only he would go! Once out of danger, he would think no more about telephoning the police. She knew Frank; once he was out of the reach of Dennis Sanderby, he would be careful to keep clear of him in future, and to be involved in a police investigation was the last thing he would want. He glanced across at her, and she gave him a scarcely perceptible nod of approval.

"Please, Frank—will you?" she said. "I can't help feeling rather nervous, and we really ought to do something."

O'Ryan nodded and opened the door.

"If I'm gone some time, don't worry," he said. "The common's a biggish place and—"

"I'll come with you," announced Clive. "I know every inch of the ground, and if you go alone we shall probably have to send a search party for you later on."

O'Ryan's hand released the door handle, and Nita saw the sudden alarm in his eyes.

"I say, sir, there's no need—" He started violently as a deafening clap of thunder announced the return of the storm. "I mean, it's a pretty foul night—"

"Nonsense, O'Ryan. A drop of rain won't hurt me— eh, Nita?"

"There's no need for everyone to go, Selby," she answered. "After all, Sir Ralph may have taken shelter with the Haylings. Their house is on the way, and he knows them quite well. Perhaps if we telephoned there first ..." She glanced across at O'Ryan and gave him a quick, contemptuous smile. "No use your getting cold feet for nothing, Frank," she said.

Lane coughed discreetly.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but what shall I say to Colonel Boscombe? He is holding the line."

"All right—I'll come and speak to him," replied Clive, and hurried from the room.

Muller smiled.

"Lost—one crackerjack lawyer," he laughed. "Well, if he's never found, I guess he'll be the hell of a loss to society."

"He's our guest, Mr. Muller," Nita reminded him.

"Sure," he agreed. "But I guess if a guest decides that he doesn't like your dinners, there's no sense in dragging the river for him. Selby's always inclined to make a vast fuss over his friends, but they never did a darned thing for him except let him down with a bump."

"All except you, eh, Mr. Muller?"

He waved that aside with a gesture.

"I don't see myself tramping about a common on a night like this just in case a guest couldn't find my house. That's what Selby did." He smiled. "Poor old Selby! He must have blundered into something that wasn't his guest, I reckon. He was in a goodish mess when he came in, anyway—his hands all over red paint or somep'n."

O'Ryan started.

"Red paint?" he exclaimed in a hollow voice.

"Well, I didn't make a close inspection, Mr. O'Ryan. He didn't give me a chance—went straight upstairs."

"Paint?" repeated O'Ryan. He was staring at Muller with frightened eyes. "Are you sure it was paint?"

"There's nothing—nothing been painted red," said Nita rather breathlessly. "I'm quite sure—there's been no painting done."

"Well, I'm not going to swear it was paint," said Muller. "It was somep'n' red, anyway—all over his hands. He seemed terribly upset about it and didn't stop to explain. He just said he must go upstairs and change his shirt."

Nita caught her breath sharply. Selby, of course, had changed his shirt—he had asked her to help him fasten his link—said he had got it all mussed up. And he had been out on the common—he had seemed quite embarrassed when he had let that out... .

She started violently as O'Ryan's voice suddenly cut into the silence.

"Paint!" he exclaimed. "My God, Muller, that wasn't paint! Do you know what it was? I'll tell you, shall I?" Muller turned and stared at him anxiously as he stood there with clenched hands and twitching lips.

"Well, I guess it's of no particular interest to me, Mr. O'Ryan," he said coolly, "so we won't get het up about it." He went to the door, opened it, and glanced back. "If you're interested, Mr. O'Ryan," he said, "I suggest that you ask Selby whether it was paint. I've no doubt he'll tell you!"

## CHAPTER XX

O'RYAN swung round and faced Nita.

"My God! What a fool I am!" he exclaimed, and there was a note of hysteria in his voice. "I might have known—"

"Why on earth didn't you go?" she retorted. "You had the chance. If you haven't the pluck to go openly—to tell Selby you're going, and go whatever he may say—why didn't you go out to look for Sir Ralph? You needn't have come back."

"He wanted to come with me, didn't he? You heard what he said, and he wouldn't have been put off it. If I'd gone, he'd have gone with me. Did you expect me to go—out there—on that damned deserted common—with Dennis Sanderby? It would have been a fine chance for him, wouldn't it?"

"Frank, I don't want to hear—"

"And he'd warned me, hadn't he? You bet he had! He wouldn't forget that. Everyone who was in the room would give evidence that he said there were undesirable people about, that the common wasn't safe. He'd have got away with it again. He always does get away with it. He's cunning—"

Nita made an angry gesture.

"Then, for heaven's sake, Frank, go now!" she exclaimed. "Get away at once. I'll make some excuse for you to Selby; there's no need for you to tell him. Slip out while you have the chance and get to the station—"

"How the devil can I get to the station? Don't you see the trap? I can't get away. He doesn't mean me to get away. I've got no car."

"Then take the Packard. Leave it at the garage next to the station, and I'll fetch it back in the morning."

"It's out of order; he said so. It's got a broken spring—trust him to see to that. He doesn't forget much when he sets his traps. God knows what he's got in his mind this time—some devilish scheme or other—and he doesn't mean to fail again."

"You've legs, haven't you?" said Nita curtly. "You can walk."

"Across that common—alone? That's a good suggestion, isn't it? I wouldn't walk across there tonight for a million pounds."

"Not even with a revolver in your pocket?"

"It's easy to sneer!" he exclaimed angrily. "But you'll find out later whether I was right or not. Don't forget that somebody else walked across that common tonight. He started to, anyway. But how far did he get?"

She sprang to her feet.

"Frank, what—what do you mean?"

"I should have thought it was obvious. I mean Sir Ralph Whitcombe. How far did he get across the common? Just as far as meeting—"

"I won't listen!" she cried. "You shan't say it!" She grasped his arm and shook it passionately, but he wrenched himself free.

"Just as far as meeting Dennis Sanderby," he said. "He had no chance of getting any further—God help him! Didn't Selby go out specially to meet him? You know he did. And Muller saw him come back—with his hands covered with—"

"Frank—for God's sake—don't!" she begged. "You don't realize what you're saying."

"It's as clear as daylight," he went on. "If you weren't so hopelessly prejudiced you'd see it yourself. You do see it, but because you think you're in love with Selby you won't admit it. Selby doesn't know what case it is that old Whitcombe's writing up, eh? He said so—here—this evening, didn't he? And of course, if he says so, it must be true! Don't be such a fool, Nita—or such a hypocrite."

"But Sir Ralph hasn't mentioned it to him—he gave me his word that he would say nothing about it."

"Selby knows, I tell you," he cried. "He knows as well as we do that old Whitcombe is writing up the Sanderby murder case, that he's ferreting out all the details to stick them in his book. Do you suppose Dennis Sanderby is going to stand for that? After all these years of passing himself off as a decent sort of man, do you suppose he's going to let an old fool like Whitcombe blab the whole story? Not likely! He knows that at any moment Whitcombe may dig up the truth—that he changed his name to Selby Clive—and he doesn't mean to have that proclaimed from the housetops. Whitcombe had to be silenced—"

"Frank, I can't believe—"

"You won't believe, you mean. Why don't you face the facts? Whitcombe talks too much, and you heard what Selby said: 'The man who talks too much has lived too long.' He didn't mean to give Whitcombe a chance of talking too much about him, so he went out to meet him—in the dark—on the common."

She covered her face with her hands.

"I can't believe it," she stammered again. "That old man ..." Suddenly she snatched her hands from her face and turned to him defiantly. "It's hideous—foul!" she exclaimed. "He couldn't do it—Selby couldn't do it! Do you hear what I say? It's all lies—filthy lies—out of your own filthy mind! If

you weren't such a pitiful coward— "She turned from him abruptly. "For heaven's sake, go, Frank!"

"Lies?" he sneered. "Selby couldn't do it? But he's done it before, remember. What was old Whitcombe to him, except a damned nuisance? But his wife—his first wife—she must have meant something to him. He must have loved her at one time, kissed her, fondled her, held her in his arms. But she died, didn't she?—died with his kiss on her lips. You know that, yet you persist in deluding yourself."

Nita had flung herself into a chair, resting her elbows on her knees and burying her face in her hands. O'Ryan stood for some moments glancing irresolutely from her to the door and then again at the motionless figure in the chair. Then he turned on his heel, strode quickly across the room and out into the hall.

She heard him go, but she did not move. She did not even wonder whether he had found the courage to leave the house or whether, in spite of her threat, he intended making that telephone call to Scotland Yard. It didn't seem to matter what he did or did not do now. Nothing mattered but Selby. If Frank were right, if Dennis Sanderby, rather than have his secret broadcast to the world, had gone out to meet Sir Ralph—to silence him ...

She thrust the thought from her frantically. She must not believe it—she would not believe it. Even to think of it was treason. As Frank had been speaking, piling up the evidence against him, the thought had crept into her mind that it was all hideously convincing, terrifyingly possible. Selby had said and done just what Frank had stated; she was, perhaps, prejudiced, dazzled by the wonder of the great discovery she had made, instinctively shrinking from anything that threatened it. But as the thought had slipped into her mind, all her feelings had come surging to expel it. No matter what Frank might say, no matter how convincing a case the facts might build up, no matter what her reason might tell her to be the obvious truth, she felt, and therefore she knew beyond all argument and reason, that Selby could not be guilty.

The thunder was rumbling continuously now, and she rose, went to the French windows, pulled aside the curtains, and looked out. In the shaft of light from the windows countless glistening threads of rain were hanging. It was like a curtain of crystal beads, she thought; it swayed every now and then with the wind, and she could hear the swish as its end swept the stone paving of the terrace. Perhaps, after all, they were alarmed over nothing. Sir Ralph would hardly venture across the common on a night like this. Frank was rattled, and she had caught some of his panic. The most likely explanation was that Sir Ralph had seen the storm coming and had taken



shelter with the Haylings. But if he had done that, surely he would have telephoned?

She heard the door open and turned to see O'Ryan standing in the entrance. He was wearing a mackintosh, and his hat was in his hand.

"I'm going, Nita," he announced. "I shall follow the road as far as Staines and get a train there."

She nodded.

"Do you want me to go with you?"

He made no reply, but seemed to be considering the question.

"Do you?" she repeated. "I'll go with you if you like—and hold your hand."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"It's nothing to joke about, Nita. I tell you frankly, I don't fancy the trip, but anything's better than staying in this infernal house. Where's Selby?"

"I've no idea, Frank. Phoning, isn't he?"

"He's not in the hall. And there's no one in the drawing room. I wish I knew for certain. Lane, too—I don't trust him. If Selby asks where I am, Nita, say I've gone up to my room, will you?"

"All right, Frank."

He turned and stood listening intently. Then:

"I'm off."

She nodded.

"Bon voyage!"

For a few seconds he hesitated, gazing at her back as she stood by the window; and then he turned suddenly and hurried away. Nita heard the front door close, and her lips curled in a contemptuous smile.

But she was glad that he had gone. While he was in the house she had felt that she was responsible for him, and she was thankful to be relieved of the responsibility. Frank was so easily rattled. At any moment he might have said something or done something which would have brought her whole world crashing about her. She could breathe more freely now that that danger was gone; she could fight better single-handed, should there be any need to fight.

She seated herself on the Chesterfield, picked up a magazine, and began to turn the pages. There was nothing that she could do but be patient and await developments. She would have been thankful for something to do, but it was useless to try to hurry matters. Muller would be gone tomorrow, and

she would have Selby to herself. She would be able to talk to him then—as she had talked to him this morning—intimately—wife to husband; let him see that, whatever he may have suspected, he had no cause for suspicion now, never again would have cause....

The door was opened, and Clive stood in the doorway. "I wouldn't worry about Whitcombe, my dear," he said. "I expect he's gone to earth somewhere, and it would never occur to him that we might be anxious and he ought to telephone." He smiled. "Too absorbed in his precious case to think of anything else."

"I am rather worried, Selby. Have you telephoned to the Haylings'?"

"Yes—he's not there. They know nothing about him —haven't seen him all day. Jerry's just trying to get through to the police station. We may get some news there." He glanced round the room. "What's become of O'Ryan?"

"Oh, he—he said he was going up to his room. I think he's rather—upset. The storm, you know."

He nodded.

"He's a good chap, Nita—straight. That lease, for instance. I like him for that."

"And dislike him for—what, Selby?"

Clive shook his head.

"When I've any reason for disliking a person, my dear," he said, "I make a rule to keep it to myself." He turned as he heard Muller calling him from the hall. "There's my call," he said. "We'll go into the drawing room, shall we? It's much cooler in there. I'll just speak to the police first."

He went out, leaving the door open, and Nita got up from the couch and stood listening.

"You've heard nothing at all?" she heard him say. "All right, thanks." The receiver was returned to its hook. "No news there, Jerry," he said. "We'll go in the drawing room. Nita's coming along."

Nita remained where she was for some moments, frowning thoughtfully. It was queer about Sir Ralph, and they really should do something. Again she had that uneasy feeling that something was amiss, that something was about to happen—something of which she was afraid....

She heard a sound and glanced up sharply just in time to see O'Ryan step quickly into the room and hastily close the door behind him. He turned to face her, his hand still grasping the knob. His mackintosh was soaked, and his hat, still on his head, was pouring a thin stream of water onto the

carpet. There was a look of terror in his face, and his voice shook as he spoke. "Nita!"

"Frank—what on earth is the matter?"

"Nita, there's somebody—a man—out there in the grounds—watching.—"

"A man?"

He nodded, biting his lip.

"Are you sure?"

"I nearly ran into him. He's watching—for me. Selby put him there—to watch—I might have known, mightn't I? I might have guessed that Dennis Sanderby wouldn't let me get away as easily as that!"

"Are you sure, Frank, that it wasn't one of the gardeners? Joslin, perhaps. He often comes quite late to stoke up the furnace for the vinery."

"No, it wasn't Joslin. It wasn't any of the gardeners. I heard him speak. He said—I heard it quite distinctly—he said: 'Dennis Sanderby!' It was just as if he was giving a password. My God, Nita, you must—somehow—find some way—I mean, I can't stay here. Think of something—"

"You're sure you're not imagining all this?"

"Do you think I'm crazy? I saw him—heard him speak, I tell you. I nearly ran into him—nearly touched him."

There came a vicious stab of fire across the curtains, a crash of thunder, and suddenly O'Ryan became rigid, staring at the window.

"Nita, did you hear?" he whispered. "What was that?"

"I only heard the thunder," she said.

He shook his head.

"Listen!"

They stood in silence, listening intently; and then quite distinctly there came the sound of a tap on the French windows. O'Ryan turned a scared face towards her.

"There! Hear it?"

She smiled.

"Someone's tapping at the window," she said calmly. "See who it is, will you?"

"Don't be a fool, Nita. Ring for Lane."

With a shrug she crossed to the windows and began to pull back the curtains. As she jerked them back, the lightning flashed again, and as she

caught a glimpse of the figure that stood on the terrace she gave a stifled scream and stepped hastily backward, staring at the window with eyes in which was the glint of terror. And then she went swiftly forward again and grasped the handle.

"Nita—for God's sake—don't open that window!"

She did not seem to hear him. She twisted the handle, flung the window open, and stepped back with a little gasp of horror as she saw Sir Ralph, with an ugly red streak across his face, his dress-shirt sodden and stained with red, his hair in wild disorder, and his hands groping in front of him, stagger forward and lurch into the room.

For a few moments he stood swaying, his hands still pawing at the air, his eyes closed; and then, with a low moan, he pitched forward and fell in a shapeless heap on the floor.

## CHAPTER XXI

THE door of the library was thrown open, and Selby Clive, with Muller on his heels, came striding in.

"Nita—I thought I heard a scream—"

She pointed to the huddled man that lay on the floor just inside the French windows.

"Look!"

Clive started.

"Shut that window, O'Ryan," he ordered, and an instant later was on his knees beside the prostrate form.

O'Ryan hurried to the window and closed it. Muller's fingers were already on Sir Ralph's pulse.

Nita made an effort to speak calmly.

"Mr. Muller, is he—dead?"

Muller shook his head, frowning.

"No, I guess he's not dead, Mrs. Clive; but he's got a pulse that's missing on two."

"Ring for Lane," ordered Clive.

But at that moment Lane came in, halted as he caught sight of the group around the figure on the floor, and stood staring, with gaping mouth and wide-open eyes. "Is he badly hurt, Selby?"

"Can't say, my dear. Jerry, go to the dining room and get the couch ready, will you? It's better than the Chesterfield."

As the lawyer hurried out, Clive rose to his feet. "Where did he come from, Nita?"

She pointed to the French windows.

"Through there. He knocked, and I opened them."

"It must have been Sir Ralph I saw groping about on the lawn, sir," said O'Ryan. "I thought he was—somebody else."

Clive nodded.

"Lane!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Take his legs."

They lifted the limp figure and began to carry it towards the door.

"Shall I telephone for a doctor, Selby?"

"I'll see to that, my dear. Stay where you are, and don't worry."

O'Ryan went to the door and stood watching them as they carried Sir Ralph along the hall towards the dining room, and as the dining-room door closed he swung round.

"Nita, you ought to go—somebody ought to go with them. They've got him in there—Dennis Sanderby and Muller—they've got him in their at their mercy. God knows what they'll get up to!"

"Then why not go yourself and protect him?"

"In there—with Sanderby and Muller? If I went into that room, I'd never come out again alive. Nor will Whitcombe—unless someone goes in. He's as near dead already as he can be, and it wouldn't need much—Nita, why don't you go? It's—it's your duty to go. You can't stand there and let them—"

"Selby told me to stay here."

"Of course he did!" he exclaimed. "What else would you expect him to do? They don't want you or anyone else in there. But you could go, Nita. They wouldn't dare to—do anything if you were there. And they won't hurt you. Selby seems pretty well all right as far as you're concerned. I mean, I don't think he'd do anything to you. It's not you he's after now."

"Have you forgotten the pergola, Frank? That wasn't many hours ago."

"No, of course—but... oh, I don't know. It's ghastly! His face, as he came in through the window, covered with blood.... Horrible!"

"You've seen blood before, haven't you?" She smiled contemptuously. "You'll find some smelling-salts on the mantelpiece. You'd better go upstairs to your room and go to bed. You can leave the light burning and lock your door."

"Don't talk such rot, Nita!"

"Then, for heaven's sake," she cut in angrily, "do something intelligent or say something intelligent. Don't stand there whining and shivering and trying to get me to do the dirty work. If you really believe Sir Ralph isn't safe in the dining room, try to summon up the courage to go and look after him. If you haven't the pluck to do that, then clear out while you've the chance."

O'Ryan stood thoughtfully by the desk, drumming on it with his fingers.

"I'll tell you one thing," he said: "Dennis Sanderby can't hush this up. This is the finish of him. If Whitcombe lives he'll tell the whole story. He'll tell the police what happened out there on the common tonight. And what he can't tell them, I will."

Nita was smiling, watching him with a hint of amusement in her eyes.

"You don't think I'd dare?" he challenged.

"I wasn't thinking about that," she said. "I was thinking about that night at the Laffan."

"Damn the Laffan!"

"I was just wondering why I went to the trouble of bolting the door. A bogey would frighten you—a turnip with a candle inside. If you had opened the door, I need only have said 'Boo!' and you'd have scuttled away like a rabbit."

He shrugged.

"You can abuse me as much as you like," he said, "but you'll see. When the police arrive I'm going to do a little talking."

"Perhaps."

"Who's going to stop me?"

"Oh, you never know, Frank. It doesn't do to be too sure. Remember what Selby said this evening? There's a saying among the Cherokee Indians that a man who talks too much—"

As Lane entered the room she turned to him eagerly.

"How is he, Lane?"

"I left Mr. Clive and Mr. Muller looking after him, madam."

"Looking after him!" exclaimed O'Ryan. "My God!"

Lane turned his head and bestowed on him a disapproving stare.

"The poor gentleman is in a very bad way, I'm afraid, madam. He's talking and muttering something awful."

"He's not conscious?"

"No, madam."

"Have they sent for the police yet, Lane?" now inquired O'Ryan.

"Not yet, sir."

"Why ever not?"

"I suggested to Mr. Clive that I should telephone through to the police station, sir, but he said that there was no need to do so for the moment."

"No need? When a man has been nearly murdered! Why on earth didn't you phone at once—"

"Lane!"

"Yes, madam?"

"Please remember that if Mr. O'Ryan asks you any more questions you are not to answer them."

"Very good, madam."

"And you will certainly not telephone to the police station without Mr. Clive's instructions."

"Certainly not, madam. I shouldn't dream of it." She nodded.

"That's all, Lane."

He went towards the door.

"I say, Lane," said O'Ryan, glancing round the room, "where the deuce is the whisky? I'm parched."

"I'll fetch it, sir," said the servant. "I took it into the dining room at dinner time and—"

"All right, thanks," interrupted Nita. "You needn't trouble to fetch it; they may want it in there. Mr. O'Ryan will have his drink in the dining room."

Lane went out, after administering another disapproving stare, and O'Ryan turned to Nita furiously.

"Do you expect me to stand for that sort of thing?" he exclaimed. "Cheapening me in front of the servants, making me look a fool, humiliating me.... All right, Nita—then I'll humiliate you. You thought I was in love, with you, didn't you? You thought you were so charming, so beautiful, so alluring that I'd lost my head over you and was willing to do anything rather than give you up. You thought—"

"Oh, shut up, Frank. Pull yourself together."

"I'm not going to shut up; I'm going to tell you the truth. You thought I wanted you—wanted to kiss you, to hold you in my arms. You flattered yourself that I couldn't resist you, that you had only to go on dangling yourself in front of me—just out of reach—tempting me with a dainty morsel, and you could get me to do anything you wanted. You thought I didn't realize what your game was, but I knew. It wasn't an original game; all women try it. But it was a bad mistake to try playing it with me. It didn't work, did it? And shall I tell you why? Because I didn't care a damn about you! I never have. All I wanted was the lease, and I just used you to try to get it. It was the lease that mattered, not you. You were just a stupid, sentimental fool who might be useful to me, and if I could get you to provide a little amusement for me at the same time, so much the better. What do you think of that, eh, Nita?"



She was looking at him gravely—very calm, very pale, and for some moments she stood there, gazing at him fixedly, meeting his glance until it wavered and slipped away. Then:

"What a cad you are, Frank!" she said quietly.

He shrugged.

"Call me what you like," he said; "that's the truth. You're a great one for the truth, aren't you? You'll hear plenty more of it later on, I can promise you. When your murdering husband is in the dock—"

He caught the sound of footsteps in the hall and paused. Clive came in.

"Has the doctor come, Selby?"

He shook his head.

"I haven't sent for one."

"But shouldn't you? Wouldn't it be wiser—"

"There's no need at present," he told her. "He's not so badly hurt as he appeared to be. I've left Jerry with him."

"But surely, Selby, a doctor should see him?"

"I think so, sir," urged O'Ryan. "And the police should be told. Lane was saying that you haven't advised the police, and in a case like this—I mean, it's a rotten sort of business—"

"You can safely leave it to my discretion, O'Ryan," Clive interrupted. "I'm used to accidents of this kind." He went to the door. "Lane!" he called.

"Of course—I mean, about the police," began O'Ryan again. "Of course, it's none of my business—"

"Quite!" snapped Clive. "There's one thing about this mysterious affair which I can't understand. It's difficult to see how—oh, there you are, Lane. Get me an electric torch."

As Lane went in search of the torch, Clive began thoughtfully pacing the room.

"You're not—not going out, Selby?"

He looked up and smiled at her.

"You're wrong, my dear," he said: "I am going out—as soon as Lane brings the torch. But there's nothing for you to make a fuss about."

"I'm hanged if I'll go—" began O'Ryan, and became suddenly silent as Selby Clive glanced at him.

"It's all right, O'Ryan," he said, with a faint smile, "I'll let you off this time. I'd rather go alone."

Lane came in with an electric torch and handed it to Clive.

"Thanks," he said. "If Mr. Muller asks for me, tell him I shall be back in a few minutes."

He crossed to the French windows, opened them, and stood peering up at the sky.

"Do you mind the draught, Nita? I shan't be long. The storm seems to have passed."

He switched on the torch, directed the beam onto the ground and went out onto the terrace.

Nita hurried to the window and stood watching the spot of light as it slid across the glistening pavement—and as it disappeared down the steps that led from the terrace to the garden she drew in her breath sharply and turned suddenly to the manservant.

"Lane—would you mind? It's terribly dark, and I don't like Mr. Clive being out there—alone. Of course, there's nothing to be afraid of—I wish you'd go with him, Lane, will you?"

"Certainly, madam," said the man, and stepped out onto the terrace.

O'Ryan crossed to the French windows and stood beside her, peering out anxiously into the darkness.

"I say, Nita, what's he looking for?"

She took no notice of the question. She hardly heard it. She was watching the small patch of light that showed where Selby was. She could see it again now, moving this way and that about the lawn, and she could not wrench her gaze away from it. If only it would move towards her, back towards the house....

O'Ryan glanced at her curiously. Her lips were parted, and there was a tense, strained look on her face; it was obvious that she was very frightened.

Suddenly she spoke.

"Frank, I—I'm going out—if anything should happen—now...." She took a step forward, but he grasped her arm and drew her back.

"Don't be a fool," he said sharply. "Who's going to hurt Selby?" He laughed nervously. "I don't suppose he'll fall in the catch-pit or brain himself with a beam of the pergola. He reserves those amusements for other people. Besides, Lane's there, and Lane won't hurt him."

She shook her arm free.

"I shall hurt you in a minute, Frank. Why don't you go out and lend a hand?"

"I guess it's because he just can't stand cold feet, Mrs. Clive," said Muller's voice.

They both turned to find him standing by the fireplace, lighting a cigar.

"But I'd not worry, O'Ryan," he went on. "It makes no odds in the long run. If you don't die of pneumonia you'll sure die of some'n' else."

Nita stepped back into the room.

"Mr. Muller, you haven't surely left him alone?"

"Old crackerjack Whitcombe? Sure I have. He's O. K. Don't suppose he'll die for several weeks yet. K.C.—Krazy Coot!"

"What happened, Muller?" asked O'Ryan.

Muller raised his eyebrows.

"Happened?"

"I mean, he was in a pretty ghastly state."

"I've seen worse. He's a tough 'un, though. Most men of his age would have been dead all right."

"What was it—a knife?"

"He'll tell you," replied Muller. "He'll enjoy doing it. Selby sleuthing?"

"He's on the lawn, I think," Nita told him. "He said he wouldn't be many minutes."

"Fine! Don't hurry him when he's enjoying himself. He'll be tickled to death if he finds the weapon that did the deed."

Nita smiled at him and shook her head.

"It won't do, Mr. Muller."

"Eh?"

"You're trying very hard to make me think you're utterly heartless, but you're not succeeding. You're terribly sorry for poor Sir Ralph really, aren't you?"

"Well, I can't say I envy him, Mrs. Clive. But I don't have to sit beside him and spill tears on his shirt front." There came the sound of hurried footsteps on the terrace, and a moment later Lane came quickly in through the French windows and made for the door. "Lane!"

He paused with evident reluctance.

"Yes, madam?"

"Is—is anything the matter?"

"Mr. Clive requires a piece of rag, madam. He wished me to be as quick as possible." He was out through the door before she could question him further.

She gave a puzzled frown.

"A piece of rag?" she repeated. "Why should Selby—"

"Rag!" exclaimed O'Ryan. "I say, Muller, there must be—he's found somebody else—wounded—"

"Frank—Mr. Muller—please go and—no, I'll go!" She turned and hurried towards the French windows, but as she reached them Clive came in. He was carrying a small leather attache case, sodden and discoloured by the rain. He dumped it on the writing desk.

"Look at this, Nita," he said. He spread out his hands, displaying the palms for her inspection. They were smeared with red.

O'Ryan took a quick step backwards.

"My God, sir—blood!"

Lane came hurrying in with a large piece of white rag, and as Clive took it from him he glanced at O'Ryan and a smile of amusement flickered round his mouth.

"Nothing so melodramatic, O'Ryan," he said, as he began wiping his hands on the rag. "You go to the pictures too much. It's not blood; it's paint."

## CHAPTER XXII

"SELBY, are you—sure?"

Nita's voice was unsteady, but her eyes were suddenly bright as she stepped forward quickly to get a closer view.

Clive smiled at her.

"I know red paint when I see it, my dear," he said, "and I haven't such a craving for the dramatic as O'Ryan. I've had enough drama to last my lifetime—eh, Jerry?"

"Sure," agreed the lawyer. "And enough paint, too, by the look of it."

Nita still stood staring at his hands as he wiped them, and he paused for a moment and held up the rag.

"Smell it yourself and be satisfied," he laughed.

She leaned forward, sniffed at the rag, and nodded.

"Paint!" she said—to herself, it seemed. "Just red paint!"

Clive nodded, and continued wiping his hands.

"Just like that damned post office," he went on. "After doing nothing for months, they suddenly put up that pillar box, daub it with paint, and never say a word to anyone about it. It's right at the entrance to the drive, and that's twice I've walked into it this evening. They ought to give me six months' free postal service as compensation for the dress shirt I ruined before dinner." He tossed the rag aside. "By the look of things," he added, "poor old Whitcombe must have cuddled it. He has got the stuff all over him. He'll need a bath in turpentine before he'll look presentable."

He snapped back the catches of the attache case. "Now let's see if we can get to the bottom of all this." He opened the case, took out a bundle of newspaper cuttings, glanced at it casually, and laid it aside. "Press cuttings—stuff for his book, I suppose," he said. "They'd hardly explain things, eh, Jerry?"

Muller smiled.

"Strong stuff, I guess, Selby, but not strong enough to account for old Whitcombe."

Clive rummaged in the case for some moments and then brought out the small flask-shaped bottle, which he held up.

"Ah! What's this?" He smelt it, frowned, smelt it again, and shook his head. "What is it, Jerry?" he said.

Muller took the bottle, sniffed it several times, and handed it back.

"It's a new one on me," he said, "and I thought I knew 'em all."

Nita smiled.

"It's vodka, Selby," she said. "Sir Ralph always carries some about with him in that bottle. He showed it to me one day."

Clive smelt the bottle again.

"Vodka, eh? What do you say to vodka, Jerry?"

"I'd say no wonder Russia's what she is!"

"He takes it for chills," explained Nita.

Clive turned the bottle upside down and smiled.

"He must have had a good few chills this evening, Nita," he laughed. "Poor old Whitcombe! I can just imagine what happened. He must have lost his way—took shelter, perhaps, under a tree from the storm—and got a chill ... and then another chill ... and then another, until at last—" He smiled and set the bottle on the table. "The marvel is that he ever managed to find his way here at all."

"I guess the pillar box puzzled him," said Muller. "Sort of new feature in the landscape. Well, they'll be needing another pot or two of paint to make it look like a pillar box. Judging by his face, I should say he kissed it."

Clive nodded.

"I'm afraid he must have given you a bad fright, Nita," he said, "suddenly appearing at the window like that."

"Just for a moment," she admitted. "It was silly to scream, though, but both Frank and I were scared for a few seconds." She smiled. "It was the blood, I suppose—eh, Frank?"

"He looked pretty ghastly, sir," said O'Ryan. "Just for the moment I thought he'd—had an accident."

"And the pictures did the rest," laughed Clive. "What do we do with old Whitcombe now, Nita? We can't send him home as he is, and there's no car to take him—"

The handle of the door rattled, and they all glanced towards it. It rattled again, turning first one way and then the other; and then the door was slowly opened a little way, and Sir Ralph's head was thrust in. It was a grotesque-looking head, with wildly disordered hair, of which dank, matted pieces straggled over the forehead, discoloured by daubs of red paint, half wiped away, and a pair of bloodshot eyes that peered at each of them in turn. The face broke into a cheery smile.

"Friends!" said Sir Ralph thickly. "All friends!"

The door was swung wide open, and he stood there, slightly swaying, looking, with his stained and crumpled shirt front, his collar missing, and his clothes creased into absurd shapes, like some comic figure from a pantomime.

He advanced unsteadily into the room.

"Awf'ly sorry, Clive," he said; "awf'ly sorry to trouble you—at this time o' night. If it weren't so awf'ly important I wouldn't dream of troubling you."

"That's all right, Whitcombe," said Clive amiably. "What is it you want?"

Sir Ralph beamed at him.

"You're a good fellow, Clive—specially at this time of night." His face became suddenly anxious. "I'm not keeping you up, am I? I hate keeping people up. Those young devils—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Clive—but they keep me awake every night at the Boscombes!"

"You're not keeping us up, Sir Ralph," Nita assured him. "We weren't even thinking of bed."

"No? Most interesting! Tha'sh all right, then, because I want to ask your husband something. S'long as I'm not keeping anybody up, tha'sh all right. Is that Mr. Muller over there?" He turned to Muller, smiling genially. "Most remarkable thing, Mr. Muller," he said—"most remarkable thing your name should be Muller too. I must talk to you about that." He waved a hand as if dismissing Muller. "Some other time, Muller. Don't worry me about it now; I want to talk to Clive."

"What do you want to ask me, Whitcombe?" inquired Clive.

"I want to ask you thish," said Sir Ralph, raising a finger and regarding him gravely. "Did you—in my bag—did you find a little bottle?"

Clive nodded.

"I found a little bottle and little else, Whitcombe," he laughed.

He went to the desk, picked up the bottle and handed it to him. Sir Ralph stared at it for a few moments, held it up to the light, frowned, and shook his head gloomily. And then he turned to Nita and gave her his genial smile.

"Chills," he said, tapping the bottle.

She nodded.

"I remember, Sir Ralph," she smiled. "It's splendid for chills, isn't it?"

"Marvellous," he assured her. "Who told you that, Mrs. Clive? Awf'ly good for chills—Russian doctor told me—nice fellow. Most respectable sort of Russian, I thought. Most interesting and intelligent. He told me that in Moscow But I'm keeping you up. I'm afraid I do keep people up when I start

talking about my book. You shall read my book, Clive. You, too, Mrs. Clive. I intend to give you both a copy." He glanced at Muller.

"O.K.," said Muller. "I'll buy one."

"It's to be published at ten-and-six," said Sir Ralph. "Most thrilling and absorbing. You won't be able to put it down. I shall keep more women awake at nights than any man in England."

"You're rather complimentary to yourself, Whitcombe," laughed Clive.

"My dear Clive, when you've read my book you'll see that I've every reason to be colli—colpi—every reason to be proud of myself. But tha'sh all right. Now listen—listen everybody." He turned again to Muller. "Listen, my dear learned friend. I've got that last little bit of data."

"Fine!" said Muller. "And now you're going to trot off to bed like a good boy. Unless you go to bed early you'll never be a judge."

"Tha'sh all right," said Sir Ralph; "I don't want to be a judge—ghastly job—perfectly ghastly jub being a jodge—I've got that last little bit of data—"

Nita beckoned to Lane.

"Tell the maids to get the spare room ready, please, Lane."

The man nodded and went out.

"Last little bit of data," repeated Sir Ralph. "Absolutely—data—last little bit. Most absorbing and interesting case, Clive—remarkable psychological study—"

"What is this case you're so interested in, Whitcombe?" asked Clive.

"Aha!" exclaimed Sir Ralph slyly. "Still, you're a good fellow, Clive, and as long as I'm not keeping anybody up I don't mind telling you."

Nita half rose from her chair, but instantly returned to it. It was hopeless to try to interfere, she reflected; she would probably only make matters worse. If Sir Ralph meant to blurt out the whole story she could do nothing to prevent him.

"The case I'm writing about," said Sir Ralph—"I'll tell you, Clive: it's the case of a man called Dennis Sanderby —"

"What!"

It was Muller's voice. He had stepped forward and was staring hard at Sir Ralph, who stood smiling benevolently back at him; but Nita had not missed the looks that had flashed between Muller and her husband. She glanced at O'Ryan, but he did not look at her. He was edging towards the door, his gaze fixed on Selby Clive, his right hand thrust into his pocket.



"Dennis Sanderby," repeated Sir Ralph. "Last little bit of data. Got it somewhere." He began groping in his pockets. "Got the telegram—cablegram—all the way from Canada—must have it somewhere—ah!" He pulled a crumpled paper from his pocket and held it out to Muller. "There's the last bit of data, my learned friend. Read it for yourself. Read it to everybody. You're not keeping anybody up—tha'sh all right!" Muller took the cablegram, glanced at it, then at Selby Clive's set face, and began to read:

**"REPLY YOUR INQUIRY. DENNIS SANDERBY DIED INSANE ASYLUM  
WINNIPEG LAST OCTOBER."**

Nita's eyes were on Clive. She saw his hand suddenly clench and his eyelids flutter.

"Dead!" he said in a low voice. "My God, Jerry, if that's true—"

"Sure it's true," said Muller. "This wire's from the police. Dennis Sanderby's dead, thank God! I wish he'd died twenty years ago!"

"No, no! That's not correct, my learned friend," said Sir Ralph. "Not twenty years ago—died last October." Lane appeared at the door, and Nita, catching his eye, nodded.

"Your room is ready, Sir Ralph," she said. "Lane will show you the way."

"Awfly nice of you, Mrs. Clive," he said. "Awfly nice of Lane, too. Good fellow, Lane. Most respectable type of servant, I thought. But I was going to tell you about Dennis Sanderby, wasn't I?"

"Tomorrow, Sir Ralph," smiled Nita. "I'm rather tired tonight."

"Ah, then, I am keeping you up, Mrs. Clive. I apologize. I'll tell you about Dennis Sanderby in the morning—at breakfast. Where's Lane?"

Lane opened the door.

"This way, sir, if you please," he said.

Sir Ralph went unsteadily to the door and paused.

"I shall sleep well tonight," he announced. "Now that I have that last little bit of data, I shall certainly sleep well." He waved a hand. "Good-night, everybody," he said, as he went out into the hall. "A very pleasant evening. Quite an unusually enjoyable evening, I thought. But I hope I haven't kept anybody up...." As Lane closed the door, Nita seated herself on the couch and glanced across at Clive. She had a feeling that this was the moment, that she must not miss it, that if she let this opportunity slip it would never recur. If Clive did not tell her now, she felt that he would never tell her, that there would always be that doubt in his mind, that there would always be that barrier between them. She must at any rate give him the chance....  
"Selby!"

He turned towards her.

"Yes, my dear?—"

"You—and Mr. Muller—you seemed terribly relieved when you heard that Dennis Sanderby was dead. Did you—either of you—know him?"

"Sure we did—both of us, Mrs. Clive," said Muller. "Who—who was he?"

It was her husband who answered her.

"A man in Canada, Nita," he said—"a cunning and brutal murderer who escaped the gallows twenty years ago. The case caused a great sensation at the time. Jerry defended him."

"He got off without me," said Muller. "I'd have hanged him if I'd had my way."

"Oh—I see," said Nita. "Is that—all?"

She saw that Clive was hesitating, saw the doubt in his eyes as he glanced towards Muller. The lawyer made a gesture of impatience.

"Go on, man—go on!" he said brusquely. "Now you've started, go on and finish. You'll be doing it three years too late, anyway."

"All right, Jerry," replied Clive. "No doubt you're right again."

He turned and faced Nita, and she smiled at him, trying to tell him by that smile all that she was feeling—that she trusted him, that she loved him, that no matter what he might tell her she would still love him.

"The horrible thing about the affair, my dear," he said slowly, "was that my name was Dennis Sanderby, too. Like a fool, I didn't take Jerry's advice and change my name immediately. I didn't think that having the same name could possibly do me any damage; I thought Jerry was making a fuss over nothing."

Nita was still smiling at him; but her heart was pounding, and her throat had that queer, strained feeling, and for some reason or other she badly wanted to cry.

"And Mr. Muller was right, Selby?"

He nodded gravely.

"After Dennis Sanderby was acquitted," he went on, "my life was hell. I was turned out of hotels, hooted in the street. I hardly dared to show my face out of doors. And then one day—in Saskatoon—the crowd mistook me for the murderer and tried to lynch me. It was—pretty horrible, Nita. Luckily, Jerry was in the street at the time; it was his eloquence that saved my life. They had actually got the rope round my neck when he managed to reach me. The crowd knew Jerry. He told them that they were making a mistake, that I

was not the Dennis Sanderby they thought I was. They accepted his word and let me go. I wish you could have heard that speech, Nita. Jerry was absolutely inspired. He held that crowd—swayed them just as he liked—"

"If you're going to start getting grateful, Selby," interposed Muller, "I guess I'm going to bed. Good-night, everybody."

He turned and hurried from the room, and Nita got up from the couch and went to where Clive was standing.

"And then, Selby?"

"And then, my dear, I changed my name to Selby Clive—as I should have done when Jerry first advised it."

She nodded, her lips quivering and her eyes moist, and for some moments the silence was unbroken. And then she looked towards O'Ryan, and there was triumph in her eyes—triumph and scorn and anger and a great joy. But he did not meet her look.

"That's a rather extraordinary story, sir—" he began; and then, as his glance met Nita's, he fell suddenly silent.

Nita went to the door, opened it, and stood there waiting, her hand on the knob.

"Please, Frank," she said.

Without a word he went out of the room.

She turned again to her husband.

"Selby, my dear—"

"I can guess what you're going to say, Nita," he said: "that I should have told you. Perhaps I should. Jerry said so. He has never ceased to rub it in that I was in honour bound to tell you. He was at me again only yesterday when he telephoned from the Laffan. He begged me to tell you everything and trust you to understand. There was only one thing to do, in his view: have it out with you once and for all and get it over."

"And why didn't you, Selby?"

"I didn't see it that way," he told her. "I didn't want you to know that you might have had a name that was hated from one end of Canada to the other. Perhaps I was wrong. I might have known that you trusted me, that you would understand—"

"I do, Selby," she said softly. "And you? Tell me, Selby, please—do you—absolutely—trust me? Have you always absolutely trusted me?"

He nodded gravely.

"Always, my dear—and absolutely."

She smiled at him, turned suddenly away and crossed to the door.

"Selby!"

He glanced towards her. She raised her hand, took the small silver bolt between finger and thumb, and pushed it across.

"Understand, Selby?"

He shook his head, smiling.

"Just you and I, Selby, in future," she said, "and everything else in the world—bolted out."

**THE END**