

HAZELHURST

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Title: Hazelhurst

Author: Enid Leigh Hunt

Release Date: August 07, 2017 [eBook #55297]

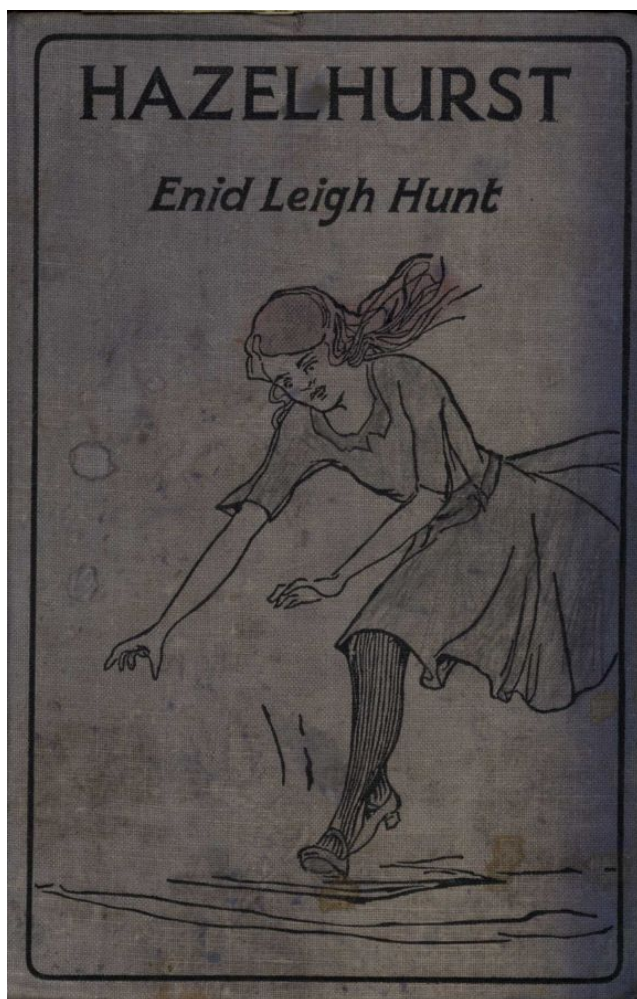
Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HAZELHURST ***

Produced by Al Haines.

HAZELHURST

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Cover art



*GERALD CARVED THE MUTTON, TEDDIE
SERVED THE VEGETABLES (p. 248)*

"THE ADVENT OF ARTHUR"

LONDON
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON AND CO., LTD.
1908

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
PURNELL AND SONS, PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON

HAZELHURST

PROLOGUE

The present generation of the Le Mesuriers were possessed of powerful lungs, the same being a heritage.

It is true that many of the great vaulted rooms and galleries of Hazelhurst, which had rung to the clear tones of the Le Mesurier voice for some three or four hundred years, were now so empty of furniture, so devoid of thick hangings and tapestries—the very floors being stripped bare of the covering natural to well-appointed floors—so denuded, in short, of everything wherein, and behind which, the rich quality of the Le Mesurier voice might lurk and muffle itself, to ring on thinned while suffering no loss of compass, that this might, in some measure, make explanation of the seemingly exceptional strength of their vocal capacity; nay, further, might exonerate them from all charge of exceptionality, but for the fact that as children the Le Mesuriers had shouted with precisely the same lusty vigour and resonance from the lap of luxury. For it was but seven years since that the feet of the five Le Mesurier boys, with the pair belonging to the one Le Mesurier girl, had stridden or trotted, according to their respective length of

limb, over deep-piled carpets, from one magnificently furnished apartment to another. They had been seated in the great oak-panelled dining-room, at a table groaning under its weight of massive silver, to feast upon the daintiest fat of the land, tended by noiseless human machines in the Le Mesurier livery. So that if, when sitting deep and well covered in the lap of luxury, the Le Mesurier voice was acknowledgedly sonorous, it is unreasonable to suppose now that it was only seemingly so, under the condition of over-much empty space wherein to resound. Besides, if further proof be needed: five-and-twenty years ago, when the first of the five Le Mesurier boys was born, Doctor Dash, a most eminent authority from London, had remarked upon the voice, and the nurses had declared they had never heard anything like it. It was further agreed to be a very beautiful voice when not raised in grief; even then its beauty remained for the mother; and each new Le Mesurier baby commanded a most interested and attentive audience, the more flattering in their attendance that they came in the full cognisance that no gracious words were to be expected, but solely in the keenness of their desire to learn whether or not the newcomer was possessed of the widely appreciated and justly valued constituent of the Le Mesurier personality.

The sixth and last baby, a girl, in no wise shamed her family nor disappointed those who attended her first summons by any deterioration in lungs. The voice, in its infancy certainly, like the rest of her, was undeniably present, clear, authoritative, cultured, albeit softer-toned than her brothers', as was seemly in a girl.

This last-born Le Mesurier, last-born at least in the direct descent, if not of the generation, while being neither a disappointment nor a disgrace, was an immense surprise. No guard left the side of the white satin-hung cradle whilst she slept, nor the little silver tub wherein she splashed, nor the soft white carpet spread over a portion of the nursery floor whereon she took her exercise, on her back, kicking, ever and anon deeming it advisable to expand the famous lungs in cooings and trills and, on occasion, exerting more lustiness in other sounds, pertaining to babyhood. I repeat, no guard left her until relieved by one equally vigilant. But for the voice, she would, despite this fact, have created serious doubts in the minds of the respective members of her family, and all connected with it, as to whether some changeling was not usurping the cradle, the tub, and the exercise ground of the rightful Le Mesurier girl.

For the child had brown hair and eyes; and the skin, though exquisitely clear and delicate, was, of necessity, darker than that which went to constitute a well-ordered, self-respecting Le Mesurier.

In the first days of her life, therefore, in spite of the love that encompassed her, the child was held to be something of an alien. The pride in the lovely little creature that overflowed the mother's heart came rather timidly, rather depre-

catingly, from her lips. None of her boys had presumed to be anything but fair, the most daring among them attaining to only light brown hair, and all looked upon the world with the traditional blue eyes. The case, however, was not unprecedented; and when this fact was ascertained, the family was free to recover its natural calm and to pursue the even tenor of its way, holding its head even higher than heretofore.

One day, as Helen Le Mesurier was exhibiting the little beauty to a host of admiring friends, with a wistful and slightly apologetic manner, in which attitude she vainly sought to veil her pride, Hubert, her husband, was struck with a sudden thought. Hastily quitting the room, unnoticed, he sped in some excitement to the picture-gallery, situate in the west wing of the great house. Too impatient to brook the delay of unbaring the heavy shutters, he seized and lighted a lamp, which he held at arm's length above his head, as he eagerly and swiftly scanned row upon row of dead and gone Le Mesuriers portrayed upon the walls. Everywhere fair hair, from light brown to gold, gleamed in the lamp-light, straight-featured, broad-browed, the women dazzlingly fair of skin, the men square-chinned, and, for the most part, curly-headed—one and all blue-eyed.

But Hubert passed these by, for some vague memory had awakened within him. Surely his father had once shown him, as a child, the portrait of a dark-eyed girl, half in pride, half in apology. If his memory were not tricking him, such a portrait must be in existence. He made his way directly to the more secluded parts of the room. His diligence was soon rewarded, for there, within a corner niche, almost at his feet, he discovered the object of his search: a small portrait of a lovely little girl, scarcely above miniature size, surrounded by an oak frame. Her hair, of a nut-brown, waved and rippled to her waist, and a pair of wide brown eyes looked out, mischievously, upon the beholder; the wonderfully clear and delicate skin was warm of tone.

Setting down the lamp, Hubert, his fingers trembling with eagerness, unfastened the picture, and, turning it, read upon the back: "Hazel Le Mesurier, aged five years, 1671."

Thus it was that the Le Mesurier girl came to be named Hazel.

At five years of age a painting was made of her head and shoulders, in like pose, on the same sized canvas as that of her namesake, and, behold, the two faces, allowing for the dissimilarities of style arising from the difference of the schools of painting of so remote a period from those of the present time, were as like, one to the other, as two—hazelnuts!

When his daughter had attained to her ninth year, Hubert Le Mesurier fell ill and died, being then in the forty-fifth year of his age.

The twenty-and-odd years of his majority had been one hard struggle to redeem the heavily mortgaged estate inherited from a spendthrift father and grand-

father. His endeavours ended in failure; he had speculated deeply for many years, keeping his fortunes, with few fluctuations, at the same dreary level. On his demise came the inevitable crash: the foreclosure of the mortgage. Other debts there were; so that, when Helen and her eldest boy, Guy, of some nineteen or twenty years, who, having the ordering of these things, had quieted and pacified even the loudest crying among their creditors, and were once more enabled to breathe freely, now that so heavy a burden as debt was removed from the delicate shoulders of the mother and the youthful ones of the son—so inapposite a load for either to bear—they found the great house a very barrack in its echoing bareness, being, indeed, divested of many things.

Heavy oak furniture, some dating from Queen Anne's time, covered in decent palls, was moved away in vans down the gloomy avenue of great trees, with funeral gait. Also much valuable plate and almost priceless china.

But the mourners who had sustained this loss were left rejoicing in that the portrait gallery, sacred to the Le Mesuriers, doubly sacred to Helen as her husband's dying trust, was left inviolate; and as the poor thing stood, surrounded by her five sons, in the huge marble-paved entrance hall, she exclaimed, tears of very thankfulness coursing down her cheeks:

"Why should we grieve while we have each other? While together we can protect what my Hubert, what your father held so dear."

Each Le Mesurier boy, in varied pose of heroic resolve, protested his loyalty and devotion to his father's memory, and to the honoured name of ancient lineage which he bore; and each Le Mesurier boy's heart beat strong and fast according to the stage of development in which his inherent pride of race had found expression and proportionally to the valorous and chivalric feeling that stirred in the depth of each affectionate Le Mesurier boy's nature toward his lady mother.

Hazel, with outspread skirts, gravely danced, twirled and pirouetted with light, quick feet in the background; but on hearing the tears in her mother's voice, with a little caressing cry she flew to Helen's side, flung her arms about her and, looking up into her face, cried:

"Mother, mother, don't forget that you have *me*"; and Helen, as she stroked the curly head, and looked into the upturned brown eyes, felt warm comfort glow at her heart, in that nought but death could wrest from her these six priceless treasures, her children.

The stables and carriage-house were emptied. Then came the disbandment of the company of servants. Many wept, and, refusing the wage due to them, took sorrowful leave of their mistress and the young masters whose infancy they had tended.

Two, however, there were who did not weep and who, on the almost indignantly named plea of having left their former beloved master and mistress,

Helen's parents, for the express purpose of following the fortunes of Helen herself, on her marriage with Hubert Le Mesurier, stood their ground in the most literal sense, by obstinately declining to go. These two were Miles the butler and Martha Doidge, who, kitchenmaid in her early youth, at thirty—the age of her exodus with Helen—had been raised step by step till now, at fifty, the good woman had attained to the dignity of housekeeper at Hazelhurst.

"But my dear, faithful Martha," Mrs. Le Mesurier expostulated, "you forget: there will be no field for such services as yours. Most of the rooms will be closed and your cupboards will be empty. And you, Miles, your duties have been wrested from your hands."

Such arguments were vain. Martha Doidge established herself as cook and general factotum, managing, with the help of two young girls from the neighbouring hamlet, with great dexterity and order, the domestic affairs pertaining to the habitable part of Hazelhurst.

As for Miles, who was nigh upon sixty years, he did all that a faithful, hardworking servant might, indoors and out. Five o'clock in the morning would often find him gardening assiduously, polishing windows, or engaged in some such work, attired in a dilapidated old suit, which he called his "undress"; but nine o'clock would see him serving the simple breakfast with all the old dignity and with even added respect, arrayed, as became the butler of "high family," in all the glory of the fast-growing-shabby-and-shiny full dress of his vocation.

Almost speechless was Miles with indignation, and something more, when Helen—deeply concerned for her old servant, that he should put aside all his own interests in his devotion to herself and her children—made to him the proposition that he should seek the position of butler at Earnsclough. She had heard that the young master was about to return from his sojourning abroad, to take up his abode permanently in the home of his fathers; that great preparations were in making, and that the usual staff of servants was needed in the completion of these preparations. As for her own household, Helen urged, the two young maids could serve the simple meals that Doidge so daintily prepared; but in their adverse fortunes they could not expect to command the services of the best servant, she verily believed, in the land, nor could she wish to be instrumental in helping to deter him from his self-advancement.

Thus, by flattering and cajoling, did Helen endeavour to dissuade the old retainer from continuing in what she deemed so great a sacrifice; but she had not calculated on the very real affection that, deep-rooted, had sprung up in the old man's heart during all the years of his servitude, and when, his anger cooled, Miles pleaded, visibly affected, that to go, to turn his back on the family, would to him be leaving all honour and grateful love behind; that his only wish was to end his days in her service, she at length desisted from her efforts to render

the faithful fellow more worldly wise; and pressing his hand, assured him of the affection and esteem with which she and her family regarded him; of how rejoiced they would all be to learn that, despite their recent losses, they were not to part with their old retainer; that he, who had been with them so long, was to be with them yet.

So it was that Helen soothed the poor fellow's wounded sensibilities, and Miles continued butler at Hazelhurst.

Various were his ingenuities in that capacity, and gradually Helen and her children learned to respect the innocent devices out of regard for the feelings of their perpetrator. The sideboard was ever furnished with decanters of wine, which—seeing that the cellars had been emptied of all, save the old port deemed necessary by the physician and friend of the family for Helen, in the rather delicate state of her health—might well be looked upon somewhat dubiously and hastily declined in favour of the clear, crystal water, a gourd of which Miles was careful to offer with the wine. Nor was such refusal made difficult, for Miles did not press the doubtful beverage on his young masters, seeming rather to be relieved that it should be held in disfavour among them, though he religiously continued, during luncheon and dinner, to carry it round the table, sometimes under one name, sometimes by another.

Whether the wine was procured at the village grocery or whether it was tinted water, as Hazel ingeniously suggested, remained a mystery to all but Miles himself; but certain it was that the decanters seldom needed replenishing, so that no fears were entertained of a drain upon the household disbursements or the private pocket of the *Le Mesuriers'* butler.

Dire was the wrath of Miles should any of the womenfolk presume to encroach upon his right. Since the day of his coming to Hazelhurst—twenty years ago, to be exact—the young footmen under his supervision were most deferential to an old retainer upon whom the family conferred so many honours, and in whom they reposed so much trust and confidence. Miles had enjoyed his power and made the most of it, ordering, regulating, and drilling his satellites with perfection of manipulation. Now, however, that Fortune had frowned, things would indeed have come to a pretty pass, to Miles's thinking, had he permitted women to fulfil the functions pertaining to the table that had hitherto been performed by men only. No; the fiat had gone forth that Miles himself undertook to wait upon the family at meals; but woe to the maid who failed to be at hand at the right moment, to bear the required dish, or to receive the whispered communication. Woe also to her, who, lacking nicety of perception in such matters, or, more blameworthy still, in mere feminine curiosity, ventured a step into the room, or stood without in such position as should discover to those at table the agency by which the butler carried out his duties with such order and precision.

Whether Helen and her family were supposed to be in ignorance of the number and sex of their attendants, or whether matters were ordered thus by the redoubted Miles, upon the prompting of his own delicate feeling on the point, remained as zealously guarded a mystery as the wine.

On one occasion the maid from the hamlet engaged by Martha Doidge, being new to her duties, after knocking to attract the butler's attention did most unwisely and erroneously open the door and advance three steps into the sacred precincts of the dining-room, bringing some course for which Miles was not yet ready: a fact which his stern disregard of her summons should have made plain to her.

So frightened was the girl when, on turning her fascinated eyes from the table, they encountered those of the butler, who seemed to be bearing down upon her, swift and noiseless, awful in the majesty of his wrath, that, setting the dish upon the floor, she turned and fled. Miles, pausing beside the dish in momentary hesitation as to which of these barbaric proceedings he should first give attention, followed in hot pursuit, closing the door behind him.

Hazel and the boys were convulsed with stifled laughter, and Helen, herself somewhat discomposed, could only beg of them to control themselves before the faithful servant returned to the room.

The girl had evidently not retreated far, judging by the space of time that Miles was absent, judging also by the ominous sniffs that fell upon the ears of the dinner party when the door was reopened.

Miles entered, red of face and somewhat short of breath; but nothing could surpass his dignity. He lifted the dish from the ground, and renewing the plates with miraculous speed, handed it round with the utmost composure, to all outward seeming.

The meal over, Miles sought an interview with his mistress, apologising for any laxity of order that she might have noticed, assuring her that the like should not occur again; and that Mrs. Doidge had discharged the girl for her remissness. Helen had much ado to get the sentence of dismissal commuted to a month's trial.

CHAPTER I

On a bright day in late June, Hazel, now a tall slip of a girl of sixteen, was wandering through the bit of woodland that stretched from the immediate vicinage

of Hazelhurst on its right flank to the boundary of the land that had been left to the Le Mesuriers when, seven years since, the greater part of the estate had been sold. Tempting offers had been tendered, both for the ground as it stood, and for the timber grown upon it; but Mrs. Le Mesurier had remained firm, and her sons had resolved that no poverty should induce them to part with this last remaining portion of their heritage.

As to Hazel, the woodland was her kingdom, her empire. She loved every inch of its leafy, winding tracks; she was acquainted with every squirrel and bird housed within its hospitable shelter; she gloried in each veteran oak and cherished each tender sapling.

To-day, as she sauntered on, her small brown hands clasped before her, pensive, her head bent, the soft brown hair falling like a mantle around her, she seemed a very wood-nymph in her simple gown—the exact shade of the gnarled trunks, in which russet tint it was her mother’s fancy to clothe the girl.

Presently, wearied of pursuing the beaten pathways she turned aside to stroll over a thick, springy carpet of last year’s crumpled leaves, strewn with fir cones, pine needles, acorns, and acorn cups. A squirrel ran by her, paused and looked back, with what seemed to the girl a roguish twinkling of his bright eyes; then, with a salute of his bushy tail, was gone. Birds of sorts, ceaselessly trilling their sweet notes, hopped to the lower branches as she passed; presently one or two, leaving the piping chorus for a space, fluttered to the ground near her feet and, as she paused, seemed to be considering her in a conclusive, bright-eyed way, with heads first on this side, then on that, as if questioning the cause of her muteness.

And, indeed, Hazel was unlike herself this summer morning. It was her wont to greet her subjects graciously with chirps and chirrups and all manner of sweet wood-notes. At her soft cooing a ringdove would belike perch upon her shoulder, when she was minded to have one confidante! But her ”twee-twee” would create a whirr among the tree branches, and a very medley of her feathery vassals would appear on the lowest boughs, hopping, chirruping in bright-eyed questioning. In bright-eyed greed also; for they little doubted that when their liege lady had done with her clear piping to that great, greedy, black thrush, who responded with bows which would have been deferential and dignified had they only been less choppy, and if he would only have desisted from shuffling his feet and sidling restlessly up and down his perch the while performing them; when she was pleased to stop chirping caressingly to the robins and sending forth clear wood-note calls to summon the few pet woodlarks to her presence, the manchet of bread which usually bulged her pocket would surely be drawn out and dispensed in crumbs around her.

But to-day the pocket of the brown gown was suspiciously and ominously

flat, and Hazel held her peace, as if she feared to render unhappy the pretty winged creatures by the sad-toned chirps and chirrups which would surely be all she could contrive this morning if she endeavoured to be sociable.

Presently the girl came upon a rugged oak-tree. She paused and looked wistfully up into its branches, watching the sunlight glinting in and out among the leaves, marking each delicate shape in relief against its background of yellow light or blue shadow, each articulation of the brown branches outlined clean and distinct, affording delicious peeps of blue sky between.

Hazel, with impulsive motion, threw her arms about the trunk, and, kissing the rough, sweet-smelling bark, turned her head and pressed her soft pink cheek against the rugged surface of this lifelong friend.

"Ah," she said aloud, yearningly, "ah!" and the brown eyes filled with tears, "I wish I could earn some money."

However strangely this admission may have sounded to any winged or bushy-tailed audience that chanced to be within hearing, they were too polite to allow their surprise to show itself, either by excited increase of trills and cooings, or by sudden cessation of all sound. The sunlight gleamed in quivering, shimmering shafts, as before; the topmost tree branches waved slightly overhead; and the mischievous squirrel, who must have been within earshot, now discovered himself and, taking his seat not far from the girl, looked upon her more in sympathy than in condemnation.

That the remark did sound out of place and somewhat mercenary is hardly to be denied, coming as it did from this brown-haired Dryad amid such pacific surroundings. For Dryads are not supposed to know the worth of money, nor to be harassed with such need: the woods wherein they dwell and have their being affording them everything of the freshest and fairest that they can possibly require. Still the wish expressed was not so unfitting in its nature as might at first appear; for this particular wood-nymph had a mother—quite a peculiarity among Dryads, it is generally understood. And this mother was less well than usual, causing much anxiety and distress to her little daughter, who, however odd it may seem, possessed a very human heart beating within her breast, an immense capacity for joy and sorrow, and a great sympathy withal; though, for her, personal acquaintance with grief was, happily, slight.

Mrs. Le Mesurier had never recovered from the shocking grief that her husband's death had caused her. For her children's sake she had mastered herself to some extent, to all outward seeming becoming once more the cheerful little mother whom they had always known and adored: ready in her sympathy with the young life around her, wise in her counsel and, in her protection, loving. But she, and she only, though the family physician could testify to the results, knew of the bitter suffering in the hours of dark and quiet, that sapped her strength and

told on her vitality. Hers was a nature that could better bear a selfish indulgence of that suffering, even if it should cast an abnormal melancholy over her naturally joyous temperament, than the pent-up emotion which, when the strain became too great, burst with terrible force over the poor thing, leaving her so inert and listless that the armour of bravery, which in sheer habit she would buckle on with each new day, was sometimes very thin and worn, affording her but a poor guard against the assailing sorrow.

Of late her health had fluctuated strangely. No sufficient reason accounting for such ebb and flow, the doctor was fain to lay the charge to the strength-stealing propensities of an early, warm spring and hot summer.

Hazel had gone daily to the village in person to select a couple of choice peaches or other dainty luxury—alas! all too seldom seen now at Hazelhurst, where once upon a time great baskets of such delicacies were pressed upon the poor of the neighbourhood. But to-day the poor child had made the last disbursement from her slender store of pocket-money, and was searching her mind for some suitable means by which to make replenishment. Each of her brothers gave his mite toward the support of the household: why not she?

Guy, the eldest, through great good fortune and the exertion of influential friends, had become a private secretary in a Government office, for which post he was taken from college, and was now earning a modest income. Cecil, the second, was abroad, doing well in the Indian Civil Service. Gerald, the third, articulated to a chartered accountant, was hoping to pass his examination in a couple of years. Hugh, the fourth, and Teddie, the fifth Le Mesurier boy, both at the present time "something in the City," accompanied their brother Gerald to town each Monday morning, returning to the family roof-tree for the week-end, so hungering for the simple delights of their quiet home, and for the sweet, fresh air of their beloved woods, that from the train window, as they approached their destination, each curly head would be thrust forth to catch the first sight of Hazel, who never failed to be awaiting their arrival upon the platform, her eager face and glad eyes an earnest of her welcome; and each famous pair of lungs would greedily drink in each faintest breeze wafted to them from the direction of Hazelhurst.

Gerald, of a steady, plodding temperament, gave no slightest cause for uneasiness, either to his mother or to the kind patron who had helped the boy to this opening in life. But, alas, of Hugh and Teddie otherwise! Cyril Westmacott, a younger brother of Helen's, had kept the two boys at school till the age of eighteen, but, having sons of his own, could not afford a college education to follow. Hugh, therefore, for the last two years, had lived a somewhat desultory life since leaving school till the present time, when he held a rather vague position in a London office—a life which greatly unfitted the boy, never of a studious or persevering nature, for such steady application as nondescript appointments in the

City render desirable for the attainment of a more lucrative post.

Teddie, only a few months from school, was equally restless under restraint and impatient of all monotony. Unfortunately, monotony constituted, in great part, the high-stooled City life of the two youngest Le Mesurier boys.

To-day was Monday, a depressing fact to Hazel, who accompanied three long-legged and long-faced brothers to the station, some two miles distant from Hazelhurst, with mournful regularity in the early morning of that day, come wet, come shine, after a hearty breakfast at half-past six, served to the party by Miles, who, respectful and deeply sympathetic, urged one and all to keep up their strength for the trying ordeal they were about to undergo. Nor were his efforts vain, for no excitation of mind, not even that of sorrow, to the best of his knowledge, had ever affected the wonderful appetites of his young masters.

And now the girl, returned to the quiet house to find her mother not yet risen, had found its solitude unbearable, the very echoes that the famous Le Mesurier voice had awakened within its walls having died now into quite disproportionate silence, it seemed to Hazel, who, fleeing to the woods, had given herself up to sad meditation, in which the wistful desire to earn money herself held prominent place.

Lying on a bed of soft mosses, she lost herself in thought, and more than an hour must have passed when the sound of footsteps fell upon her startled ears. Raising herself to a distrustful sitting posture, the girl awaited what should chance, presently descriing the figure of Miles the butler, evidently in quest of herself, though at the moment of her discovery she could perceive him passing among the trees along many and divergent tracks.

"Miles," she cried, "Miles"; and, springing to her feet, the girl ran to meet the old servant. "Is mother asking for me?" she inquired.

To her surprise, for all answer, Miles, rummaging in the breast pocket of his coat, produced an orange-coloured envelope: a telegram addressed to Hazel; and, placing the missive upon a tiny salver he was carrying, presented it to his young mistress; then retiring a few paces, awaited her pleasure.

Truly the two figures presented an odd contrast one to the other; the girl slim, graceful, upright as the feathery larch near which she stood, pink-cheeked, bright-eyed, the embodiment of delicate, supple youth; the old man, clothed in shabby black, the fresh green around rendering his poor habiliments more rusty-looking and threadbare than ever, the baggy knees lending to his attitude the effect of a curtsy from which he had never recovered. Yet the face, though seamed with many a line, was fresh-coloured and well favoured, possessing a cheery, bland expression, born of peace and contentment—heritage of advancing age into which, alas, all too few come.

Hazel, recovering from her astonishment at finding herself the recipient

of a message of sufficient importance to necessitate a telegram, with trembling fingers opened the envelope and read the following words:

"Been sacked: break news gently to mother: meet afternoon train, TED-DIE."

"Miles," the girl said tremulously—and as the servant approached she regarded him in awed solemnity—"to be sacked is to be discharged, isn't it?"

"Yes, miss," Miles replied, his eyes almost as dilated as those of his young mistress, "is—the message from one of the young gentlemen, miss? Has one of them been—er—discharged, miss, if I may make so free?"

Hazel, flushing red, then pale, read aloud the contents of the telegram, Miles listening with bated breath; after which the two regarded one another in silence, both guiltily conscious that their emotions were not altogether of such a nature as the occasion seemed to demand.

True, Hazel did feel consternation in that this darling of her heart, this same Teddie, who for three long months had been self-supporting, was now to be returned to them: for the girl was aware that her idol, to put into words her own half-sad, half-humorous thoughts on the subject, was an expensive luxury; that the slender resources of Hazelhurst were sorely tried during the redoubted Teddie's visitations. Her mind was further exercised as to the cause of his dismissal, though she guessed it to be, and rightly, largely owing to the, it must be confessed, somewhat peppery temper of Teddie. She was distressed, on these several accounts, for the sake of her mother, from whom it was essentially necessary to keep all matters of a character likely to prove agitating or disturbing. So that it was with feelings very mixed, though a delicious exultation predominated, that Hazel made her way to the house to acquaint her mother, using what gentle tact she might, with the exciting intelligence. Miles followed. In his way he was equally rejoiced with his little lady, for the quietude of Hazelhurst from Monday at 7 a.m. till Saturday at 4 p.m. was hardly more to his taste than to hers.

On the threshold Hazel paused and, turning, asked Miles to bring her a glass of port and biscuits, it being close upon the customary hour at which her mother partook of that refreshment.

On entering her mother's room, Hazel found herself in the moment of time for the performance of the duties of tirewoman; for Helen, seated before the mirror, brush in hand, was engaged in smoothing her hair, somewhat surprised at her little daughter's tardiness to be at this, her dearly loved, self-imposed task. Setting the wine upon a side-table, Hazel crossed the spacious room, and, kneeling beside her mother's chair, placed her arms about her and kissed her.

"Good morning to you, sweet my mother," she said, gaily, looking lovingly upon the delicate face that was so dear to her. "I hope I see you well and that you have only just begun to brush your hair. You were not up when I came home this

morning, and I have got late somehow. I was in the wood, where I do believe," the girl added, half laughing, "that time is not."

With that she rose to her feet and, taking the brush from the table, where her mother had laid it—the better to return her daughter's caress—with gentle hand proceeded to smooth the masses of fair hair that rippled and waved so like her own; presently, with deft fingers, skilfully twisting and coiling it into a great knot behind the shapely head. Then assisting her mother to exchange her dressing-gown for a simple morning-gown of some soft, black material—Helen always wore black—the girl placed the tray containing biscuits and wine before her, bidding her eat and drink whilst she told her some news.

"Really important news," Hazel said, "and not altogether good," she added, rather at a loss to know how to follow Teddie's wise dictate, of which her own heart so wholly approved.

"It cannot be altogether bad," her mother returned, "though half afraid: you also look very glad about something, Hazel."

"Well," Hazel responded, "I must not keep you on tenterhooks, mother; so, if you promise to keep before you the delicious, really delicious, view of the case, and try not to mind the—er—rather awkward side, I will tell you. Teddie has been sack—has been dismissed, you know," Hazel amended, then paused and regarded her mother apprehensively.

To her immense relief, Helen, albeit a little startled at this really alarming intelligence, was smiling at her daughter's ingenuous way of breaking the same.

"One can't help being glad, can one?" Hazel said simply, her countenance radiant, quite mistaking the tenor of her mother's thoughts. And the girl, fully reassured, dropped all hesitancy of speech and, becoming less guarded in the expression of her exultant joy, proceeded without further dalliance to lay before her mother a hundred-and-one good reasons for rejoicing in the return of this redoubtable youngest son, only lamenting the lack of a fatted calf for killing.

"We must hope that he will find something to do before leaving his present position," Helen remarked, stroking the soft pink cheek, as Hazel, having exhausted her repertory to hand, paused to collect further store wherewith to swell the arguments in favour of her generous premises.

Her raptures thus unwittingly checked, she could only gaze upon her mother in mute dismay, truly concerned to find that so important a detail of the momentous announcement had yet to be imparted.

"Dearest," she said at length, "that is not likely. He has so little time—the— the fact is, he is coming home to-day"; and she drew from her bosom, where it had lain, carefully concealed, the fateful pink paper.

"Hazel," her mother exclaimed, more alarmed than the girl had yet seen her, "what can he have done to be dismissed at a moment's notice? Something must

be seriously wrong!”

“He has probably shied an inkpot at Carrots’ head,” Hazel returned laconically. “But, motherling, he may get some job or another quite quickly. You know what taking manners Teddie has, how every one likes him the first moment of seeing him.”

“Hazel, my dear child, what extraordinary expressions! You really must not use such words,” Helen remonstrated, her breath fairly taken away by the girl’s remarkable suggestion as the solution of the proposition, and her glib and peculiar phraseology in wording it. “And why,” Helen proceeded, “why should you imagine that Teddie, a gentleman—a Le Mesurier—should so demean himself as to throw inkpots at—er—at Carrots, did you say, dear? at Carrots’ head? Who is Carrots, pray?”

“I don’t know who he is, motherling. They call him Carrots at the office because his hair is so red—Carrots or the Lout. Teddie generally speaks of him as the Lout,” Hazel rejoined meekly, in pretty penitence.

Mrs. Le Mesurier glanced uneasily at her daughter. “Probably of French extraction,” she murmured, the suspicion, that this again might be a word not commonly used among ladies, ousted from her mind on encountering Hazel’s innocently candid brown eyes. “But, dear, you have not yet explained. Why should you imagine for a moment that Teddie—”

“Well, you see, mother dear,” the girl interposed, eager to justify herself, “Teddie did it once before—I thought he would have told you—and so I supposed it not unlikely, considering how he enjoyed doing it that time—having tasted blood, as it were—he should, if roused, be unable to resist doing it again. He says there was a fearful row that time,” she went on enthusiastically, “Carrots gave a sort of bellow when the inkpot struck him, and at that moment, who should come into the room but—the boss. I am not exactly using slang now, mother,” the girl hastened to explain, breaking off the narrative at this most critical juncture, “I am only quoting Teddie, who tells the story so graphically—somehow, more classical language would not suit it. Now would it?” she asked, quaintly deprecative.

“I fear you are too much with the boys, Hazel,” her mother remarked, gravely, “or rather, *were* too much with them,” she amended, a little sigh escaping her for those absent ones, “and your mind was always impressionable, your memory retentive. Even as a tiny child you would always clothe a story in the exact words in which it had been told you, whether by servant, schoolboy, or your mother and father.”

“Yes, I do that rather,” Hazel admitted contritely. “I must always let people know I am quoting. That would make it better, at all events less bad, wouldn’t it, mother?” and she nestled fondly against her mother’s knee.

“Well, go on, dearie.” And Helen smiled to herself as she stroked the curly

head. "What happened when Mr. Hamilton came in?"

Thus encouraged, Hazel resumed the thread of her narrative. "Teddie says that Carrots blubbed pretty badly—mind, dear, I am quoting Teddie," the girl again interrupted herself, somewhat abashed to find that the tale seemed to fairly bristle with words of doubtful repute, "and, being a sneak, he instantly went and blabbed."

"What is that?" Helen asked. "It is fortunate you don't quote Teddie very often, Hazel."

"He told the—Mr. Hamilton all about it," Hazel explained, "and Mr. Hamilton said: 'Le Mesurier,'"—here Hazel assumed a dramatic pose, suggestive of righteous wrath denouncing an evildoer—"Le Mesurier, if such scandalous behaviour occurs again, I shall discharge you on the spot. Had you been any young man other than you are," Hazel continued, speaking in a voice that would make righteous wrath itself tremble, "I should have requested you to leave my office instantly. As it is, I shall expect you to apologise to Mr.—I don't know his name, mother—'and to make what amends you can for your most unwarrantable behaviour."

"And did Teddie apologise?" Mrs. Le Mesurier asked, much diverted.

"Not he," Hazel cried exultantly. "The sequel to the story bespeaks the character of both. Teddie offered Carrots five shillings instead—you know what a very little pocket-money he has, mother; and if you will believe it, the Lout accepted it. The next day," Hazel continued, after a pause devoted to pacing the room in some excitement, "Mr. Hamilton called Teddie into his private office, and inquired whether a reconciliation had been effected. Teddie answered that Carrots was satisfied. 'You did apologise, then, Le Mesurier?' Mr. Hamilton asked, Teddie thought in some surprise, though he tried to hide it. 'No, sir,' says Teddie. 'No?' says Mr. Hamilton, puzzled. 'You said just now that the young man was satisfied. Explain yourself, if you please.' 'I did not apologise, I would rather leave you, sir, than do so; I offered five shillings instead, and the'—I think Teddie said the cad," Hazel broke off apologetically, "and the cad accepted it."

"Yes?" Mrs. Le Mesurier said interrogatively, too much interested to expostulate.

"That was all," Hazel returned. "Teddie says that just then Mr. Hamilton had a fit of coughing, and, as he held his handkerchief to his face, Teddie could not see the expression. So he took Mr. Hamilton's wave of the hand as a sign to leave him, and went."

"My boy must have entertained an extraordinarily poor opinion of the young man, to have proposed giving him money instead of asking his pardon," Mrs. Le Mesurier commented.

"Yes indeed," agreed Hazel. "It was a far worse insult than having an inkpot

thrown at your head. But Teddie was justified in his opinion, mother, for Carrots was quite pleased."

"And you don't know what it was that so angered Teddie in the first instance?" Mrs. Le Mesurier asked.

"No, he would never tell me," Hazel answered.

CHAPTER II

On this fateful Monday the five o'clock train was miraculously punctual. At precisely two minutes to the hour its serpentine, many-jointed body rounded the bend of the line, gracefully and with dignity, being neither flurried nor dilatory in its smooth, gliding motion, emitting neither shrill whistle nor vulgar puffings, as some quite well-appointed trains do, thinking to force recognition of the length of their run and their hard-pressed punctuality by triumphant noise or most distressful breathing. It is true that the great engine gave vent to a soft, long-drawn sigh, and that its huge body seemed to pulsate slightly as the train ranged itself obligingly along the platform; but so unostentatiously, so obviously desiring not to attract attention, that it was to be supposed the monster's heart really was a little delicate, occasioning palpitation and more or less exhaustion.

A fair, curly head, unmistakably a Le Mesurier's, had emerged from the window of a third-class compartment some ten minutes before the train was stationed, drinking in, with the usual rapacity, the sweet sun-warmed air; and presently, the bend rounded, a smile lighted the boyish face, as his eyes fell on a little figure in brown cotton gown and shady straw hat standing upon the platform.

"Confound it all," muttered the youngest son of Hubert Le Mesurier—to whose memory, peace—"here I have been practising how to make a long face, for decency's sake, and was really beginning to feel a bit low; and now the first glimpse of Hazel upsets it all, and away goes melancholy."

Resisting a desire to fling himself from the train while it was still in motion, as was his custom, Teddie, awaiting his time, descended to the platform as one whose soul is heavy within him; and Hazel, her sunny smile checked at sight of her brother's demeanour, came toward him sedately, in deference to his feelings.

"How did she take it?" were Teddie's first words, spoken in somewhat hollow accents.

"Much better than you would think," Hazel responded, seeking to reassure him. "Of course, she hopes you will get some other employment quickly; and—and, of course, Teddie dear, she is rather troubled as to what it was, you know. She is naturally afraid that something rather serious may have occurred."

Hazel linked her arm comfortably within her brother's, the while she apprised him of these circumstances. She did not attempt to persuade or coax his confidence, knowing that in his own good time he would tell her all.

Teddie groaned.

"You see," the girl continued, pressing the angular elbow to her side, and looking up into the moody countenance, "she can't help thinking it rather—rather sudden: the dismissal, I mean. That is only natural, isn't it, Teddie?" Hazel asked apologetically.

"Your bag, sir," said Mitchell, the younger of the two porters that the station boasted. "Carry it up for you, sir?" the man inquired respectfully. The Le Mesuriers were held in great esteem by Mitchell and his colleagues.

"Thanks, Bob, no," the boy returned, "it is not heavy"; and taking the lean, attenuated, and excessively shabby portmanteau containing Teddie's night apparel and toilet requisites from the man's hand, the brother and sister walked from the station and out upon the sunlit road.

"You must not take it too much to heart, old fellow," Hazel said presently. "How do you feel?"

"Rather cut up and a bit blue, you know," Teddie responded with hesitancy. "You see, it was rather sudden, and—and came upon a fellow with rather a shock."

"Yes," Hazel agreed sympathetically; "it was sudden."

"So, of course, I feel it rather," Teddie continued pathetically, though seemingly soothed. "And, anyway, I gave the brute a fine black eye," he broke out gleefully, in startling exultation.

"Not—not Carrots?" gasped Hazel.

"The worst of it is," Teddie continued, gloom descending once more, "the worst of it is that I am not at all sure that Hugh may not turn up one day this week—in this same way, you know. He was given a month's notice more than three weeks ago, but has said nothing about it, hoping to get something else all this time."

"Does—does he wish to keep what he has done private?" Hazel asked with delicate hesitancy, "or may you tell me?"

"He has not *done* anything," her brother replied; "that is just it: he won't work, you know. I don't blame the old boy, I have always known it to be simply impossible for Hugh to work; if he gets a pen or pencil in his fingers, he is bound to *draw*. Have you not noticed it in him? His blotting-paper at the office is a sight," Teddie continued, "and, which may have hastened matters, his boss found

a likeness of himself—not a flattering one—among Hugh’s papers.”

“How dreadful!” said Hazel in consternation.

“Pretty bad, isn’t it?” Teddie agreed.

“And oh, Teddie,” the girl went on, “my pocket-money gave out to-day. You know how I like to give mother some little delicacy. I don’t know whether you could lend me any. Sixpence would do for to-day.”

Teddie felt in all his pockets and produced three halfpence. “I am awfully sorry,” he said ruefully; “and to think I spent one and fourpence on a steak to-day.”

“You *must* have been hungry,” his sister exclaimed, amazed.

“Oh, not to eat,” laughed Teddie. “It was for Carrots’ eye.”

Hazel looked her astonishment.

“You see,” her brother explained, “it was after the row. Hamilton had gone out to lunch, and I was going to mine, when I noticed that Carrots, who was sitting at his desk, was holding his face in his hands and groaning.”

“Yes,” said Hazel pitifully, “and then?”

“Well,” Teddie continued, “the eye certainly looked pretty bad—seemed to be a worse one than I really intended to give him, you know, and it put me in mind of beef steak somehow. So I went to the nearest butcher and bought one.”

“But, Teddie,” said Hazel, much interested, “surely a much smaller piece would have done?”

“It never struck me,” Teddie declared. “I was never in a butcher’s shop before. I suppose I thought they would not halve it. The master of the shop said: ‘What can I do for you, sir?’ I said: ‘I want a steak.’ ‘The best?’ he said. ‘Yes,’ I said; ‘the juiciest you have got: it is for—’ I was just going to tell him it was for a black eye, but there was a wretched little errand boy in the shop, grinning, so I said: ‘It is for one person.’ He slapped a piece on to the scales and wrapped it up in newspaper, and said it would be one and four—which was lucky, as I had got only one and fivepence halfpenny. I ran back to the office and put it down on the desk, in front of Carrots, and went out again.”

“Did it do him any good?” Hazel asked.

“I don’t know,” her brother answered. “I left for good after that, you know.”

“But, Teddie,” she protested, “then you have had no lunch.”

“Oh, that does not matter,” the boy rejoined tragically, as on this reminder healthy pangs of hunger reasserted themselves. “That is quite the least part of the whole bad business—I don’t suppose I *could* eat, you know, if I tried. It is just possible,” he continued, with increased gloom and some irritation, “that the Lout had a rattling lunch with what was over: he could easily fry it on the shovel over the office gas.”

“It would make the office smell rather, to cook there, wouldn’t it?” suggested Hazel. “Mr. Hamilton might be angry.”

"An awfully nice smell," groaned Teddie, "enough to make Hamilton want to sit in the outer office all the rest of the afternoon."

Hazel, making a shrewd guess at her brother's innermost feelings and private sufferings, endeavoured to divert his mind from beefsteak or any other subject likely to aggravate them. And again affectionately stroking the shabby coat sleeve, she proceeded to discourse on divers topics, thus whiling away the time, that must otherwise have dragged terribly for poor hungry Teddy, as the two trudged along the somewhat monotonous track of dusty road, under a sun that was only now beginning to be aware that the hot summer day was waning; that it would therefore become him to restrain his ardour, and to relax his fierce and fiery countenance to more gentle demonstrations of his warm and impulsive temperament.

On reaching the house, after safely bestowing the delinquent upon his mother's care, Hazel sped across the marble-flagged hall, down one of the numerous passages and through a baize-covered swing-door, which shut off that portion of the house devoted to servants' offices. She made her way to the kitchen, an old-fashioned stone kitchen, where sundry odours made apparent the circumstance that dinner was in preparation. The two village maids dropped curtsies, and Mrs. Doidge turned from the fire to welcome her young lady.

"Will you kindly be seated, miss?" asked the ex-housekeeper. "Mattie, leave that bit of ironing and place the easy chair nearer the window for Miss Hazel."

"No, Mrs. Doidge, thank you," Hazel interposed. "I cannot stay a moment. I only wanted some slices of bread and butter, rather thick, please, and a cup of tea, if you have boiling water. Mr. Teddie has come home, as I daresay Miles told you; but what do you think?—he has had no lunch."

The three women were quickly in a bustle, many ejaculations of concern escaping Mrs. Doidge's lips, in that Teddie, her pet and darling—next to Hazel, be it understood—should thus be famishing within these very walls. Hazel had no need to urge haste, and was presently bearing away a tray, followed by many remonstrances from Mrs. Doidge, who protested she could easily spare one of the maids on so short an errand. Teddie, whose quick ear caught the tap of Hazel's little foot against the panels, rose to give her admittance, and hungrily eyed the food that he yet deemed it only decent to turn from in seeming disgust.

"Just leave it near me," he said, in response to his sister's pleading. "I may perhaps find I can nibble a piece of bread presently."

Hazel had fully expected to find her mother and brother deep in conversation concerning the circumstance of his sudden, not to say precipitate, restoration to the bosom of his family; but the truth was that Teddie possessed very little information of which to deliver himself. It appeared that his *bête noire*, Carrots, had grievously insulted the young gentleman, nor him alone, but the ancient name of

Le Mesurier, in grossest manner, such as no gentleman, let alone a Le Mesurier, could allow to pass and yet hope to retain his honour. Therefore had Teddie risen up in his wrath, and, with vengeful force, had smitten this enemy of his house, inflicting a black eye. The young man's employer had at that moment made his appearance. We have the sequel of the story in the reappearance of poor Teddie at Hazelhurst on the day of his departure thence.

Hazel, bent on humouring the hungry lad, after placing the food within easy reach, discreetly turned away and occupied eye and hand in the rearrangement of flowers in their several vases, adroitly holding her mother in conversation the while; but when, five minutes later, having completed her task with all possible deliberation, and having duly considered the result of her labour, with head on this side and that, the girl came forward to take her favourite seat beside her mother's chair: lo, the cup was empty, the plate bare, and Teddie was ingenuously reviewing his boots in taciturn and blue-eyed melancholy.

Despite himself, however, the boy could not long pretend to a condition so at variance with his joyful, hopeful young nature. In truth, by dinner-time, in response to the second sounding of the gong, fresh washed and dressed, his hunger appeased—for it is to be supposed that Teddie was responsible for the disappearance of the bread and butter and tea—he presented himself, to Hazel's delight, in the likeness of the more familiar Teddie, having set aside all pseudo-dejection, and, if truth be told, looking wonderfully handsome in his evening garb, which, though shabby and curiously appointed with high lights in all prominent places, was well brushed, and displayed a goodly show of spotless and snow-white cuff. So fresh and handsome did the boy look, indeed, that Hazel, quite impressed, regarded him in admiration.

"Why, Teddie," she cried, "how nice you look! And you were complaining, only last night, that your dinner jacket was not fit to wear. It is a little shiny, certainly, but—"

"You don't suppose," said Teddie seriously, amazed at her simplicity, "you don't suppose that I should be such a noodle as to wear my own evening clothes? No, no, I save my own, whenever I get the chance!"

"Oh, what a shame," Hazel expostulated. "Then whose are these?"

"Why, Hugh's," her brother informed her, with an irrepressible chuckle. "And it is all very well to cry shame, Hazel; but why do you suppose this suit looks so decent? Because, forsooth, Hugh puts it carefully away and wears mine whenever he can. And again, why has mine become so extremely shabby? Because, when he has it on—and he manages to wear it pretty often, let me tell you—he is utterly reckless as to how he treats it: he will lie upon the grass in it; and he wore it a great deal while he was making those bookshelves for you, and messing about generally in the carpenter's room of an evening."

"Mrs. Doidge has fine-drawn the hole in the knee where the chisel went through, sir," murmured Miles, as he offered his young master the vegetables, with deferential bend, "and I brushed and laid everything out upon your bed, sir, as usual."

"Thank you, Miles; yes, I saw that," Teddie rejoined. "Well, they will be all the readier. I am afraid I shall be wearing them very soon: something tells me that it won't be long before Hugh comes," he added, turning to Hazel.

Good, faithful Miles! With how much perseverance did he endeavour, in things great and small, to keep up his loved "family" to the level of their former status, deeming such condition essential to their well-being! With what toil and labour did he strive that each of his young masters should at all times appear well groomed, that they might not miss, nor show they lacked, the attentions of the two valets whose services had been entirely devoted to his five sons, by Hubert's order!

And indeed, as Miles himself was wont to confess, if it were not for the saving help of their faithful servant, long ere this would the young gentlemen have presented themselves at dinner in morning dress, to be tended by a couple of maids—Miles always lost his equanimity at the mere thought of women at table. He shuddered to contemplate the probable condition of the plate and glass, that constituted his greatest pride, under feminine control.

He would look into the drawing-room or search the hall—either of which places were gathering grounds of the family—a few minutes before the sounding of the dinner-gong, and if one luckless *Le Mesurier* boy chanced to be lurking in some corner, in morning garb, hoping to escape the watchful eye of the redoubted butler, Miles would immediately spy him out, and with bland severity inform the delinquent that he would ask Mrs. Doidge to "put the dinner back" a quarter of an hour, if his young master could find that sufficient time in which to make his toilet. His patient persistence at length shamed the boys into meek acquiescence, so that Miles had relaxed his stern vigilance somewhat of late, showing in its stead a pathetic trust in their own sense of right, such as they could not disregard.

The flower-garden too, in the immediate neighbourhood of the house, would be overrun with weeds—as he had once found it after a month's confinement to the house with an obstinate attack of rheumatism—entailing the extra expense of outside help for their suppression. It is true that Miss Hazel had wrestled with the noxious growths—as her little brown hands testified, for she either could not or would not keep on the queerly fashioned and enormous gloves that Mrs. Doidge assured the girl were the correct thing for gardening, and with which the good woman was careful to supply her; but what was his little mistress's feeble strength, pitted against the alarming odds of the pertinacious herbage? Miles asked pitifully, when even he, tough, work-hardened old man that he was,

found the fight a fierce and oft-to-be-repeated one: for the foe, fresh and smiling in their green uniform, seemed to bear charmed lives, and to rise in formidable ranks like so many phoenixes from the weed carnage. Extermination seemed an impossibility, notwithstanding the feverish energy with which Miles went forth to combat, and the wondrous strategy that he brought to bear upon the imposing and ever-smiling green army.

CHAPTER III

Two days later, Teddie and Hazel, she seated on far-stretching, hopelessly tangled tree-roots, he prone upon his back on the dry moss, disported themselves in the leafy shade of the beloved greenwood, deep in consultation on the same momentous question that Hazel had endeavoured to solve alone: how might she earn money?

Typewriting had been discussed, but the idea was soon abandoned, Teddie informing his sister that, to be successful in that branch of industry, a peculiar kind of appearance was desirable—indeed, was essentially needful—an appearance that Hazel entirely lacked, as she herself would admit, could she see "the sort" that frequented the office adjoining Mr. Hamilton's.

"Why," the boy declared, "they would simply stare if *you* suddenly turned up there and asked for a job, and the boss would inquire delicately where your mother was, and would instruct his head clerk to take you back to her."

"I should not go like this," Hazel returned, deprecatingly, fingering a piece of her white spotted muslin, and eyeing her brother wistfully. "I should probably have a tailor-made tweed dress, and a man's straw hat, and thick boots, and a stand-up collar and tie. You have no idea how—how strong-minded I could look, if I had the proper dress for bringing it out. Most women owe it to their dress: I am quite sure they don't feel and stride about like that, in their dressing-gowns."

She regarded him pleadingly; the mere thought of becoming one of the City band—the doing away for ever with the dolorous Monday morning partings—above all, the obtaining of means to supply her mother with endless little luxuries, made the proposition a very tempting one to the girl.

But Teddie shook his head. "It is a peculiar *stamp*," he said musingly, "and, take my word for it, Hazel, it is not all in the clothes. Why, some of them dress quite æsthetically; but it is no go, they are typewriters. Not that I disapprove of

them as a class," he hastened to add. "If it comes to that, some of them are quite pretty, but—well, you would not do, and that is all about it."

There was a short silence. The sun glinted in and out among the tree-branches in shimmering shafts of yellow light, the leaves quivered slightly in the still air, the birds chirped, and Hazel sighed.

"Besides," Teddie continued, feeling perhaps that he had been somewhat unsympathetically sweeping in his assertions, "there would be the expense of learning. You don't become a full-blown typewriter all at once, you know. You don't just sit down and manage it, so to speak, as you happen to be able to play the piano—without lessons."

Hazel brightened visibly so soon as this very real obstacle—means—was put before her: she was willing to give up any attempt at scaling an obstruction that would obviously harm her in the ascent. It was not that she was cowardly, or easily discouraged—far from it: never was girl pluckier or keener spirited; but she was wise in her generation, and saw that the loss entailed in the attempt to gain was greater than the gain itself; that the other side of the block, in short, was not worth the reaching.

"That is true," she admitted, relieved. "There is the tailor-made dress, too! Let us talk of other ways." She hesitated. "Now, don't laugh, Teddie," she went on, "just think seriously over what I am going to propose, and then say yes or no, after due consideration, you know. Teddie—could I be a governess?" And the girl unconsciously straightened her back, while an expression of mild severity overspread her countenance.

Teddie's surprise at this, to him astounding, idea silenced his tongue. After a few moments the slender figure drooped—Hazel never stooped, she drooped: as different a state, mental and physical, as ugliness from beauty—the pretty features relaxed.

"Of course I know," she resumed modestly, "that they would have to be very, very young children—or very backward older ones. I should prefer the backward ones: the very young are so fascinating. I don't know whether I should have the strength of mind, if they were hot and tired, and wanting to play, to insist on their finishing the spelling-lesson or sum; and I know that, while you cannot be too kind and too patient, you also cannot be too firm in having the little task completed. But," she added reflectively, chin in hand, "I should be wise and see to it that the task was a very short and easy one, especially if the child was particularly longing to go out, or was not quite well."

The girl had almost forgotten her brother's presence, and had entered into a little world of her own. She pictured to herself a pleasant, airy schoolroom with three or four happy, rosy children seated at the table, of which she herself was the head, strewn with the usual schoolroom paraphernalia: rulers, slates,

dingy spelling-books of dog's-eared, awe-inspiring columns of words, slate pencils whose points and bluntness alike set your teeth on edge when you looked at them; copy-books with pot-hooks and hangers to copy in pencil—for Hazel would permit no inkpots nor ink-bespattering pens to enter her domain, to sully the purity of clean pinafores and childish fingers. Yes, she would be careful that the room should be airy, for she knew that much of rosy-cheeked happiness must depend upon that; the lessons short and interesting: for how should a child, mewed up in a close atmosphere, set to learn a tedious task, which no older mind had first rendered pleasant and understandable by a little intelligent smoothing and explaining, be aught but fidgety, cross, and unhappy? A child's mind should be lightly taxed, Hazel decided. She also decided that, however unorthodox it might be, she would always have freshly cut flowers upon her schoolroom table. Lessons were to be connected with pretty things, as well as with smeary slate and dingy spelling-book. Besides, how useful they would be in furnishing themes on which to discourse to her eager-eared young charges!

These ideas floated through the girl's vivid imagination within the space of a few moments only. Presently she roused herself, and shook herself free of the reverie into which she had fallen.

"I suppose it ought to be the backward ones," she said with a sigh.

"To think of Miss Le Mesurier becoming a governess," Teddie observed ruminatingly. "It is ridiculous, Hazel. Why, you would be romping with them round the table? And why are they to be so very young or, if older, dolts? Do you mean you cannot teach?"

"I don't quite know," Hazel returned, hesitating and pausing. "My—my education has been—er—has been rather choppy, hasn't it?" she asked a little timidly, fearful of wounding her brother's feelings, for the five boys had had practically the charge of their little sister's education. Cecil, until he had obtained his present post in the Indian Civil Service, had given her a daily lesson in some or other branch of knowledge, at irregular times, certainly—an occasional hour before breakfast, or half an hour before bedtime. But the girl was an apt pupil. She marked, learned, and inwardly digested—her clever little brain seemed to be well nourished: for the food on which it was fed, albeit scanty, was of goodly quality, and the very ample time allowed her for the assimilation of each respective lesson was perhaps the secret, in part, of her strongly marked digestive power.

Then Guy had taken her in hand, but soon confessed himself no teacher—that Hazel's odd questions puzzled him. Soon afterwards he left home to play his modest part in the government of his country. The girl was then passed over to Gerald—good, steady, faithful, plodding Gerald. In him she found her master: he an intelligent, interesting pupil. Together they would while away the long morning hours in profound study, in summer taking their books to the woods;

in winter the bearskin before the hall hearth would often be the scene of their labour.

Necessity, however, caused long months of enforced holiday, when the girl would have been impatient of days, and of late Saturday evening had become the only time possible for Gerald to devote to two or three hours of tutorage; while on Sunday, between church hours, the young man would read aloud and make instructive comments to a little auditor, all ears and eyes, upon books, the like of which caused the hair of Hugh and Teddie to rise upon their heads in amaze, in that their brother and sister should find pleasure in such "deadly dry stuff," to couch the expression in their own tongue. And Monday morning would see the persevering tutor, at a very early hour, correcting writings of his pupil's authorship, and further arranging a programme for the ensuing days of his absence.

"I don't fancy I am well grounded," the girl went on, "and I should suppose that to be very important to teachers." She paused.

"I must say," Teddie remarked remonstrantly, "that you are not very complimentary to Gerald—or to me, if it comes to that. I have given you a turn at arithmetic, myself, and I have found you smart enough."

"Yes, oh yes, thank you, old fellow," Hazel returned hastily, apologetically. "He and—and you"—it appeared a little difficult to the girl to make the addition—"have the talent of teaching. Now, even supposing my learning to be sufficient, have I?"

"I don't see that it *is* the question," returned her brother, much mollified, "for none of us would let you become a governess: it would be too absurd—you are only a child yourself."

At this Hazel waxed indignant. "I am young," she admitted with naïve frankness, "but I am tall and fond of children. Mother was saying lately that my next new dress must be made quite long. See," she cried, springing up and walking swiftly to and fro in straight-limbed, supple grace, "they are all but long already. And of course," the girl continued, resuming her seat, "I should do up my hair and wear 'ladies'; instead of 'girls' hats. As I said before, you have no idea how much is owed to clothes."

There was a short silence. Teddie, upon his back, groaned slightly.

"Now listen, Teddie," Hazel presently continued, "I have one more plan to lay before you and, really, out of three, it is only reasonable to expect you to think seriously of one, and finally to agree to try it and help me to persuade mother. In this last plan, indeed, we need not consult her—she need know nothing about it, but just live happily and enjoy the results of it."

The girl paused and looked about her, half startled, on encountering the inquisitive glance of the bright eyes of her favourite squirrel who, afraid to approach nearer—his mistress, the wood-nymph, seemingly entertaining

company—appeared to be listening with all his might for the proposition about to be unfolded by her.

"Teddie," Hazel said, bending over him and speaking low, "what do you say to us—to you and me—*keeping a lodger* at Hazelhurst?"

In the pause that ensued Teddie rolled over upon his face, but never a word spoke he. Hazel regarded him a little anxiously, uncertain as to his state of mind. At length he broke the silence.

"*We should have to feed it,*" he remarked, in hollow accents.

"I thought of that," Hazel returned eagerly, delighted that the proposal met with no more definite negative, "but suppose we were lucky—suppose we found a very delicate one, who wanted heaps of fresh air—we could give it the whole of the west wing, for instance—but one that could eat hardly anything? But no, that would not do," she continued, after pausing to reflect, "it would be more expense in the end, than less, to have a delicate lodger, I mean. You see, one would have to provide chicken and jelly, even if it would not eat, just to try to tempt it. No, we hid better look out for a moderately healthy one, but one who was used to plain food, you know: the sort that likes bread and cheese for lunch, better than anything else, and is a firm teetotaller. Who is that coming, I wonder?" she broke off suddenly.

The two raised themselves to listen, in breathless silence.

"Perhaps it is some one looking for lodgings," Teddie whispered mischievously. "Now remember, Hazel, twenty guineas a week for the west wing, garrets five shillings each, and the basement seven-and-six."

"It is Hugh," the girl exclaimed, springing to her feet and running to meet the fourth Le Mesurier boy, who, hot, dusty, and tired, yet returned his sister's greeting affectionately, if somewhat shame-facedly, as he became aware of the presence of his brother.

Teddie, at Hazel's exclamation, had sunk back into his former position and now lay, cool and comfortable, complacently regarding the new-comer with twinkling eyes.

"Hallo!" he said brightly. "So you have turned up, have you? I hope you will be comfortable. I have spent a very pleasant couple of days here myself. I ran down, without lunch, on Monday, and Mrs. Doidge has been feeding me up ever since." And Teddie gave vent to a sigh of satisfaction.

"Slack beast," murmured Hugh disgustedly. Yielding to the silent entreaty of Hazel's little hand and seating himself upon some moss, he threw off his hat and proceeded to mop his damp face.

"What is that?" Teddie asked innocently. "But, I say, you do look hot, old fellow. Walked up, I suppose?"

"Ugh," grunted Hugh.

"Doubtless in some perturbation of mind," Teddie continued sympathetically. "Very heating, this weather. And your bag, too—had books in it, perhaps?"

A slightly sardonic smile overspread Hugh's countenance.

"Talking of books, there was one of yours that I packed with mine," he announced in a friendly way, "and I left the bag at the station, thinking you might like to fetch it."

Teddie's blue eyes of a sudden blazed with wrath. "Do you mean to say," he asked, an ominous quietude marking his manner, "do you mean to say that you left a heavy bag of books at the station for me to fetch, your only excuse being that the bag contains a wretched thirty-page paper-covered pamphlet on Dentistry that chanced to be left in my name at our lodgings?"

"Partly that," returned Hugh, with the same air of engaging frankness. "I thought you would be pleased to see it again, and I knew it would grieve you to have me toiling up with anything belonging to you. Also partly because I thought the exercise would do you good: you have been out at grass long enough. I am glad I was so fully justified in my ideas," he added, "for on your own admitting you are eating your head off, and doing nothing all day."

"I hope you have a second supply of hair-brushes and—er—other things pertaining to the toilet," Teddie observed politely, his anger evaporated, a similar smile lighting his boyish features, "because I don't suppose you will feel inclined to make a second trip to the station to-day, and I don't happen to be going that way this afternoon. By the way, I shall have to wear my own dress clothes to-night," he added, with the air of one who is struck with an idea that necessitates reflection.

It was now Hugh's turn to wax indignant, but the sight of Hazel returning at this auspicious moment, bearing in her hand a large glass of lemon-squash, which she tendered to the hot and dusty lad, extinguished instantly the dire wrath that was kindling within his breast, making him feel very amiable toward his thoughtful little sister in particular, and to a world that included Teddie, in general.

"Ah," he exclaimed, pausing in the draught in order to take a deep breath, "there is nothing like lemon-squash in hot weather," and he turned a softened pair of blue eyes upon his brother, with a look of gathering trust that seemed only to ask sympathy.

Teddie vainly tried to look indifferent as he regarded the favoured Hugh a trifle wistfully; but nature is weak.

"It is a curious thing, Hazel," he remarked insinuatingly, "how awfully thirsty one gets this weather, even doing nothing."

"Oh, Teddie, I am so sorry," the girl made answer, "but Mrs. Doidge has no more spare lemons. Perhaps Hugh—" she broke off: it was too late. The glass was drained to the last drop, and Hugh, with a sigh of contentment, arranged his

long limbs upon the mossy carpet for half an hour's repose before luncheon.

A couple of hours later Teddie, tired of inaction, being besides of an extremely good-hearted disposition, having melted sufficiently toward his brother, took his way to the station for the purpose of carrying home that brother's personal effects; but, only human, he could not resist the desire to open the bag and subtract therefrom the luckless pamphlet, which he proceeded to tear into shreds and scatter along the hedgerow.

CHAPTER IV

About a week after the circumstances of mixed joy and embarrassment recorded in the last chapter, there came strolling through the Le Mesuriers' wood one Paul Charteris, tall, lithe, and handsome being in the thirty-first year of his age. The master of Earnsclough was on his way to Hazelhurst with the intention of paying his respects to its mistress, whom he had not seen for some six or seven years, having for that t space of time been an attach in the British Embassy at St. Petersburg. Eight years since, on the death of his father, Vivian, his elder brother, had inherited Earnsclough and all pertaining to it, including the great town house. Vivian was devoted to his brother, and begged that they two should continue to share the old home as heretofore. But Paul's was a restless spirit: his college career ended, he must be up and doing. The interest of influential friends soon obtained for the young man the coveted post in Russia, and Vivian, with regret, was perforce obliged to yield where he had no authority to interfere. Therefore, for six long years was Paul Charteris no more seen among his people. Yet, while the elder brother yearned for the companionship he had always known, he could not but admit that it was better so, that action was necessary to Paul. For himself it was different He was essentially a student by nature, and wished only for a retired life. A slight limp in his gait fostered and favoured this recluse propensity, and the solitary years before his death were lived almost exclusively in the library at Earnsclough, devoted to study, at such times as his multifarious duties with steward or lawyer—faithfully and patiently performed by the young master—left him free to follow his own devices.

Then came the death of Vivian at the early age of three-and-thirty, and Paul was called to take upon his own shoulders the responsibility of the vast estates of Earnsclough.

He did not respond at once. Indeed, it would have been difficult for him to throw up his position at short notice. Neither had the young man any great inclination to take possession of his own, for the inheritance was rendered hateful to him, that had come to him only with the loss of his brother. He dreaded the sight of the empty place, the lonely library, the disused smoking-room, with its many familiar objects: skins of animals, boyish attempts at photography that the two brothers had always kept upon the walls and mantelshelf, as relics of their happy childhood. He shuddered as he thought upon such desolation.

So that a year had elapsed since the death of Vivian, and Paul had arrived only a few days since, his trouble somewhat softened by the healing of time. Nevertheless, it was a sorrowful ordeal. He yearned inexpressibly for the sight of his brother's form, seated in the old place at the study table, as he had so often pictured to himself; for the gladness that was wont to light Vivian's features at the appearance of himself, after even a temporary separation; for the tones of his voice. However, the first dreaded days were rendered considerably less painful by the almost continuous presence of Mr. Lewis, the family solicitor, or Crawford, the steward.

Yet, the first press of affairs over, Paul found more leisure in which to indulge his sorrow, and very sorely it beset him: its tyranny at length forcing him to rouse himself and endeavour to throw off the oppression. He presently bethought him of the friends and acquaintances of years gone by, and determined upon a course of visits, that should at once renew kindly recollections and while away the tedium of hours not enlightened by work. The Le Mesuriers were naturally uppermost in his mind, for the Hazelhurst estates joined those of Earnscleugh. They were nice enough boys, he was glad to remind himself—they would be strapping young fellows by now—and for their mother he entertained affectionate memories, for she had been a good friend and counsellor to the two motherless sons of Philip Charteris. Vivian, indeed, could remember her first coming to Hazelhurst, a bright, beautiful young creature, and the boy of six had formed quite a romantic attachment. Then there was that little brown witch of a girl, Hazel. Hazel must be sixteen or seventeen, Paul reflected, and he smiled at the recollection of their last interview, seven years since.

He had taken leave of Mrs. Le Mesurier and of such Le Mesurier boys as were present, and was departing through the wood, without accomplishing a farewell to his little friend Hazel, who was nowhere to be found. Passing beneath an oak, he heard above him a suppressed exclamation, then the rending of "gathers," and the child stood beside him, holding her torn frock together with one hand and courteously tending him the other.

"You are going away, aren't you?" she had asked him gravely. "You have been to say good-bye to mother and the boys?" and she turned to accompany

him to the boundary fence.

"Yes," Paul replied, "and I was afraid I should have to go without seeing you."

"It would not have mattered," she answered, "you saw me on Tuesday, only three days ago. What will it matter, when you are going away for years, whether you saw me on Tuesday or Friday?"

"But I did not say good-bye on Tuesday," Paul returned, much amused. "That matters; don't you think so?"

"No," Hazel said quaintly. "Going away means good-bye. There is no need to say it, except in your heart."

"Still I like to say it to you and in my heart as well," Paul persisted. "To-morrow, when I shall be already in Paris, I shall be saying, 'Good-bye, little Hazel, good-bye; don't forget me.' And then I shall like to recall how you looked and what you said in answer."

At this juncture they had reached the fence dividing the two estates, and Paul turned to face his little companion.

"I am going away for years," he said, a trifle wistfully. "Will you give a fellow a kiss, Hazel?"

"No," Hazel returned decisively. "I am sorry, but I am too old. You may take both my hands, if you like," she added graciously.

Paul gratefully possessed himself of the proffered hands, and looked long into the upturned childish eyes.

"I wonder whether you will be as pretty when I come back as you are now," was his boyish comment.

"I don't know," Hazel returned indifferently. "I hope I shan't be any browner," she added; "the boys do tease me so."

"And shall you be saying 'good-bye, Paul,' in your heart to-morrow?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course," she said earnestly, somewhat surprised at the question. "All the time till you are home again."

"Let me hear you say it now," he entreated.

"Good-bye, Paul," she said obediently, and made to withdraw her hands.

"And you are quite sure about the—about the kiss?" he asked diffidently.

Hazel regarded him in mild reproach.

"I am sorry," he said hastily. "I did not mean to ask again. Good-bye, Hazel; don't forget me."

He vaulted over the fence and was gone.

Following the same twisting path that he had passed over then, with his child companion, the young man was presently aware that his dog, which had trotted on ahead, was leaping backwards and forwards before a certain tree,

breaking into short, excited barks. Thinking it likely that Towzer was scaring some pet or other of Hazel's, Paul called sharply to his four-footed friend, but was not heeded by that usually most obedient of dogs. Becoming angry, he quickened his pace, and, raising his stick, was about to punish Towzer, when, to his astonishment, its point was seized from above and held firmly—after one or two ineffectual efforts to wrest it from his hand—while a girlish voice said, in laughing tones:

"No, you don't."

Paul peered up, in among the clustering foliage, and presently descried the recumbent form of a girl, lying at full length along one of the great boughs—her dress, of the exact shade of the bark, rendering her discovery difficult. The girl released her hold of the stick and sat up, one slender foot and ankle becoming visible beneath the canopy of leaves above the young man's head, and with both hands she parted the green screen before her face and peeped down at him. It was a lovely face that Paul beheld—bewitching, indescribable in its charm, framed in soft brown hair.

"Hazel—Miss Le Mesurier," he cried, "have you lived in that tree ever since I went away?" For he now recognised the giant oak. "I always said you were a little Dryad. Won't you deign to come down and be mortal for a while?"

"Certainly," returned Miss Le Mesurier, and hesitated. "If you will be so good as to walk on," she added, rather severely, "I will join you in a few moments."

Paul did as he was bidden. A rustling among the branches ensued, then a light jump to the ground; and as he turned eagerly to greet her, Paul was almost expectant of seeing one little hand occupied in the holding together of a rent skirt, so vivid were old associations with him just then. She came swiftly to his side, the soft cloud of hair floating around her. In the brown eyes shone a glad friendliness—the same grave, direct regard he remembered so well: a child-like, inquiring, essentially intelligent gravity, often to be remarked in clever, highly sensitive faces—and Hazel's was a very clever and acutely sensitive little face, in the truest sense for women, womanly. But, though childlike and open as ever, the expressive countenance was more grand, more noble—an earnest that the beautiful little nature of the *child* Hazel had grown up in the way of its starting, without deviation.

She held out a hand to Paul, very slightly larger than the one that had bidden him farewell; and if it was not browner, it was quite as brown, but such a pretty, soft, warm tinge in the clear, transparent skin as made all whiter skin appear harsh in contrast, to Paul's thinking. It courteously shook his, and withdrew.

"How long have you been home?" she asked, when the wise, childlike eyes were satisfied; and, truly, Paul was a goodly sight.

"Six days," Paul returned. "I arrived here on Monday. But there was work to see to; and, besides, I did not feel like visiting any one, just at first."

"Of course," the girl responded sympathetically. "The boys will be home to-day," she added. "Three of them. So to-morrow—to-night even—you will have something cheering."

"I feel cheered already," Paul returned, cheerfully enough, as they turned to walk on together in the direction of the house. "How are they? How is your mother?" he inquired.

"Mother is fairly well," Hazel replied. "The boys are always well."

"And doing well?" Paul asked. "Affairs are prospering, I hope?"—the fortunes of the Le Mesuriers were ever an open secret.

"No," Hazel admitted, frankly and without reserve, "things are rather bad, and we are dreadfully poor just now—especially myself. You would hardly believe it," she went on confidentially, "but if it had not been for one and sixpence that Hugh gave me last Wednesday—already it has come down to eightpence—I should not possess a halfpenny. See," and the girl held out a limp little silken purse.

Paul took it from her. "What a quaint little thing! May I look inside?" he asked.

"Of course," Hazel said. "But I have told you exactly what is in it: eightpence."

And sure enough, two threepenny pieces and four halfpennies rolled out upon Paul's open palm.

"It is partly owing to the fact of Hugh and Teddie being out of work," Hazel went on, when the purse had been restored to her, and safely bestowed in her pocket. "They are in town to-day looking for something. But I am very much afraid they won't find anything. You know," she added, unconsciously moving a little nearer to him as they walked, "the main difficulty is, I believe, that they don't look 'clerky,' and their name is not a 'clerky' one, is it? These trifles make a difference, don't you think?" And she looked up at him with considering, brown eyes.

"I am sure they must," Paul assented.

"It only struck me lately," Hazel, following her own train of thought, presently resumed, "quite lately, how exactly like the portrait of Hugo Le Mesurier Teddie is. Of course Hugo has long hair and a lace collar—he was a Cavalier in the days of Cromwell, you know—but if he changed his clothes and cut his hair, the face alone would be enough to make people say they did not require a clerk"—and she sighed.

"I can well believe it," Paul agreed, sympathetically.

"I have been consulting the boys as to how I might earn a little money, if it

were only five shillings a week," the girl continued. "They say I don't look like a typewriter. What do you think?"

"Great Heavens, no!" Paul ejaculated vehemently, horrified at the bare suggestion.

"That is how they feel," Hazel returned resignedly. "Only, they are a little calmer about it: they have seen so many, you know, poor things," she added, ingenuously. "Next," she began again, after a slight pause, "we considered letting lodgings, without mother's knowledge. But Teddie says a 'cute lodger would take me in horribly. He says I am no more cut out for a landlady than for a typewriter. Do you agree with that?"

"Most emphatically," Paul replied, unable to restrain a smile, which, however, escaped the girl's notice.

"You do?" she said, a trifle wistfully, as though half disappointed. "I hoped that you might, on thinking it over, consider it not such a bad plan as it at first appeared to you. I had thought of an invalid lady-lodger, who would require plenty of fresh air, but very little food. Though on second thoughts it occurred to me that we should have to persuade her with all sorts of dainties. So that would not do. But a gentleman, now, a gentleman, however unscrupulous in most matters, would not take a lady in, would he?" And the girl looked for his assurance.

"He would be an infernal cad if he did," Paul returned fiercely, tugging at his moustache.

"Yes," Hazel agreed. "I should hardly think that quite such cads existed, should you? Such very infernal ones, I mean. For even the greatest gentleman cad must have the sleeping instincts of a gentleman."

Paul's face was inscrutable.

"Now a bounder is different," was Hazel's startling announcement. "A bounder has never been a gentleman. He was born bounding, as you might say. I would rather deal with a cad myself: a bounder is so hopeless."

There was a short silence, devoted by both to reviewing the situation.

"But, Haz—Miss Le Mesurier," Paul amended, "you—you surely are not seriously thinking of—of this? Especially a gentleman. It—it—well, it would not be very usual, you know, especially if your mother is to be kept in ignorance."

"You mean, it is not the thing?" Hazel asked, simply, coming to his aid. "Oh, but we Le Mesuriers never trouble much about conventionalities," she explained airily. "Teddie says that ladies or gentlemen are always safe in following their inclinations—provided, of course, that those inclinations are not bad. Now, I don't think you could call my inclinations bad," she went on, meditatively, giving to the weighty question its due consideration. "They do rather lead me to take in a gentleman lodger, but he need not necessarily be a cad, you must remember. He

might be very nice, and we might get quite fond of him."

"Certainly," poor Paul agreed, rather helplessly. It was evident that Hazel had interpreted his words to mean, he was under the impression that she, and the Le Mesuriers generally, delighted in cads and the like doubtful company.

At this juncture they reached the flower-garden, which, thanks be to Miles, looked pleasant enough. The girl led her companion swiftly through its winding paths and up the broad flight of steps. The marble-paved hall, with its shaded open windows, was deliciously cool and refreshing after the heat and glare without. In one of the wide recesses Miles was busied about the tea-table, collecting chairs from different quarters of the sparsely furnished hall. He turned as the two approached.

"You remember Miles?" Hazel asked of Paul. "Miles, Mr. Charteris has come home."

The old man bowed deferentially and made to withdraw, but Paul went forward and took the hand of the faithful old servant.

"Remember Miles? I should think I did, and the many things he has forgiven me when I was a boy," he said warmly.

A gleam of pleasure lighted the butler's furrowed countenance.

"I have had a deal of experience of boys," he said, somewhat sententiously, "having five young masters of my own, and I know what is natural to them, and only right, and what is wrong."

"And I was only natural, was I?" Paul laughingly asked.

"Yes, sir," Miles answered stolidly.

Hazel, who had gone in quest of her mother, soon returned with Helen.

"I am very glad to see you, Paul," Mrs. Le Mesurier said simply, regarding him with something of her daughter's direct gaze. "You are 'Paul' still, I hope?"

"If you will—if you please," he returned earnestly, and it suddenly occurred to the young man that Hazel had not named him at all.

He remarked little change in Mrs. Le Mesurier, save that she appeared to him more frail, perhaps, and the blue eyes seemed almost grey, as though the tears of her great grief had faded them.

"We have much to tell you of Vivian," she observed, as they seated themselves and Hazel made tea. "You know what a student he was, but he always found time to come to us, and always welcomed my children to his house. Indeed, they had the run of it at all times," she added. "I often feared it must inconvenience him."

"It was his greatest happiness," Paul said simply. "He frequently mentioned the boys and—and your daughter in his letters to me, and how their presence enlivened the old home."

"Poor Vivian!" Helen murmured. "He missed you sadly, Paul; but he always

confessed that things were best as they were; that he would not have you home to pine in idleness."

She related many anecdotes of his brother that she knew would cheer Paul, and they fell to talking over old reminiscences, presently coming back to the topics of to-day, and the existing state of affairs; and Paul was soon laying before Helen a plan of his own sudden devising.

"Why should not Hugh come to me for a while as my secretary?" he asked. "If he does not care for the work, after giving it a trial, he can continue his search in the City."

"I don't want to seem conceited," Hazel broke in upon the conversation. She was seated near her mother on a low stool, chin in hand, deeply interested in all that passed. "I don't want to seem conceited," she said modestly, "but I can't help thinking that you had better have *me*. One often hears of lady secretaries," she went on, in expostulation at the smile upon her mother's face, a smile that Paul's countenance reflected; "it would be delightful, and you would not mind how I dressed, would you?" she added, turning eagerly to Paul. "You would let me have my hair down, and let me wear what I liked, provided I came punctually at the hours you named, and did the work properly?"

Paul looked upon the ground. It was difficult to keep the muscles about his mouth under control. Helen was about to speak when Hazel resumed: for it appeared to her that Paul was considering the matter.

"I dare say you would be rather cross with me sometimes, at first," she admitted, "and think my writing queer and untidy; but I should soon fall into your ways, and my writing is at least legible. I have more of a business head than Hugh," she added, after a pause. "You see, I am not hampered by a love of drawing."

Mrs. Le Mesurier had acquainted her guest with Hugh's difficulties of temperament.

The girl awaited a decision breathlessly, but it was Helen who first spoke, the while Paul contemplated the little brown business head, with its wonderful, drooping hair, in silent and varied emotions.

"It would not do, Hazel," she said quietly. "Neither Paul nor myself would like it, nor think it wise."

Hazel glanced quickly at Paul, only to see him confirm her mother's words by a smiling shake of the head.

"Very well, motherling," she said resignedly, "and, after all, it would be selfish in me not to let Hugh have the trial," she added, more brightly.

Nevertheless, the girl looked down at the two small hands in her lap, and

sighed.

CHAPTER V

The next day, Sunday, Hugh, Gerald, and Teddie, the two latter in high and unrelenting collars, well smoothed as to hair, attired in well-brushed clothes and boots of an almost supernatural polish—for Miles, the faithful, had personally attended their toilet—soberly and with elaborate care helped each the other over the boundary fence, intent upon returning, with prompt courtesy, the call their mother had received from Paul Charteris. The three wished to create a favourable impression upon their whilom friend, and a "decent get-up," to use Hugh's own words, was of the utmost importance for producing this desired result. Hugh, who had affected a low collar and loose tie, would have been well satisfied with himself were it not for the annoying circumstance that his new shoes pinched horribly, and that they squeaked, being somewhat low down in the scale of gentlemen's shoes, and bent on blatantly announcing the fact.

"Confound the things," he said angrily, trying various modes of locomotion, and finally adopting a mincing step of airy lightness, which seemed somewhat to pacify his fretful footgear, albeit he was pinched no whit less severely.

"Confoundedly hot in these high collars," Teddie grumbled, as he unfolded a snowy handkerchief and dabbed his moist brow. Immediately there was wafted upon the air the scent of lavender.

Hugh and Gerald regarded their brother in some severity, not unmixed with envy, in that they had neglected to make this elegant addition to their own toilets. "By Jove, Teddie," Gerald expostulated, "you must have literally soured that handkerchief."

"It is a bit damp," Teddie acknowledged composedly, "Comes in very refreshing."

Pursuing the winding paths in as direct a line as the topographical possibilities of the wood admitted, they at length came upon a large lawn that skirted the trees and lay smooth and green before the shady verandah of the south side of the house. Several long, low cane chairs stood invitingly about the verandah, and upon one of these, stretched at full length, in utter and complete comfort, was Paul Charteris, in loose white flannel garb, a cigar between his lips, a novel in his hand.

He sprang to his feet with an exclamation of welcome as Gerald, Hugh, and Teddie made their appearance across the lawn.

"Now, you fellows, just make yourselves comfortable and cool off," Paul said in amused compassion, as he marked the heated condition of the trio, and his quick glance took stock of the unsuitability of their habiliments. "I will look up Jackson, and ask for something to drink."

Hugh, glad to avail himself of the invitation, mincingly mounted the steps, and sank gratefully into the easiest chair, the other two likewise seating themselves.

Paul, disappearing for a few moments, quickly returned, followed by a servant bearing a tray, containing various sparkling liquids in multifarious bottles. Over this good and cooling cheer conversation soon became easy and natural, Teddie becoming so much himself as to refer energetically to stand-up collars as a "rotten invention."

"Look here, Charteris," he said, "perhaps, as you are alone, you won't mind my taking it off for a bit," and he proceeded to unfasten the offending piece of starched linen, in accordance with his host's warmly expressed advice, while Hugh surreptitiously slipped his poor tortured toes from their natural quarters into the main body of the shoe.

"You don't object to a pipe, Charteris?" Gerald inquired, producing from his pocket a well-worn briar-root, and, on Paul's assurance that he often enjoyed one himself, Hugh and Teddie quickly produced two others for his edification.

"Hazel received an invitation last night to spend a week with the Travers," Gerald announced conversationally, when all four were luxuriously smoking. "She is rather bothered about it; she does not care to leave the mater for so long."

"She could cut the visit short," Paul said, not unwilling to suggest so pleasing a solution of the difficulty. "How—er—how would your sister go?" he added, prefiguring himself and Hazel taking the long drive together in his dogcart, through the beautiful countryside.

But Gerald's reply quickly extinguished any such day-dream. "Oh, young Travers would fetch her in the trap; that is easy enough," he said carelessly.

"Is that Digby?" Paul asked quickly.

"Yes," Gerald replied, "he is desperately gone on Hazel—makes an awful idiot of himself."

"How old is he?" Paul asked curtly.

"About two- or three-and-twenty," Teddie broke in. "He is a decent fellow enough if only he would not sing."

Paul's innate delicacy would not permit him to ask that which he longed to know: whether or not that brown-eyed child, Hazel, reciprocated the feeling of the importunate Travers. However, Hugh soon relieved him on that score.

"Of course, Hazel does not guess what he is up to," he said, somewhat scornfully, in no wise trying to hide his contempt of the laboriously arranged and clumsily carried out tactics of young Travers. "How should she? None of us are likely to open her eyes. He only succeeds in boring her fearfully; she keeps out of his way whenever she can."

Paul was conscious of a sudden interest, almost amounting to a liking, for the luckless young man. "What sort of a fellow is he to look at?" he asked, readjusting his tie with some complacency.

"Oh, well enough," Hugh returned, to which somewhat vague description Paul's other guests grunted agreement.

"Greeky," Hugh went on, for his host's better understanding, and the subject was dropped, this graphic portraiture being deemed so eminently exhaustive that Charteris must be criticising a vivid mental picture of young Travers, the while he reclined with half-closed eyes, puffing lazily at his cigar.

"By the way," Paul began presently, turning to Hugh, "has Mrs. Le Mesurier spoken to you of the idea we formed?—just a suggestion, you know; you must, of course, feel at perfect liberty to—er—"

"Yes, thanks, awfully," Hugh replied suavely. "I'll turn up to-morrow. Nine o'clock suit—nine to four?"

For a moment Paul was staggered by such prompt acceptance of the post and subsequent arrangement of detail. "I think ten would suit me better," he said, a trifle apologetic. "I like to go in for various modes of exercise for a couple of hours before beginning work."

"All the same to me," Hugh returned airily. "Ten to five, then?"

"What do you say to having no fixed hour for leaving?" Paul suggested. "Just turn up at ten every day, and we can see what work there is to do, and do it. You will as often as not get through in an hour or two."

"That will just suit me," Hugh declared frankly. "And the salary?"

"Well," Paul said, with hesitancy, "a hundred a year would—er—"

"Phew," whistled Teddie, resorting to his bescented handkerchief; "and to think how I have to slave for a miserable forty!"

"But then, look how distasteful any kind of clerical work is to me," Hugh said ingenuously, gently expostulating with the unreasonable Teddie. "Even one hour is very real hard work to me; whereas Gerald, here, positively likes such business. If you look at things in their right proportions, you will find that I could hardly be overpaid, whatever you gave me."

Teddie did not look convinced by his brother's argument, and Paul, half amused, half dismayed at the outspoken candour of his secretary-elect, could not but determine that, whatever it was that filled the fair, curly head, diplomacy did not number among the gifts of Hugh Le Mesurier.

When, after some further talk, the young men rose to take their leave, Paul insisted upon accompanying his guests on at least part of their homeward way. Friendly relations were now so far established between the houses of Earnscliffe and Hazelhurst, that Teddie strolled with easy grace across the lawn, carrying the obnoxious collar in his hand, ever and anon waving it airily in gesticulation in the course of his conversation with Paul and Gerald; whilst Hugh modestly brought up the rear, stepping gingerly in bright red socks, bearing around his neck the plaintive shoes, slung together by their laces.

Hazel, meanwhile, who had walked with her brothers to the verge of the estate, had settled herself cosily upon the carpet of moss with a book, to await their return. Curiously enough, a desire to accompany them never entered the girl's mind, though it had ever been her habit to join her brothers in their excursions. Vivian Charteris had been well accustomed to the sight of Hazel's little figure among the tall and lanky forms of the Le Mesurier boys. Indeed, he would have sorely missed the bright and gentle girl, whom he had known intimately from babyhood, and for whom he entertained a brother's regard. He had gloried in the Le Mesurier lungs—more especially when voiced by the silvery tones of his little, brown-eyed favourite—echoing through his domain or about his house. But Vivian was Vivian, the grave and serious student, sixteen or seventeen years older than herself. Now, a quite unconscious reticence seemed to withhold the girl, to forbid the old childish freedom. Paul was almost a stranger to her: for, during the earliest years of her childhood, he had only spent at Earnscliffe the brief holidays of the long school-terms. At the age of eighteen he had entered upon his college career, visiting either his home or travelling abroad in the vacations; finally quitting England when Hazel had attained to her tenth year. So that, while familiar with his name, of the actual Paul the girl knew little.

Hazel sprang to her feet as her quick ear caught the sounds of footsteps approaching from the direction of Earnscliffe. Perching herself upon the fence, she peered eagerly down the little, twisting, shady pathway that she well knew led most directly to the house, presently perceiving Teddie's loose and angular form, looking somewhat *négligé* about the neck, while his collar encircled the crown of his straw hat. Gerald next made his appearance round the bend, the narrow ways being of necessity traversed in Indian-file order.

"Was Charteris at home?" Hazel called, with all the vaunted strength of the Le Mesurier lungs, poised upon the topmost rung, balancing her lithe body, hands on hip.

"He is here," Teddie called back, and, too late, Hazel discovered the figure of Paul, following close upon Gerald, whilst Hugh still brought up the rear in besocked feet.

Hazel precipitately dismounted from her lofty stand, her sensitive little face

growing pale with dismay at what she deemed her unmannerly way of dispensing with the formality of the usual prefix of "Mr.," which, however, Paul thoroughly understood: not as a rude peculiarity in the girl herself—little aristocrat that she was to her finger-tips—but as natural in the circumstance of that girl possessing five brothers.

There was the bare possibility in Hazel's mind that her words had not caught Paul's ear, or, being audible to him, that the omission had not been remarked. With this faint hope to buoy her, she held out her hand to meet Paul's over the fence, the while with flushed countenance she lifted her eyes, half shy, half anxious, and endeavoured to read the handsome face the merry eyes, that seemed laughingly to defy her scrutiny, whether consciously or unconsciously she could not determine.

As a matter of fact Paul was perfectly aware of her embarrassment and its cause, and was much amused. He was bent upon keeping her in a state of uncertainty, however, and merely commented upon the beauty of the day, which mischievous spirit was hardly in accordance with the young man's usual attitude towards her.

With a demure response Hazel moved a little away, soon becoming interested in a cluster of flowers at her feet, Shepherd's Eye, that seemed to gaze up at her in blue wonder and sympathy. She proceeded to pluck the small, starlike blossoms, her brothers and Paul meanwhile sitting upon or leaning against the mossgrown boundary fence, in several and varied poses of ease and comfort, engaging languidly in such broken and disjointed conversation as befitted the heat of the noonday.

"What is the name of that little flower?" Paul's voice broke in upon Hazel's musing. He had followed her unawares, and made as if to take one tiny blue star from her bunch.

But Hazel pressed upon him the whole miniature posy, in frank generosity.

"Take them all," she said. "Are they not sweet? They are called Shepherd's Eye—they grow mostly over there, in the meadow."

"Shepherd's Eye!" Paul said, gratefully accepting the gift. "But here are red ones, exactly like the blue."

"I call them Sad Shepherd's Eye," she returned. "They are eyes that must have been weeping bitterly for hours. I only care for the happy, blue ones."

"They are prettiest, certainly," Paul rejoined; "but I should like one or two of the red ones, to remind me of your pretty fancy. Let me gather them; you will make yourself hot and tired."

But Hazel disclaimed all fatigue, and was presently tying together some of the tiny red blossoms with a wisp of tough grass.

"When are you two coming?" Gerald called. "I say, Charteris, come along

home to lunch. The mater will be glad to see you."

Paul looked at Hazel. "May I?" he asked diffidently. "Mrs. Le Mesurier may—"

"Mother says that the house is always open to you," the girl replied in her gracious little way.

Having completed her task, she gave the flowers into Paul's eager keeping, and proceeded to lead the way through the shady tracks of Hazelhurst wood, her brothers affecting to breathe again as they safely went by the great oak-tree with Hazel still in their midst; albeit she had cast a lingering look up into its leafy shade, in passing.

As the significance of the long-drawn sighs caught Hazel's understanding, she faced them swiftly, and still keeping step with the four, danced along backwards, the better to explain away their groundless fears.

Paul thought he had never seen anything so pretty.

"I never climb trees when I am wearing my white dress," she said remonstrantly. "It is the one thing that makes Mrs. Doidge really cross. She says it takes Mattie two hours, every time, to get it up." And Hazel looked down at her simple muslin frock with some pride, in that it should prove to be so important a factor in the weekly routine of domestic labour. Having duly impressed her hearers, the girl faced about and continued the unbroken march in silence, with pretty, swinging motion, all her own.

Presently the booming of a gong came to them on the still air.

"By the way," Gerald said, of a sudden oppressed with his quick transition from guest to host, "you will forgive any shortcomings in the meal, won't you, Charteris? It is of no use attempting to disguise the fact that we are living—well, extremely simply, just now."

"You will be all right, Charteris," Teddie chimed in comfortably. "You are fed by old Miles on roast mutton and rice pudding with such a tremendous amount of ceremony that you are quite deceived into thinking you are in for a royal feast. And, after all, you can always eat up your own dainties when you get back to your place."

"Talking of Miles's impressive ways," Hugh said presently, "the mater had to speak to him once—he was actually serving cabbage round as a separate course, as if it were asparagus or artichokes. Oh, and by the way," he added, "I should advise you not to accept the coloured fluid he offers. No one knows what it is."

Thus warned at all points, the guest was ushered into the presence of Mrs. Le Mesurier. The party soon adjourned to the dining-room, where the fare, if simple, was most excellently cooked and daintily served, and Paul found the refined simplicity very much to his taste, vowing within himself that, with all his wealth, he would for the future practise such simplicity himself: in truth, he

was inclined to think the thing could not be overdone. The trouble would be to make his housekeeper and butler view the case in like light—people of their class thought so much of pomp and show. Oh, well, let them be, but he would have his own way when entertaining company.

He did not recall Hugh's caution with regard to the wine—whether to the butler's dismay or gratification would be hard to conjecture. Certain it was that the guest was the observed of Miles, with no small amount of interest furtively bestowed, and some palpable apprehension, as he first sipped the beverage.

Something in the flavour of the vintage rendered Paul reflective, or mayhap brought to mind Hugh's words. For a few moments his countenance was somewhat blank of expression, then, with a slight gasp, he heroically raised the glass to his lips and drained its contents. The next minute the old serving-man was beside him, eager, tremulous, with the fateful decanter poised for discharging.

Paul's fortitude gave way. "No more, thank you, Miles," he murmured hurriedly. "I must not take more than one glass," he added confidentially, eyeing the decanter with solemn conviction; "that is a full-bodied wine."

"Yes, sir," returned the delighted Miles, "and between you and me, sir, it is not what you would call an expensive wine, either. My mistress has better in the cellar, but I had not time to get it up," he murmured in pseudo-apology, for he deemed the vintage good enough as a luncheon beverage for any gentleman, old or young.

Paul nodded response, and asked for water.

The meal proceeded merrily enough when the boys had ceased to choke over the incident of the wine. Happily they were eating fish, so that Miles was in blissful ignorance as to the real cause of their unwonted distress, sternly rebuking his fellow-servants for the careless way in which the food had been prepared as he sat, half an hour later, at his own dinner in the servants' hall.

CHAPTER VI

After luncheon the party adjourned to the woods, Helen promising the young people that she would join them later, and suggesting that tea should be served in the open air at four o'clock.

The Le Mesurier boys composed themselves to rest during the heat of the early afternoon, and ranged themselves each according to his idea of comfort.

They chose the spot where Hazel was wont to hold her court of feathery and furry subjects; for, while the trees were sufficiently thick to afford a bountiful shade, there was a commodity of space in which to stretch long limbs, besides the pleasing circumstance that the carpet of last year's leaves was soft and springy, whilst the spicy odour of fir-cones and pine-needles proved grateful to the nostril and conducive to slumber.

Paul Charteris felt no desire to follow their example; probably Hazel would settle herself at too great a distance, and become lost in her book. Neither did he wish to close his eyes, for the real was even more charming than the imaginary Hazel. So, marking that she, too, seemed in no wise disposed for idleness—for she was flitting hither and thither among the trees in restless but evident enjoyment, plucking a flower, cooing to a wood-pigeon, extricating with deft tenderness two creeping plants one from the other, giving to each a fresh start in its race upon the tree-trunk to which they clung—he begged to be taken to the old oak-tree, the wood-nymph's home, to have its many beauties expounded to him. Accordingly the two, unnoticed by the napping Le Mesurier boys, set forth at so goodly a pace that at length Paul cried out in remonstrance, fearful lest such business-like locomotion should see them back to the starting-point within the space of a few minutes.

"Are you so hot?" Hazel asked pitifully. "How thoughtless of me! But I am quite cool—feel," and, craning her slender neck towards him, she tilted her head, that he might the more readily touch her soft cheek and thereby prove the truth of her assertion.

And Paul, nothing loth, delicately stroked the pink cheek once down to the pretty chin; nor durst he linger in the delicious contact, for the girl's spontaneity, bespeaking as it did liking for and trust in himself, however unconsciously bestowed, was as sweet as it was precious to the young man, and woe be to him if word or action of his should startle her voluntary friendship, should cause her to shrink within herself, away from him. Unspeakable happiness might one day be his, if he possessed his soul in patience, and fostered the pretty trust that might daily, all unknowingly, draw nearer, cling closer, till time should ripen friendship into a sweet consciousness, and he might pluck the beauteous flower and wear it for all eternity within his breast. In the meantime he would gratefully, thankfully, sun himself in her esteem.

"Beautifully cool," he murmured slowly. "But do not blame yourself," he went on. "I am not uncomfortably warm—only—it is rather a nice little walk—that is to say, I do not often have you to myself; I don't want to get back too soon."

"You find it companionable, just we two by ourselves," Hazel said ingenuously, by way of making explanation to the young man of his own hardly com-

prehended reasons for enjoyment.

"Yes," Paul said demurely, "I find it companionable."

"Thank you," Hazel returned politely. "I like it, too; though I am never happier than when I have all the five boys roaming about with me," she added, with blunt but perfect truth. "I suppose you don't remember much of Cecil and Guy?"

"I remember them perfectly," Paul averred. "Is it long since you saw them?"

"We have not seen Cecil for years—India is so far," she answered with a little sigh; "but Guy comes to Hazellhurst now and again for a day or two, once in two months or so. He is due now," she continued, "overdue—not having been here for nine weeks. It would be very convenient if he came just now—for money, you know. He always gives me money—generally two or three pounds—once as many as five. You see," she added, "I shall be obliged to spend that eightpence to-morrow."

"At what hour do you intend to—er—to go shopping?" Paul inquired eagerly. "I was wondering whether I might escort you, and help you to carry the—the parcels, you know."

Hazel laughed merrily. "Eightpence will only just buy a couple of peaches," she explained. "Perhaps only one, if they have gone back to sixpence each; and the fruiterer never lets me carry even that. He sends a man and a cart all this way, with it or them in a basket."

"But if I were with you," he protested, with much earnestness, "he would let me take it."

"I doubt it," Hazel said, still dimpling, "unless you disguised yourself beforehand. This is the tree," she broke off. "Come here—stand just so—now look up: that great fork, as you see, forms a broad, comfortable seat, the main trunk being its back. It is my house-place; the only really commodious apartment; and either of the great branches constitutes a couch, though the one on the left is the more comfortable. Higher up—stand a little more so—there are some snug little retreats, though I rarely sit there, as they are only the attics. I go up occasionally to see that no horrible spider is lurking about, but not to stay; for they are rather cramped and, as you see, in places the roof leaks and the shade is rather glaring. So I just get through my household duties as quickly as possible with that twig brush that you can see hanging against the trunk in the house-place, and come down again to my comfortable chair or couch to think or read. On Sundays I hold church to myself there."

"It is delightful, delicious," Paul averred, twisting and craning his neck in all the directions she indicated. "It is—it is heavenly. And the leaves are so thick as to give good shelter, even in hard rain," he added. "Do you ever receive visitors—other, I mean, than your pet birds and squirrels?"

"Hugh and Teddie come sometimes," she replied. "They sprawl along the two couches, while I take the chair. That is very nice, and perfectly comfortable, but once or twice they have all five wanted to come—so that three of them had to sit in the attics. Now, you see, even if they can manage to settle themselves fairly comfortably, it spoils the ease of those below to have them sitting up there, as their legs get rather in the way, swinging right down into the house-place, you know; for there are no couches in the attics, only broken-down chairs, so to say."

"The chair in the house-place looks wide enough for two," Paul observed consideringly.

"Ye—es," Hazel rejoined dubiously, "but it is not: the fork cramps you."

As the two sauntered back to the spot where the Le Mesurier boys had seemingly encamped for the remainder of the day, Mrs. Le Mesurier was entertaining a guest at Hazelhurst in the person of Mr. Hamilton, Teddie's late employer.

"I hope, madam, that in giving myself the pleasure of calling upon you, I have not taken too great a liberty," the courtly, elderly gentleman was saying. "My excuse must be my great liking for that young—that boy of yours, whom I am very eager to see re-established in my office, in pursuance of his former duties there."

"But, my dear sir," Helen interposed, cautioningly, "do you think it wise? That young man, who is, as I understand from my son, nicknamed Carrots—"

"Carrots is gone, madam," her guest interposed with a somewhat grim smile. "For months past I only awaited a good and fair excuse for discharging him, which that young—which your son's behaviour, madam, scarcely afforded me." Here Mr. Hamilton coughed, to hide another and far more genial smile. "Unfortunately for all concerned," he continued, "Samuel Smith was a most exemplary clerk, business-like"—Helen winced—"discreet, punctual to his work, good head for figures."

"My boy was punctual, I trust," Helen murmured, as Mr. Hamilton paused, feeling that of all this list of qualifications punctuality was the safest item to mention.

"Once in a blue moon, perhaps," returned Teddie's superior, "but let that pass. I like the boy, though he requires a sharp eye kept upon him, I can assure you, madam," he continued severely, resolutely checking a strong tendency on the part of his risible muscles to twitch. "He will have to make many promises of amendment for the future—reasonable ones enough, as I think you will admit."

"Mr. Hamilton," Helen interrupted gently, though somewhat proudly, "my son is not asking to be taken back. If you wish again to employ him," she added, after a pause, "I fear you must not hope to wring too many promises from him. He is so proud: it is in the Le Mesurier blood."

Mr. Hamilton shrewdly guessed that the maternal side also had bestowed the characteristic in question, but, being a wise man and a just, he saw and admitted the reasonableness of the gentle rebuff.

"Leave the boy in peace or, taking him, don't nag, you would say, madam," he replied, good-humouredly enough. "Well, I shall have him back if he will come. I have your permission?"

"I shall be very glad to know him once again safe with you," Helen replied graciously. "He is attached to you, and really felt leaving you. He bears you no grudge," she added, "owning that you could not have acted otherwise than you did, under the circumstances."

"Owned himself to be in the wrong, did he—the young scamp? I am glad to hear it. Attached to me, is he? I am fond of the boy myself. Had a son once, about his age—something of his spirit," and Mr. Hamilton turned away toward the window and blew his nose.

"Your only son?" Helen asked pitifully.

"My only child, ma'am," the old gentleman returned, somewhat brusquely. But she was not hurt by his manner, understanding him.

After further talk of Teddie and other subjects, Helen asked her guest to accompany her to the woods, where her daughter and three of her sons would presently congregate for tea. So together they set forth, Mr. Hamilton in open admiration of all they passed on the way.

In the meanwhile of Gerald, Hugh, and Teddie there is little to tell, unless it is of their dreams, which, to judge by the profound peace depicted upon their countenances, were of a beatific nature. For nigh upon two hours had they three lain thus wrapped in innocent, childlike slumber, the while their sister and Paul Charteris held low-toned converse together, somewhat apart; Paul, in his kindly consideration, deeming it a pity to disturb such blissful tranquillity.

"They had a hot walk this morning, poor fellows!" he said compassionately. "Let them rest."

But Miles had no such compunction, when, a while later, he made preparation for tea, with so much demonstration and clatter—quite at variance indeed with his usual noiseless motion and deft skill in the handling of such rattle- and jingle-begetting articles as cups, saucers, and spoons—that one by one, or rather pair by pair, the blue eyes of the Le Mesurier boys opened and blinked in the light of day, dazed at first somewhat, and blank as to expression, till by slow degrees dire wrath blazed up in their depths—direst in the pair owned by the peppery Teddie—as they fell upon the callous disturber of their peace, and the enormity of the offence began to dawn upon their reviving intellects.

"Hang it all, Miles," Teddie remonstrated, "can't a fellow close his eyes for five minutes without you must come and make such an outrageous row; and for

what?" he asked, with a comically injured voice and mien. "That we may feast our eyes on that wretched crockery for two hours and more."

"Yes, Miles," put in Gerald, somewhat more dignified in his sense of grievance, "whatever possesses you to bring out all those paraphernalia ten minutes after luncheon?"

"If it were not for your grey hairs, Miles," added Hugh severely, "you would just have to cart it all back again."

Miles chuckled. He also had indulged in a nap in this, his one free hour in the week, and knowing of its pleasures and of the pain of awakening; being, besides, greatly refreshed, he felt lenient towards his young masters for what he deemed the mere puerile irritation that sometimes besets the young on first being roused from sleep.

"I am arranging the *china*, Mr. Ted," he explained, with marked emphasis on the word *china*, in reproof of the reflection cast upon that valuable earthenware, "in compliance with my mistress's wish that tea should be served at four o'clock."

Hazel, who with Paul had been enjoying the foregoing dialogue, at this juncture interposed.

"You silly boys," she exclaimed, laughing merrily, "you have all been fast asleep. And you have had the narrowest possible escape of being surprised by a stranger," she added, looking down one of the pathways leading from the house. "See, who is it, coming with mother?"

The whole party followed the direction of her gaze, to behold their mother accompanied by an elderly gentleman, inclined to portliness, wearing a short, iron-grey beard and moustache. Teddie, rubbing his eyes to observe the more surely, presently gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"Great Scott!" he remarked briefly, and rose uncertainly to his feet.

Slowly the two approached, conversing as they came. By the time they reached the little party, that had risen to receive them, Teddie had completely recovered himself, and, by right of acquaintanceship, advanced to greet his mother's guest.

"Hallo, Mr. Hamilton, this is a surprise," he said cordially, holding out a friendly hand. "I am glad to see you."

Mr. Hamilton took the proffered hand, and stood regarding the lanky youth's honest countenance for some moments before he spoke.

"Thank you, Le Mesurier," he said, with twinkling eyes; "I hope you won't be less glad when I tell you what occasions my visit. The truth is I am short-handed, young Smith having left me—" He paused and hesitated.

"Is that 'the Lout?'" asked Hazel, who was listening wide-eyed. "Oh, Teddie, then you could go back."

"My sister," said Teddie, shortly, formally. "Hazel, you should not interrupt."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she said, turning a pair of penitent brown eyes on Mr. Hamilton. "I—I was so pleased, you know."

"Not at all, my dear young lady," he returned, somewhat drily, half incensed, half amused, to note that this lovely girl also, like the mother, seemed to consider all coaxing and persuading in the matter due and necessary to the independent Teddie. "Not at all; but may I inquire what it was you asked?"

"If 'young Smith' was 'the Lout,'" Hazel replied, blushing.

"I did not know him by that name," Mr. Hamilton replied, smiling in spite of himself; "but I dare say it is the same person—the epithet is not inapposite. Well, Le Mesurier," he continued, "what do you say? Like another trial, eh? But, mind, you must keep your ink-pot in your desk; and there must be no further need of raw steaks in my office—it is not a butcher's shop, you know. Is that a bargain?"

"That's all right," Teddie responded laconically. "Well, Mr. Hamilton, I'll come back; but there is one little thing I'd like to mention—a little hint to help to keep the peace. If you would not mind being a trifle more particular in the future as to the society one works with in your office."

Mr. Hamilton gasped.

"Then that is all right," Teddie said comfortably, "and I, for my part, will try to keep my temper, which, to be sure, is a bit hot when roused; though nothing can be sweeter," he added earnestly, "when people do their best, in a reasonable sort of way—I don't ask too much—to please me."

Mr. Hamilton mechanically received a cup of tea from Hugh's hand, and looked from him to Helen somewhat helplessly.

"Ted," Helen interposed, a little reproachfully, "you must expect to take your chance as to companions. And pray, of what credit is it to you to keep your temper if it is never tried—if you are never tempted to lose it?"

"I don't *ask* any credit, mother," her son answered, smiling affectionately upon her. "It merely struck me as a pity, being naturally, as I have said, particularly sweet, to rouse it unnecessarily."

It was now Helen's turn to look helpless.

"But you will thank Mr. Hamilton for his kind offer?" she asked, taking the hand as well as the cup that he brought to the little table, for more tea.

"As to that," Teddie replied genially, "he and I are good enough friends, and fully understand each other; don't we?" he added, turning to Mr. Hamilton, who, his sense of irritation completely subsided, was looking immensely entertained.

"Yes, yes," he responded warmly, "we are good friends, my dear boy."

Teddie looked gratified, and, asking to be allowed to present his two brothers and his friend, Paul Charteris, who were congregated somewhat in the background, the conversation became more general.

Hazel, seated near to Mr. Hamilton, took occasion to study him as closely as politeness would permit. So this was the redoubted Mr. Hamilton, Teddie's dreaded "boss," whom Hazel had held to be the most imposing of men. She had once entertained the thought of addressing a letter to him, in Teddie's behalf, but had abandoned the idea as too fearful. So this was he, this kindly looking elderly man, who from time to time threw her glances of much benignity and interest, and who called Teddie his dear boy. What could Teddie have been thinking of, to have made of him such a *bête noire*? There was, to be sure, at times, a certain severity about the mouth, but the eyes were always kind, the girl thought. If she could but summon the spirit to engage him in talk concerning her own private affairs! Of a surety he would be a most likely person to help her; for was he not an eminent "City man," living in the very thick of that City life of which she, Hazel, knew so little, yet thought so much? Perhaps, even, he was born and bred there, and was as much at his ease, as much at home in its murky atmosphere, among its imperial buildings, as she was here, in her beloved woods. How wonderful to walk the City, the dear, grand City, as he did; to wend one's way through a very labyrinth of courts, alleys, and byways, never to lose oneself, to know one's whereabouts always, as she knew the woods, blindfolded!

Hazel's chin was in her hand, her elbow supported on her knee, and her eyes grew round and deeply reverential as she lost herself in the contemplation of this being from another sphere. The magnetic influence of her gaze presently drew Mr. Hamilton's eyes to meet hers, but so gently did he turn, so quietly did they fall upon her, that the girl was not startled from her reverie, but continued to gaze in reverence, whilst an eager questioning grew up in her speaking eyes.

"You were wishing to say something, my dear?" he asked kindly, and with a sudden impulsive tenderness, new to him, he laid a broad hand upon the girl's brown head.

Hazel hesitated, then glanced about her. Her brothers were engaged for the moment in some discussion together, her mother in interested listening. Paul Charteris, certainly, was observing herself, and, being nearest, would catch her words; but she did not mind Paul: he would not interfere. She even gave him a little smile—an invitation to attend, should he care to do so.

"I know that you do not keep lady clerks," she began, with gentle, confidential eagerness, "but have you ever thought of changing your mind?"

Mr. Hamilton looked his amazement.

"I should like to be one very much," she continued, "most of all yours; and I was wondering whether, supposing you could get two good, serviceable clerks from the same house—people that you knew something of and could rely upon—it would not be worth your while to alter your rule and have a lady."

Mr. Hamilton's eyes encountered those of Paul Charteris for one moment—

a moment charged with sympathy, pregnant with feeling—and both men endeavoured to conceal their amusement by pulling at their moustaches.

"Do I understand that by 'two serviceable clerks' you refer to yourself and your brother Edward?" asked Mr. Hamilton, when he had sufficiently recovered himself.

"Yes," Hazel replied cheerfully. "I am much more business-like than I appear—Teddie you already know. I am not saying that the advantage would be all on your side," she went on, "only, naturally I like to think of you first. The advantage to me would be very great; indeed, if you don't take me, I am afraid I shall have to give up the idea altogether, because mother is very particular in her wish that I should not travel or walk alone. Now this arrangement"—and the girl made an airy gesture with her hand in her brother's direction—"would give me Teddie's company from door to door; and if on occasion, say a press of work, he could not take me to lunch, you would see that another clerk went with me, wouldn't you?" and she looked to Paul for sympathy in so congenial a plan.

"I certainly should be very much tempted to make an exception to my rule, if by doing so you would honour me by coming daily to my office," Mr. Hamilton responded gallantly; "but, my dear young lady, with all these brothers, there cannot be the slightest necessity for—"

"Oh, no necessity," Hazel interposed. "Just for pocket-money, you know, and—and to feel that I am doing my part."

"But," suggested Paul quietly, "is it not the part of an only and much-beloved daughter to stay at home, to be a companion to her mother, and to make home a bright and happy place for the workers to come to?"

"I should not be much with mother, certainly," Hazel said reflectively; "but, as to the boys, why, I should be home when they were."

"Apart from the—er—inadvisability on several scores," Mr. Hamilton resumed, smiling kindly at the girl, "your mother could never spare you, my child; an only daughter must be an unspeakable treasure—one that she must always wish to keep near her. And—pardon me if I seem amused at what I see you take so seriously—but, it is not conceivable; one cannot imagine you in the City."

In which sentiment Paul appeared to participate.

"That is what they all say," Hazel rejoined, somewhat mournfully. "Well," she added, more cheerfully, "to stay with her, I suppose, is doing something for

mother.”

CHAPTER VII

Upon a day—a Tuesday, to be specific—there passed into the gates of Hazelhurst a smart trap, drawn at a smart pace by a smart horse, the smart equipage being impelled by the smart mental qualifications of Digby Travers, dubbed ”Greeky.” The turn-out was really remarkably smart; the trap itself, with its polished wood-work and brass appointments, glistened and shone in the sunlight, whilst the gleam of the plated harness was reflected in the glossy coat of the well-groomed quadruped.

Paul Charteris had for the space of a whole hour waited and watched in the marble hall of Hazelhurst, his restless pacing only relieved by occasional halts at the foot of the stairway that led—well, to the rooms above, and to Hazel’s chamber, that numbered, naturally enough, among the rest. His vigil began at precisely one minute to ten, and the ancient grandfather’s clock was even now tremulously clearing its throat with wheezy, whirring sound, suggestive of asthma, preparatory to striking eleven. Truth to tell, it was only with considerable effort that the clock could strike at all, its general feebleness being the more marked since undergoing a very severe operation, not too skilfully performed, by Teddie Le Mesurier, wherein the whole of the worn internal mechanism was taken to pieces and subjected to the hardy treatment—better suited to the constitution of younger clocks—of oil and emery-paper, the massage being administered with no light hand. Furthermore, there was a strong misgiving in the minds of all but Teddie himself as to whether there was not some flaw in the reconstruction of the clock. But the boy was sensitive upon the point, and easily hurt, so that it was only by furtive glances in its direction that the family ever dared to manifest anxiety when sounds, more dubious than ordinary, seemed to suggest that each struggle to give expression to the time of day must surely be the last.

The eleven laboured strokes were just completed when the sound of wheels fell upon Paul’s ear. He withdrew his patient gaze from the direction of the remote sanctum above and turned to look uneasily through the arched doorway, to see Travers’s trap pull up before it. At the same moment Hazel appeared at the head of the staircase, flushed and important, dragging at an enormous trunk. Paul sprang to her aid, and, bracing every muscle for a mighty effort, nearly overbal-

anced himself, as the trunk responded to his exertions with the most unexpected and discomposing readiness, being in truth of that light consistency known as wickerwork, and covered with black leather; nor was it one quarter part full.

"Why, it's nearly empty!" he exclaimed in triumphant tone, for the fact argued well for the shortness of the proposed visit.

"Nearly empty!" Hazel cried, indignant, "and I have been nearly an hour packing! There are two or three changes of ribbons, and two pairs of shoes, besides what I am wearing, and my best muslin that has just been 'got up,' and must not be crushed, Mrs. Doidge says. I wonder if you would mind going to the horse's head. Digby is waiting to come in," she broke off, as a prolonged whistle was heard from without.

Digby Travers, shading his eyes from the glare, could just discern a man's form, which he supposed by its occupation of trunk-bearer to be that of a servant. Paul, eager to fulfil the little lady's slightest behest, safely deposited his burden near the entrance, and presented himself before the surprised and somewhat disconcerted Travers.

"I—would you be so very good as to mind the horse while I look for a servant?" Digby stammered. "I have come to take Miss Le Mesurier back with me," he added, a suggestion of defiance marking look and tone as he encountered the nascent hostility of the other's glance.

Paul felt resentment in that young Travers should make use of so formal an appellation in naming the girl, knowing well that for years—from earliest childhood—the two had been Hazel and Digby to one another. The formality was for *him*, then—for *his* benefit: that he might the more readily comprehend, once and for all, his exact position toward the Le Mesurier family in general, and toward Hazel in particular. He was to understand that he was not accounted friend of the family in the astute eyes of this old and staunch, if somewhat proprietary, ally of the house of Le Mesurier. Yet, with complete though not unnatural inconsistency, Paul in his heart of hearts knew, and, knowing, owned, that the mention of the girl's Christian name would have been quite as distasteful to him.

"Why did you not bring a man with you?" he asked, striving to speak with polite indifference. "But perhaps you are not aware how shorthanded Mrs. Le Mesurier is. There is only one servant here, old Miles, and—well, it stands to reason, he is always busy."

Digby stared politely.

"My name is Travers," he said at length, ingenuously; as who shall say, "Now that I have put aside any doubt as to my identity, you will be spared the trouble of making further communication concerning the Le Mesuriers." "You are Charteris—Paul Charteris," he continued. "I remember your face quite well, though it is ages since we met. Thanks, awfully, for looking to the horse, but

I must find Miles to help me up with that trunk," and he eyed with complacent regard the black, dome-topped object just discernible in the shadow of the hall.

"It is very light," Paul returned, not ill pleased to volunteer the information, "Do you know where Miles is?" he asked of Hazel, who appeared at that moment, framed in the great arched doorway—and a very pretty picture she made.

Digby sprang to her, and Paul groaned inwardly as he marked the fervour of the young man's greeting, albeit he found comfort in noting the girl's cool reception of, and most inadequate response to, the same; for she withdrew her hand from the devout clasp that held it, so soon as the orthodox number of moments to be devoted to that ceremony was ended. Nor did her eyes rest upon his face longer than the one direct look—of Hazel's peculiar directness—that kindly interest and innate courtesy alike dictated.

"Why didn't you bring some one with you?" she asked, somewhat severely. "It is not very polite to oblige Mr. Charteris to stand in the sun."

"There was the luggage," faltered Digby. "There was not much room, you know."

He glanced sheepishly at Paul, but there was understanding without sympathy to be read in Paul's countenance; and young Travers inwardly dubbed this old acquaintance and near neighbour of the Le Mesuriers, hard and callous of disposition.

"Well, I'll hold the horse," Hazel said, descending the steps and taking the bridle from Paul's hand, "and perhaps you two would not mind lifting up the trunk. It is not so heavy as it looks."

This matter dexterously accomplished, Digby Travers got to his seat again, expecting Paul to help Hazel to her allotted place, frankly eager to be gone. He was somewhat taken aback when the girl, who had disappeared for the space of a few moments, returned with an enormous umbrella of sombre green hue, which she opened with some difficulty, and proffered to him with both hands, gravely matter-of-fact.

"I shall not be long," she announced, "but I want to see mother again before we start, and—and I did not know Mr. Charteris had called. You don't mind, do you?" she added, "It is rather heavy, but the stick is so tall that you can rest the handle on the seat beside you if you take your hat off, and, though ugly, it casts a cool and restful light."

So saying she re-entered the house, followed by Paul, leaving poor Digby disconsolate beneath an extensive shade; so extensive, indeed, that though noon-day was approaching and the sun was high in the heavens, the quadruped also enjoyed the benefit of it, over its hind quarters, well to its middle.

"Have you been here long?" Hazel asked of her companion, as the two paused in the hall, at the foot of the stairway.

The girl's usually bright spirit was clouded for the moment. A while since all had been bustle and excitement—she had made her small plans and arrangements with much of interest and ardour—had packed her small wardrobe with a keen sense of anticipatory pleasure. There had been something of the stirring nature of the heroic in yesterday's farewells to the elongated Monday faces of her brothers; and her tender solicitude was not unmixed with youthful elation at the thought that her mother would miss her right sorely. Now, of a sudden, all this seemed changed. Without doubt or question, she did not want to go, and the vague consciousness that Paul did not wish it either, that he too would miss her, did not tend to lift the girl's despondency; for she was tender, true, and pure womanly, and, being so, knew nothing of the malicious joy of that perversity wherein so many of Eve's daughters delight.

She sank down upon the first stair, rather listlessly, and looked to Paul for his answer.

"An hour," he said, "when you appeared. But Hazel," he added commiseratingly, "you have tired yourself over all that packing. Could not one of the maids have done it?"

"I am not tired, thank you," she answered absently, "at least, I do not think I am."

Paul did not look satisfied. The girl was pale, and the small hands, usually nervous-looking and energetic, lay limp before her.

"I am sorry," she continued, "I did not know. Miles could not have known, or he would have sent us a message. You must have been very dull."

"I wanted *you*, of course," Paul admitted truthfully, "but I would not have had you disturbed. I ought not to have expected more of your company than the few minutes you could give me on leave-taking."

So saying, Paul Charteris seated himself beside her upon the broad, shallow step, and possessed himself of one of the passive hands.

"What have you been doing?" he asked gently.

Hazel regarded the captive hand, or rather its prison, but her thoughts were not of it.

"Mr. Charteris," she said, timidly lifting her eyes to his, as with an effort she decided to speak her mind, "do you think—would it be very odd, if I sat behind in the phaeton, with—with the trunk, you know? Do you suppose Digby would mind, or think me very rude?"

"He would have no right to object," Paul answered warmly, pleased that she had appealed to him. "If he annoys you, he cannot expect better treatment."

"But that is my trouble," she explained, disengaging her hand to take up and fondle a fluffy ball of a kitten. "He only annoys me by being too nice. So it seems unkind to feel annoyed. If only one could sit with one's back to the horse

for fear of draughts and smuts," she went on, "as one would, with one's back to an engine! I want to sit so that he cannot look into my face every time that he says anything."

Paul hastily removed his eyes from her countenance. "Just so," he said, "very naturally." But, though indignant on the girl's behalf, he felt he could not justly blame Digby Travers for this.

"And everything he says has two or more meanings," Hazel continued impatiently. "Now, when *you* say, 'Is it not a glorious day?' you mean: is it not a glorious day?" She paused.

"And what does Digby mean?" Paul asked quietly, the while feeling he should like to demand the answer from Travers himself.

"I don't quite know," Hazel answered, troubled. "He seems to think that he and I have reasons for thinking it much more glorious than other people. But I must go up to mother," she added, rising, "I cannot keep him waiting long, and—and I feel better, now that I have told you."

Left to himself, Paul paced up and down in deep thought. Did not Hazel's confidence in him authorise him to speak to young Travers? Yet no; Digby would not admit the authority—would ask a much greater right than that of a friend—nay, of a mere acquaintance, as he would probably pronounce Paul, who in the jealousy of his heart sought to keep others from the girl's side, to take away from him, Digby Travers, and from all men other than himself, Paul Charteris, the natural right of trying for, and the gladsome chance of obtaining, the affections of Hazel Le Mesurier. No, he must let matters take their course. He could but advise the girl to cut short her visit, should she suffer any discomfort more marked than heretofore. He would remind her that it was not incumbent upon her to put up with any discomfort whatsoever—that she need not consider herself selfish, or fear that she was wanting in strength to endure, for wishing to return home, and in acting upon that wish; for in such wise, he knew, would Hazel take herself to task: she would resist such weakness, as she would deem it, with all the power of her strong little nature—suffering much, that others should not suffer little, as was her wont. He would counsel her to tell her mother of Digby's importunities, should they become difficult to her own management, or trouble her unduly.

Soon! ah, soon, he might win the right to shield her himself—Paul's pulses stirred at the thought, his heart warmed within him—the right of lover and true knight. Soon, soon. As yet she was a trustful, affectionate child, at an age when a few months only of patient waiting, of wholesome self-restraint, might see her blossom into a loving woman, forced thereto by the very strength and warmth of his unspoken love, even as a bud expands to a flower in the eloquent ardour of perpetual and encompassing sunshine, however mute and unvoiced that sunshine perforce must be.

As he thus mused, Hazel came down again in greatly recovered spirits; for Helen had guessed more of that which disturbed her child's peace of mind than the girl herself could have told her, or had acknowledged even to herself; and with loving tact had soothed her as only a mother can.

"Don't stay away longer than you like, dearie," she had concluded, "and Hazel, you would not wish that your motherling should not miss you, or that the boys and Paul should be pleased to have you gone? They will all be glad to have you back, and will appreciate you more than ever," she added playfully, her heart telling her that there was no need of further appreciation on the part of Mr. Paul Charteris, Paul had not heard Hazel's light step upon the stair, so that she reached the hall and stood confronting him before he knew of her presence.

"I am going now," she said. "Good-bye."

He took the outstretched hand and looked into the upturned eyes.

"You have not been troubling for me," she added anxiously, "about Digby? He is very nice to me, and I don't really mind him—I thought I did, but it was mostly because I did not want to go. I—I don't like leaving mother, you know." So saying, the small hand wrung his, and withdrew itself.

The two then proceeded together across the threshold and down the steps; and, if hard upon the little victim, it was even harder upon him who led her to the sacrifice.

CHAPTER VIII

Comfort, solid comfort, best describes The Beeches, its inmates, and all appertaining to it and them. Solid comfort without luxury, ease without laziness, happiness without a positively cloying sweetness.

John Travers was not handsome, but comfortable-looking; his figure, perhaps, was becoming a thought too comfortable; but then John Travers was fifty-five, and plenty had been his lot for nigh upon eightfold of the proverbial seven years that go to make plenty a really established fact. Then, too, he gave way, perhaps somewhat injudiciously, to a liking for white waistcoats and rather large and conspicuous watch-chains.

Of Elizabeth Travers, his wife, little need be told in description, for much is learned of her ways and days in twenty-four hours. That she, too, was comfortable need hardly be said; else John, who was a devoted husband, would not

have been so. But she was not in the least too comfortable to be a fitting wife for John Travers, or the truly motherly mother of his children. For surely a broad breast is the natural haven for young heads, when wearied of the very fulness of the joys of childhood, or stricken with its tragic, if fleeting griefs.

John and Elizabeth Travers had two sons and two daughters. What could be more comfortable than that? Is not "two of each" in all good things the very acme of satisfaction and contentment? The children themselves were comfortable, considering their years; for if ever there is a period more devoted than another to strange misgivings, fervent hopes, and acute sensibilities, that period is youth; and none of these characteristics can be said to be "comfortable" ones.

Digby, their first-born, now twenty-three years of age, and a student at Oxford, was enjoying the long vacation under the comfortable parental roof-tree. Of Francis, the second son, aged nineteen, was to be made what is known as a gentleman farmer—an ever-increasing interest in the somewhat laborious pursuits of tilling, ploughing, sowing, and harvesting, not to mention a love of animals, making apparent at a very early age the bent of the boy's mind. That he had not Digby's intellect was obvious to those who knew both brothers; but that Francis was going to do very well in his own line was everybody's opinion. His enthusiasm for all bucolic pursuits, together with a keen—no, not a keen; there was nothing keen about Francis—together with a good, sound judgment of all things connected with them, was marked. If his eye lacked quick observation or keen appreciation, as it lighted on some matter of interest or beauty, it was steady, honest, trustworthy, and not without a certain shrewdness. And it were hard upon him to criticise the tendency of lip to part with lip; for there was nothing of weakness or indecision about the large, well-cut mouth, which could close firmly enough at such times when depth of thought or concentration of mind were required of him. Rather should the characteristic be looked upon as the natural consequence of open-air labour, of a nature that demands more oxygen than can in reason be expected to find its way to the lungs by the nasal channel alone; if the fact that to one who frequently studies the sky for signs of changes of weather with the long, earnest scrutiny bestowed by Francis Travers, was not in itself explanation enough for an oftentimes open mouth.

The daughters, Doris and Phyllis, aged sixteen and twelve years, were slim, fair-haired maidens. Doris, the elder, looked upon life with grave eyes, seeing only its serious side, and determinedly facing that aspect with resolute lips and somewhat pale cheeks, quaint and demure. Phyllis, on the other hand, while in no way boisterous—sharing, indeed, in some part her sister's quietude of mind and demeanour—was rosily cheerful and a thorough child. It was quaint Doris's aim to keep her thus; and odd it was to note the enforcement of the staid authority which the slender four years of seniority gave to the girl in the absence of their

mother, or of their governess, Miss Manifold.

Miss Manifold—nicknamed "Sins and Wickedness" by Hugh and Teddie Le Mesurier—the daughter of a Lincolnshire squire, long since deceased, was a good woman, well liked by her two pupils, whose well-being she had sincerely at heart. At the present moment she was absent from The Beeches, being once more returned into the bosom of her family for the Midsummer holidays. This fact, meaning as it did freedom of will and action, combined with the pleasing circumstance that Hazel Le Mesurier's impending visit was about to be realised, brought much rejoicing to the girls; for even sober Doris was not impervious to the delights of a few weeks' unrestricted leisure, nor unmindful of the advantages of living for that short interval without the eye of supervision upon her every movement.

She and Phyllis were, for the fourth time this morning, taking a survey of the bedroom that had been allotted to their girl-guest—moving, changing, and rearranging articles of furniture or ornament to suit Hazel's queer taste and odd fancy. The bed they had dragged before one of the windows, for Hazel had once confided to these two friends that she liked nothing better than to sleep with her head pillowed on the sill; only that it was not often that bed and sill chanced to stand in the necessary relative position one to the other. Also the bed must needs be wide enough to permit the full stretch of her limbs, when she had twisted herself to this crosswise position. She assured Doris and Phyllis that to gaze up at the stars until you fell asleep was conducive to the dreaming of the most lovely dreams, whilst the soft fanning of the summer night-air proved most pleasant and refreshing.

"And what if it rains?" her breathless auditors had asked.

"That is nice, too, in its way," Hazel had made answer. "But once," she added ruefully, "when I was sleeping so, I was so sound asleep that it did not wake me until my hair was drenched, and I had to get up and rub it with a towel for nearly two hours."

"How your arms must have ached," Doris said, eyeing the heavy brown mane, half in admiration, half in pity.

"And I was so sleepy," Hazel continued, "that every time I stopped to rest my arms a moment I found myself nodding, with the towel in my lap."

"Didn't you have a bad cold the next day?" Phyllis asked.

"No, I never catch cold," Hazel answered. "It is being so much in the open air, I suppose."

The dressing-table, too, was never to block a window and obscure the view in Hazel's room; and there must always be flowers upon it. Having ascertained that all was to her liking, Phyllis and Doris fared forth to the garden gate, rightly judging that, had their brother found Hazel ready to accompany him, the two

must long ere this have made their appearance.

It was a pretty view that stretched away before The Beeches. As they stood at the entrance gate, which faced the road, the girls looked upon a wide, sunny tract of undulating common ground, ablaze with yellow gorse. Trending toward the west in long dark line was a ridge of fir-trees sharply defined and almost black against the even blue of the sky, but merging into soft and softer gradations of consistency and colour on the wood's southern extremity, its outline finally well-nigh lost in a mist of feathery larches. To the east was a low range of hills with brown, thatched, and red-tiled cottages and farmhouses dotted at intervals at its base, whilst a rivulet that flowed past the Travers's estate, forming indeed the boundary on its right flank, wended its way in and out, twisting and twining, a white ribbon shot with sunlight, till lost to sight in the valley.

And there, round the bend came the trap. Hazel, perched high, her hands encased in Digby Travers's thick gloves, was driving, to her own evident delight and self-importance, having successfully eluded her companion's practically demonstrated teaching by declaring that she did not care what was the orthodox way of manipulating the reins; that she and the horse understood one another well enough.

Hazel was delighted with her room, and had no suggestions to offer respecting any change in the position of its furniture. Everything was perfect, she frankly told her gratified friends. Her quick eye had lighted upon a tiny escritoire standing in one corner, and a thought flashed into her mind, an idea as novel to her as it was pleasing. She grasped the delightful idea, seized upon it, and stowed it carefully away in a corner of her brain, until such time as she should have leisure to look into the alluring possibilities it suggested—to cogitate without fear of interruption.

Just now, with very active assistance from Doris and Phyllis, Hazel was removing the dust of travel from her person.

When the three girls descended to the dining-room for luncheon, they found the rest of the family already there assembled; and Hazel received a warm kiss from the motherly Mrs. Travers, whilst Mr. Travers took her right hand, and Francis possessed himself of her left; Doris and Phyllis hovered about her; Digby looked on approvingly. Having been thus duly welcomed and received into the bosom of the family, Hazel, as the party seated themselves around the table, addressed herself to Francis.

"Well, farmer," she said, with *bonne camaraderie*, "and how are the crops?"

"They are coming on all right," he replied, somewhat sheepishly. He liked Hazel; but considered her a terrible little tease. She had always laughed at his manner of walking, declaring that he swayed backwards and forwards, as a sailor will roll from side to side.

"It comes of always imagining that you are stepping over ploughed furrows," she told him, "just as a horse is trained to step high by having obstacles put in his way."

"And the live stock?" she went on.

"Flourishing, thank you," he returned.

"Hens sitting?" she asked. "And oh, Francis, did that baby pig learn to grunt properly, the one that loved wallowing in the mire?"

But here her hostess claimed the girl's attention, and Francis settled himself to the business in hand—luncheon—inwardly resolving to be even with Hazel yet.

The day passed pleasantly enough, resting with books and work in the shade during the afternoon, walking through the sunlit meadows when the heat of the day was subsiding. In the evening the young folk entertained each other with music, Hazel singing some quaint songs in her own way—an adorable little way in the opinion of Paul Charteris, an opinion shared to-night most fervently by Digby Travers.

Soon after ten o'clock Hazel found herself alone at last, with hours before her, supposing she could manage to keep awake, for meditation upon the scheme that had come to her at sight of the little writing-table. Her own room at home did not boast such a convenience, and it is to be presumed that the publicity of the position of the few desks and escritaires about the house had prevented the idea from occurring to Hazel's mind before.

She would write a story—a thrilling, exciting story—and make all the money she could possibly want! Here, all alone in the undisturbed quiet of her own room, she would write diligently, and her week's visit might result in half-a-dozen stories for Teddie to take to some editor!

Hazel was perturbed by no fear that she might lack talent and ability, but it was not long before she perceived that she was mistaken in the amount of work that she could accomplish in so short a time. She wisely refrained from installing herself at the desk that night, thinking that she could not do better in these first hours, while all was exciting and new in this plan of work, than get to bed as quickly as possible, and devote an hour or two to the evolving of a plot, and to the construction of her first story, before sleep should come upon her.

So far from thinking it hard to conjure up matter upon which to base her tale, the difficulty seemed to lie in the fact that she must perforce write only one at a time, if she wished to be conscientious and systematic. All through the washing of her face and hands, and the brushing of her hair, mechanically performed, her head was teeming with all manner of stirring incidents, which rose up in her imagination, refusing to be placed in any nice order of sequence; inconsistent with one another; contending together—obviously "copy" for many stories of widely different natures.

"And then there is my style," the would-be authoress reflected, as she sank down at length among the pillows. "I wonder what my style will be: whether I have to find one—to settle upon one of many—or whether a particular one will come to me of itself."

And this was as far as Hazel got that first night.

CHAPTER IX

Hazel was awakened next morning by an unaccustomed sound that seemed for some time to have penetrated her sleep-wrapped senses, without rousing them to full consciousness. She lay still, and listened with all her ears; but there was no renewal of the disturbance, and she was about to compose herself to sleep—the clock upon the mantel-shelf telling her she might do so for another half-hour—when the unwonted strains began again. They were not those of a donkey braying, nor of a horse whinnying, nor of a cock crowing, but of a young man singing.

It was not a very tuneful performance, but it was most fervently and expressively rendered; and Hazel, as it dawned upon her that she was the subject of the morning serenade, hearkened with very mixed emotions.

"I suppose he *considers* it serenading," she said to herself; and she experienced a feeling of importance, intermingled with awe. "I thought they had gone out of fashion," she meditated. "Certainly they have in England: I suppose Digby's continental trips have given him foreign notions."

I stand at your window sighing
 As the weary hours go by,
 And the time is slowly dying

"Horribly," Hazel's reflections broke in. "Why don't you hurry up, or get some one to mark it for you?"

That once too quick did fly.

"What a good thing that he has not a guitar! It would make a dreadful jumble.

You need not wail so, if the pain I have caused you is so exquisite," she apostrophised the anguished lover; and scorn took possession of her. "If you were a cat, one would pour water on you. I am not sure if one would not be justified in thinking you were a cat," and her eyes sparkled with fun and mischief.

Despite the foreign notions laid to his charge, the young man's sense of the fitness of things kept him from standing long under one window in particular, even while the beauty of the flowering shrub beneath the guest-chamber gave excuse for a somewhat lingering gait in passing; so that it was only now and again that Hazel caught a connected line or two of the impassioned refrain; while his sisters, not to mention his father and mother, were regaled with a goodly, if not quite with an even share, till Francis thrust a betoused head from his window and asked his brother to "stow it," a request which caused the disconsolate Digby to wander farther from the house, and to break into fresh melody among the trees that skirted the lawn.

Hazel had unexpected good fortune, in that the morning was passed in almost uninterrupted silence; for, breakfast over, Mr. Travers and his sons furnished themselves with fishing-tackle and, begging the girls to join the expedition and witness sport, the party made their way down to the river side and were soon ranged along its near bank. Hazel was not long in seizing the opportunity thus offered, and was soon lost in her own reflections.

Her mind was quieter now than last night, when, in the first hours of possessing the exciting idea of a scheme of action so congenial to her, all had been pleasurable turmoil. Now she could think more connectedly, could shape her thoughts to some end. She wisely resolved to leave style alone—at all events at first—until she had ascertained for a fact that the style which came naturally to her was poor. She would be careful concerning grammar, but she had always detested the sight of the outside cover of books upon the subject, and so far as she could remember, had never opened one.

She set up an imaginary stage in her mind, bringing her characters one by one to bow before her, and to ask modestly whether they would please her; what relations they were to bear one to another; what influence life upon life. Then the grouping must be pleasingly harmonious or disturbingly discordant: there must be nothing tame nor indifferent about her work.

"We need not be so absolutely dumb," Digby Travers murmured, and Hazel awoke with a start. "I'd rather lose all the fish, if catching it can only be accomplished by not talking to you, or not hearing you talk."

"Hush," Hazel rejoined. "The others don't feel like that, and besides," she added truthfully, "I want to think."

"Oh, well," the young man returned, in a somewhat injured tone, "that is another thing, of course"; and he continued his occupation in gloomy silence,

the while Hazel resumed her thread of cogitation. Presently she began to realise that she must be simpler and more methodical in her ideas—less profound. After all, she was not undertaking the writing of a book. Let her conjure up some pretty little story, and write it carefully and faithfully—perhaps the pathos and the humour would take care of themselves.

That night, in the seclusion of her own room, she set to work, in a fever of energy and fervent purpose. She had gone upstairs at ten, but it was nigh upon one o'clock when the girl at length extinguished her light and laid her down to rest. Even then sleep did not come to her quickly, for her brain was thoroughly roused and excited.

Three evenings devoted to this work sufficed to complete her story, and on the fourth, after carefully revising her work, she proceeded to write it out neatly, and the result of her labour was to her own entire satisfaction.

Anticipating the certainty of having all in readiness before she slept, she had, during the day, addressed a letter to Teddie asking him to meet her in town next morning, which epistle she directed to his lodging; for she felt the urgency of completing all such arrangements from her friends' house, wishing as she did to keep all secret until such time as she could ask for sympathy in her disappointment, or for congratulations in her success.

She had little difficulty in gaining the consent of Mrs. Travers to this expedition. She did not deem it necessary to take her kind hostess wholly into her confidence: Mrs. Travers was satisfied with the girl's assurance that her mother would not object to what she was about to do, provided Teddie was with her, and good-naturedly acquiesced in her entreaty that she might be allowed to keep her little secret from every one but the brother, whose aid was essential in the completion of her business.

The following day, immediately after the morning meal, hugging her precious manuscript, she was driven to the station in the company of the four young Traverses, all of whom warmly insisted upon seeing her off. The frame of mind into which these four friends had been thrown, owing to her unwonted demeanour and most mysterious silence concerning this expedition, may be easily imagined. Doris and Phyllis were openly and frankly curious, with that feminine curiosity that knows no concealment; nor did they cease in their endeavours to worm Hazel's secret from her, resorting at length to stratagem, in the hope that the girl, if caught for a moment off her guard, might yet be led into revealing the cause of her mission.

"Teddie will meet this train," was all she would say, "and perhaps you will be kind enough to meet the one arriving here at 3.50," and she turned to the taciturn Digby.

Digby Travers was much more to be pitied than either his sisters or Fran-

cis: the latter being genuinely amused, and inclined to chaff Hazel, nor was he troubled one whit with the restless curiosity that beset the girls, or the sense of grievance that lurked in the bosom of his brother. For Digby felt himself to be deeply injured. It is true that he had not, like the others, deliberately asked Hazel to tell him her reason for running up to town: he would not urge her to confide in him, but he was hurt that she did not volunteer the explanation of her movements, at all events to him, even if she wished the matter to remain secret from the others. Hazel was partially aware of the state of his feelings, and looked to see him brighten at her proposal, but the gloom did not lift from Digby's countenance.

"As you like," he made answer, with would-be nonchalance. "Either I or Francis—or the man, if we are prevented."

And then Hazel's eyes were opened, figuratively and actually, and she gazed upon him for some moments in mute wonder and some little distress. While he spoke and acted like the Digby she had known so long, her suspicions were not aroused, her mind being fully occupied with managing him—smoothing the little difficulties that his importunities caused her, keeping him at arm's length instinctively, all unconscious that she was doing so, or that there was any need to do so. But now the situation began to dawn upon her. While he remained attentive to all her little needs and wishes, displaying an odd admixture of slavish devotion and proprietary authority, such as had characterised his attitude towards her so long as she could remember—for even the rough school-boy had lorded it over the very small maiden—she had taken it all as a matter of course—as Digby's "way." For tenderness, shame-faced at first, had crept in so imperceptibly, so gradually supplanting the old rough-and-ready affection; and the old boyish, somewhat overbearing and dictatorial manner had by such gentle degrees given place to another sort of proprietariness, that these things seemed to have grown with his growth; and the girl, beyond an occasional sense of annoyance at such times, when Digby appeared rather trying and more difficult to manage than of yore, had never given the matter a second thought. But now, with this abrupt change of front, this veering round, so to say, from eager and solicitous attention to a poorly assumed indifference, manifestly born of a certain recklessness and of deeply felt resentment against herself, a horrible suggestion presented itself to the girl's mind, and she looked at Digby Travers in wide-eyed dismay.

"I believe he is beginning to be a sort of lover," she said to herself, and her heart beat a little faster.

She reflected upon this new problem at her ease, after she had been safely bestowed in a first-class compartment with ladies, of whom Digby had inquired their destination, committing Hazel to their charge.

Many little incidents recurred to her mind, that had puzzled her at the time, but now seemed to explain themselves with unmistakable conviction.

"He must not be allowed to propose," for, strange and bewildering as it seemed to the girl, yet, assuming him to be a lover, that was the young man's end and aim—"to propose: it would be too terrible." Besides, he had no right to do so; Hazel must save him from himself—he was deceiving himself: he was not a proper lover, a real lover. It was too absurd. She almost laughed aloud at the absurdity of it. Intuitively her thoughts turned to Paul for help. The next moment the girl had shrunk within herself—her face aflame. The only place in the whole world that presented itself to her imagination was her mother's shoulder; but she was all unconscious that it was from Paul she desired to hide her face.

Presently she grew more collected, and took herself to task. She told herself that all her good sense and wisest judgment must be brought to bear upon the subject. She did not think she should trouble her mother: she might conceivably confide in Teddie, if she found it expedient to do so, but certainly, oh certainly, in no one else. And perhaps, after all, she could manage unaided; perhaps some coldly proffered hints would bring Digby to his senses. Even now she believed she must be mistaken—it was so preposterous, this new idea.

In the meantime she must set herself resolutely to put the thing out of her mind. Only so could she attend properly to the business in hand. She unfolded the manuscript, re-read it, and found that she was still satisfied with it, although the details of the story began to pall a little, as was natural.

As she finished reviewing the precious document the train drew up in Paddington Station, and there upon the platform, trying hard not to look interested, stood Teddie.

Hazel's eyes lighted on him instantly. Eagerly, almost tremulously, she once more unfolded the manuscript, and, springing from the carriage, ran to his side.

"It is called 'The Victoria Cross, and How it was Won,'" she announced breathlessly to her astonished brother, and forthwith began to read.

"What is?" Teddie asked, bluntly interrupting her.

"Why, the story," she answered, for the moment confounded by her auditor's lack of sympathy and appreciation. "Didn't you know? I have written a story," and she was about to proceed with the narrative, when he again interposed.

"I know nothing," he said with an injured air, "but that you wanted me to meet this train, and did not give me time to say I could not; it was dashed inconvenient, I can tell you."

For a moment the girl's ardour was damped.

"Oh, Teddie, I am so sorry," she exclaimed, "but I wanted to take it at once

to an editor. I had to be quick, while I was at the Traverses, as I could not take it from home without confiding in mother, and it is a surprise for her."

Her bright face clouded, and she regarded her brother wistfully. "Is it very inconvenient?" she asked.

Teddie's generous young heart was touched. "Oh, it is all right," he answered gruffly. "Let us hear it."

Hazel, nothing loth, began once more as the two strolled down the platform, hardly pausing, in her absorbed interest, as she handed her ticket to the amused collector.

Teddie, though gradually becoming fired with something of her enthusiasm, was hardly yet so engrossed but that he had sufficient sense left of his surroundings to be aware of the unsuitability of the place for either reading aloud or listening. He therefore guided the unconscious girl, without again interrupting her, to a waiting-room, which he noted with satisfaction was empty. Here the two ensconced themselves, and Hazel read on to the finish, Teddie hearkening with all his ears; nor did he once remove his eyes from her face, where a bright spot of colour, born of excitement, was glowing on either cheek.

"That is the end," she announced triumphantly. "What do you think of it?"

"Jolly good," Teddie declared with gratifying warmth. "Come on," he added, springing to his feet; "let us get a cab."

"A cab? Oh, Teddie, ought we to?" she asked timorously. "What made you think of it?"

For all answer Teddie led the way from the station, hailed a passing hansom, and helped her into it.

"Don't you see?" he explained presently, after directing the man through the trap. "Don't you see that the story will pay you again and again for a cab?"

And as they bowled along in silent enjoyment, Hazel could not but marvel upon the rapidity of the change that prosperity, through authorship, had wrought upon her life.

"Who are we taking it to?" she asked presently.

"A fellow I know of," Teddie replied. "Or rather, two fellows, Langham and Fielding. A friend of mine got a story taken by them not half so good as this."

"I am glad I asked you to help me," Hazel returned gratefully. "I only hope it won't matter very much taking you from your work, you know."

"Say no more about that," Teddie responded complacently. "It was a bit awkward, but how was I to know that it was all for such a good purpose? Here we are," he added, as the cab drew up before a building, and Hazel, timidly lifting her eyes, read in gold letters upon the window-pane, "Messrs. Langham & Fielding, Publishers."

They entered the building, and found themselves in a large, bare place that

looked to their inexperienced eyes to be a combination of book-warehouse, office, and shop, for new books were stacked upon shelves all round the apartment; parcels of all sizes were piled upon the floor, among which, in an adjacent corner, a man in a leather apron was busy sorting. Some clerkly looking young men sat or stood at high desks, whilst a long counter ran down the room, rather to one side, which an office-lad seemed to be engaged in polishing.

A fellow-feeling for the clerks, a wish not to disturb them in their arduous tasks, made Teddie Le Mesurier turn to the boy.

"This lady," he said, intimating Hazel, who trembled slightly, "wishes to see one of your principals—the editor of the — Magazine, if possible."

"Who is it from?" inquired the office-boy mechanically, as, without a vestige of expression, his gaze seemed to fix itself on Teddie's left ear.

Hazel looked blank. "Who is it from?" she reiterated, at a loss.

"Now look here," said Teddie angrily, "none of your office gibberish. Just take up my card and say—"

At this juncture a pleasant-faced clerk stepped forward. "Get back to your work, Tommie," he said briskly, and he turned to the pair. "What can I do for you?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

Teddie repeated his formula and handed the young man his card. "We are on the lady's errand," he explained, "but she has no card," and Hazel felt mortified, she scarcely knew why; but it seemed so terribly young not to possess cards, although she had never before felt the lack.

"Is it an appointment?" asked the clerk. "Will your business be known?"

"No," Teddie returned stoutly, "but there must be a beginning, you know. We wish to submit a manuscript."

The young man left them, to reappear in a few moments.

"The editor will see you at once," he informed them. "Please step this way."

He led them up a flight of stairs, and, showing them into a room, closed the door behind them. It was large and comfortably furnished, with more of the private library than office about it. The only occupant, a tall, good-looking man, of some fifty years of age, rose to receive them, tendering Hazel a chair near his own desk, the while Teddie seated himself somewhat in the background.

"I wish to submit a manuscript which I think you will find very suitable for the — Magazine," Hazel began, with an easy confidence and graciousness of manner that generally proved very pleasing from the little lady. "Are you Mr. Langham or Mr. Fielding?"

"My name is Charles Langham," he answered, bowing, a slight smile relaxing his somewhat grave features. "It is a short story, I presume?"

"Yes," Hazel returned. "My brother Edward," intimating Teddie, who looked very much at home, sitting well forward in his chair, his stick between his knees,

his chin resting upon its knob, "has known you to take a story, not nearly so good, he says."

"Not half, by Jove!" put in Teddie.

"You would not like to read it now?" suggested Hazel. "It would not take you long."

"I think not," Mr. Langham replied. "You see, that is not our usual way; but if you will leave it with me, I will place it in the hands of our reader, who will give me his report."

"Yes, I see," Hazel said, a trifle disappointed.

"You don't think you could make a concession for once?" asked Teddie.

"I think not," Mr. Langham repeated, pulling at his moustache. "It would be very irregular."

"Of course," responded Teddie politely. "You see, Hazel, that is what readers are for: to save the editors the trouble and loss of time incurred in reading a lot of unacceptable rubbish."

"And Mr. Langham cannot know that mine is not rubbish," Hazel rejoined, wishing to be reasonable. "It is called 'The Victoria Cross, and How it was Won,'" she continued, turning to the editor. "The hero goes to the front, and there is a tremendous battle, which I think I have succeeded in making very realistic."

"Stunning," put in Teddie.

"And then," she resumed, waxing eloquent in her theme, "afterwards, upon the battlefield, when he is lying wounded in the moonlight, a fearful vision rises before his eyes."

"Blood-curdling," remarked Teddie, *sotto voce*.

"But it is only his delirium that distorts things and makes them fearful. In reality it is his mother."

Mr. Langham did his utmost to appear properly interested, and endeavoured to keep his countenance, wherein he was only partially successful. It was a delightful pair, he thought: this handsome young fellow and lovely, dainty girl. And, busy as he was, he made no move to hurry Hazel. The girl's spontaneity was refreshing, her ardour and evident good faith in her attempt at authorship were touching to a man of his sympathetic and benevolent nature. He was quite anxious not to precipitate their departure by word or sign.

"I know I must not keep you," Hazel concluded, rising from her seat; "but you will be glad to hear that it all ends peacefully and happily, and his great bravery is fully recognised."

"That is very satisfactory," Mr. Langham returned, rising also. "Stories should always end happily, I think."

"I think so, too," Hazel returned. "Good-bye," she added, giving him her hand. "I hope we have not kept you too long."

Mr. Langham released the hand with something of reluctance, and preceded his visitors to the door. He shook hands with Teddie, and was somewhat astonished at the warmth of the young man's grasp.

"Yes," Teddie agreed, "I hope we have not kept you too long." And the pair passed out.

"Do you know"—and Hazel's head reappeared as Mr. Langham was about to close the door—"do you know, before I saw you," she said laughing, "I had quite made up my mind not to speak at all—except, of course, to answer any questions you might put to me. I thought it would be the business-like, correct way; and, besides, I had a sort of notion that editors were rather terrible—as a class," she added hastily, fearful of wounding the sensibility of the editor in question. "Even now I cannot help thinking you are an exception. Good-bye." And she was gone.

Charles Langham, this exception to his kind, stood listening to the sound of their dying footsteps, then turned to his interrupted work with a smile and a sigh.

"And now," said Teddie, looking at his watch, "I must take you back to the station and get on to the office."

Hazel had intended to spend the whole morning with her brother, and probably lunch with him, before she returned to the Traverses: hence her injunctions to Digby to meet her, or cause her to be met, by the 3.50 train. She was, therefore, disappointed; but of this she would let nothing appear. Teddie had already given enough, and too much, of his time at so short a notice.

"Very well," she said cheerfully. "And Teddie—I know it is all right—I shall get the money for my story in time—but, as we have not got it yet, had not it perhaps better be an omnibus?"

To this economical arrangement Teddie—himself less glowingly optimistic than he had been a short while since—agreed. At the station they found, somewhat to their dismay, that there was no train for a couple of hours or so—it was now but little past eleven.

Teddie considered the situation. "Well," he said, "you won't get home till past two o'clock. I had better get you some buns and leave you in the waiting-room. I am awfully sorry, but it cannot be helped. Do you think you will be all right?"

"Perfectly," Hazel returned brightly.

Teddie left her, to return a few minutes later armed with a magazine, and a paper bag containing twelve halfpenny buns.

Left to herself, Hazel began to read; but her mind being preoccupied, she found the stories and jokes uninteresting, and presently fell a-thinking. Was it not near here that her mother's uncle, Percival Desborough, lived? Why should she not utilise the time that must perforce elapse before she could embark upon

her return journey by visiting him? Something within her urged her to go, though the prospect was somewhat terrifying. She had heard so much of this uncle's hardness of heart and violence of temper. Poor, lonely old man! how many a time had she wished to see him and judge for herself if he were so hopelessly unamiable and unapproachable as all who knew him averred—all but her mother, who had never lost the belief that there was a soft spot somewhere in the poor, selfish old man's heart.

She had plenty of time, for it would be just as well to take the train by which the Traverses would expect her to arrive—the one after that which Teddie had supposed she would take.

Setting indecision aside, Hazel seized the bag of buns and left the station. Following the direction of a policeman, and later of a friendly inclined milkman, she found the house easily, and, though her hand trembled a little, she beat a brave tattoo upon the door. Her knock was answered by an imposing footman, who appeared to do his utmost not to show surprise at sight of Hazel.

"Is my uncle, Mr. Percival Desborough, at home?" she inquired, in as steady a voice as she could command.

The servant answered in the affirmative, and Hazel walked in. A few moments later she heard herself announced, slowly, distinctly, and most unmistakably: "Miss Le Mesurier!"

CHAPTER X

Hazel entered her great-uncle's library with beating heart indeed, but with no outward show of fear or trepidation. It was a large room, furnished in good, if somewhat ponderous taste. Books lined the oak-panelled walls from ceiling to floor; the window curtains and other hangings were for the most part of a heavy, sombrous, red colour, harmonising well with the rich, though subdued tints of the deep-piled carpet and oak furniture, nearly black with age. The many windows, in all sorts of unexpected recesses, though they admitted light none too freely, being either of stained glass or otherwise darkened with drapery, saved the room from positive gloom, more especially when the eye had become accustomed to the dusky conditions, as doubtless was the eye of Percival Desborough. He turned in his chair with a groan and scrutinised the girlish form that stood motionless by the door, waiting till her sight should serve her; for, after the glare of the white

pavement without, she was at first well-nigh blinded.

"What do you want?" he asked, ungraciously enough. It was the same question he had asked of the girl's mother some years since, and practically the last words he had spoken to her or her family.

Hazel turned her head in the direction whence the voice proceeded. "I want to see you," she answered, "only it is so very dark."

"And why do you want to see me?" he returned brusquely. "Have you come to ask for money?"

"Oh no," Hazel replied, advancing swiftly now, and holding out her hand. "And please don't begin by being disagreeable," she added pleadingly—"at all events, not before we have even shaken hands; I don't want to feel I cannot shake hands with you—as you have made many of us feel, particularly as I had made up my mind to start fair."

The old man took the proffered hand almost before he knew what he was about. He was slightly taken aback.

"To start fair!" he repeated, somewhat vacantly.

"You see," Hazel continued, drawing up a low chair, and seating herself in friendly proximity to her august relative, "I have heard of you all my life as being so unapproachable and—and even rude, sometimes, if you don't mind my telling you so. But mother says you were not always like that. She says that when she was a girl you were fond of her and very kind to her. So for years I have felt convinced that your—your manners were chiefly owing to—to loneliness and gout." For the first time Hazel allowed her glance to rest pitifully upon the poor, bandaged foot, that she was careful not to touch. "Which must be a very terrible combination," she added sympathetically.

"If you have come here to pity me, the sooner you leave the better," he answered irascibly, a very paroxysm of twinges rendering civil speech for the moment an impossibility.

Hazel saw him wince, and understood.

"Oh, I have not," she returned gently. "At least, I can keep it to myself. I know how annoying pity can be in certain moods. But I hoped I might amuse and interest you," she added wistfully, "almost before you knew that such a thing was possible, by calling upon you and giving you all the family news."

Mr. Desborough moved uneasily in his chair. "I don't want to hear anything about them—not a word, do you hear?"

"Don't you?" said Hazel, and she sighed. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," he answered savagely. "I have done with my niece, with the whole family, and their begging letters—"

He stopped short, for Hazel, flushing scarlet, then turning very pale, rose proudly from her seat and stood confronting him.

"Uncle Percival," she said, her voice vibrating with anger, "say anything you like of me, and if I cannot stand it I can go away; but you shall not say a word against my mother or the boys—you had better not even mention them in my hearing. My mother is—well, never mind, I would rather not discuss her with you; and my brothers are dear, good fellows, every one of them, and—and courteous gentlemen, who would never speak of an absent lady as you have done. I want to be tolerant," she added, "but unless you take it back, unless you retract what you said, I shall feel obliged to leave you at once."

"Sit down," her uncle rejoined surlily. "Don't make such a fuss."

"You take it back; that about—about the letters?" she demanded eagerly.

"Yes—yes," he answered testily. "Sit down."

Hazel sat down. Percival Desborough was surprised and interested in the novel sensations awakened within him by the presence of his visitor, this young relative. He had experienced a feeling of alarm, positive alarm, at her threat to leave him, though he did not acknowledge this to himself, or for a moment give it credence.

"So you wish to be tolerant, do you?" he asked, after a pause. His voice was gruff, but Hazel could detect some kindlier note beneath the gruffness.

"Yes," she made answer. "I think you might grant that I am," she added, smiling up at him from her low seat. "Now, Teddie would not have stood you for two minutes—you have not a very nice way of greeting people, you know. Your first words, if you had spoken them to Teddie, would have driven him out of the room without his answering. Now, don't you want to hear why I am up in town? You would never guess."

"Well?" grunted Uncle Percival, as she paused.

"I have taken a story I have written to a publisher—an editor, I should say. I very much want to earn some money, and I find I can write," she added modestly. "Teddie met me in town and went with me—I am glad he did. He always impresses people so favourably. And when we got back to the station we found that I had two hours to wait for a train."

"So he brought you here?" Mr. Desborough inquired.

"Oh no," Hazel replied, in a tone that might imply that Teddie would not have done so under any consideration. "Oh no, he left me in a first-class ladies' waiting-room—he had to go back to his office, you know—and while I was sitting there I remembered how near you were, and how often I had thought that some day, unknown to any one, I would come to see you and try to make friends. Don't you think we might be friends, you and I?" she added ingenuously.

"What do you want money for?" her uncle inquired, evasively.

"Just pocket-money," Hazel said. "I am always running out of it. You would not believe how inconvenient it is. I am always seeing new ways of earning some.

I see one to-day—only mother would not let me.”

”What do you think of doing?” her uncle asked. He was becoming interested, and almost amiable—he, who had been interested in nothing and in no one but self for years. He admired this bright, gentle girl in spite of himself; he was beginning to dread the moment when she would get up and say she must go.

”You will laugh,” Hazel returned, ”but my latest idea is to be a companion—to you—for so much a week, you know: that would mean that you could dismiss me, or that I could leave you, at a week’s notice. If I went without *any* notice, quite suddenly, I should have to forgo a week’s salary. But it would never do,” she continued reflectively, ”mother would never let me. She says she must always have me with her. But it is a pity. There is no doubt you need a companion, and I certainly want money.”

”I much prefer living by myself,” her uncle replied brusquely. ”I don’t want any companion.”

”I think you do,” Hazel returned, standing to her opinion bravely. ”To begin with, look at this room!”

”What of it?” her uncle asked harshly. ”It is a very good room, well furnished, capacious, comfortable.”

But Hazel observed that he was roused, and did not seem displeased to have some matter to discuss.

”It is dark,” she persisted, ”and stuffy. No one could spend many hours a day in it, as I dare say you do, without their health and spirits being affected. Human beings are like plants: they want light and air,” she added oracularly. ”I know I could not live here and feel well and happy and—and good tempered”—with delicate hesitancy.

”What should you propose to do?” Mr. Desborough asked.

”To throw open the windows and drag back some of the curtains. May I? You will find it such an improvement.”

”Mrs. Hodges would be horrified,” her uncle returned, ”and rightly. The sun would fade all pattern from the valuable carpet.”

”But you are more valuable than the carpet,” Hazel pleaded, ”and you must not forget that the dark fades *you*.”

At this juncture the footman entered the room to announce that luncheon was served, in the exact tone of voice and with the selfsame manner in which he had announced Hazel. Then, relaxing the rigid muscles of his body, the while his face took an even added look of stoic resolve, he advanced to his master’s side and deferentially offered his arm. Percival Desborough regarded the arm with an expression of dislike, almost of disgust, depicted upon his hard-featured countenance. There was nothing personal in this show of feeling, as Thomas had probably long ago discovered.

"Must you go through the pain of walking?" asked Hazel pitifully, quick to note and interpret. "Won't you have a tray brought here?"

"I prefer to eat in the dining-room," her uncle answered shortly, as he got to his feet with a groan and a half audible word of an exclamatory nature.

But, with all his bad temper, and his sensibilities rendered ultra-critical, as they were, through pain and discontent, the poor gentleman could find no real fault with the way in which Thomas, like some machine of wonderful mechanism, manoeuvred the movements of both himself and his master, with an accuracy of eye-measurement controlling hand and limb, truly amazing, acquired only by years of practice. During those years, however, devoted by the servant to learning how to satisfy his master, Mr. Desborough had acquired the habit of expressing his opinions somewhat freely concerning the stupidity of Thomas in particular and of his kind in general. So that even now, albeit Thomas's manipulation was perfect, and his master, aware of the fact, would not under any consideration trust the removal of himself from room to room to any other than this well-tested servant, he could not refrain from relieving himself of some of the well-worn and hackneyed phrases, to the use of which he had accustomed himself during the years of Thomas's noviciate. But these recriminations had always to be voiced well in advance of the moment to which they were supposed to allude; else their unreasonableness struck disagreeably upon even Mr. Desborough himself.

"Should you like my shoulder, or do you prefer your stick?" Hazel asked, springing to her feet.

"Thank you," her uncle returned drily, "I am more accustomed to the stick—I had better keep to it." But there was a gleam of amusement in his eye, as he surveyed the shoulder in question, squared for action. "You will lunch with me?"

"Thank you," the girl answered. "I had not thought of it, but there is certainly plenty of time."

"Where did you intend to lunch?" her uncle answered when, the laborious journey accomplished, they were seated at the table.

"Where?" Hazel repeated. "Oh, in the waiting room. Teddie bought me twelve halfpenny buns, thinking that I was going to take an earlier train, and that I should not be very late for lunch. I should be glad if I might leave them here," she went on, "It is such a bagful and, however hungry I am, I can never eat more than two halfpenny buns. Can you?"

"I don't know," returned her uncle with a grim smile. "I have forgotten. Eh, Thomas?"

Thomas was so startled at this most unusually amicable address, that he nearly dropped the dish that he was in the act of handing.

"Teddie knows this—this peculiarity of mine," Hazel continued; "but he is

always so generous, and always likes to do things on a large scale. He said he knew I should not eat them, but nevertheless he liked to think I had them."

"I suppose you engaged an outside porter?" her uncle inquired.

The amazed Thomas had not seen him in so jocular a vein for years.

Hazel laughed. "You would like Teddie. Everyone does, without being able to help themselves."

"Humph," her uncle ejaculated.

"I could give you another instance of his large-heartedness," the girl went on. "It is a good story, and not long." She proceeded to relate the incident of the quarrel with Carrots, its cause, the black eye, the beefsteak, and of her brother's subsequent dismissal. Her uncle endeavoured to hide an interest that was manifest.

"What is the boy doing now?" he asked gruffly.

"He is back there," she answered. "Mr. Hamilton soon afterwards discharged Carrots and came to see us and took Teddie back."

"What does he get?" her uncle inquired.

"Fifty pounds a year," Hazel replied cheerily, with some pride. "He has had a rise lately—it used to be forty."

Her uncle muttered something in response, then coughed to cover his words.

"I beg your pardon?" Hazel apologised.

Her uncle evaded the note of interrogation. "What do the others earn?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly what Cecil's salary is," she returned. "He sends every penny home that he can afford; he is in India, you know, and it is a good lot—a couple of hundred, I should imagine. Guy and Gerald have each a hundred a year; Gerald gives up fifty of his, but Guy, who is obliged to dress better, has to keep seventy-five for himself." She paused.

"There is another one, isn't there?" Mr. Desborough asked.

"Yes, Hugh," the devoted sister continued. "Till lately he had forty, like Teddie, but now he is getting a hundred too."

"And what does he contribute?"

"I think seventy or eighty. You see, he lives at home."

"How is that?" Mr. Desborough inquired sharply.

"He is a private secretary to Paul Charteris. You have heard of him, I suppose? His ground adjoins ours."

"Paul?" repeated her uncle. "Paul? That was not the name, surely?"

"You are thinking of the father, Philip Charteris," explained Hazel. "He died, years ago; then Vivian died, his eldest son, and now it is Paul."

"So it is Paul now. What is he like?" And Percival Desborough eyed the girl

keenly.

"You would like him," she returned with enthusiasm. "You feel you can confide in him. To me he is almost like one of my brothers, only, of course, he is much older. But he appears quite young—somehow you forget his age."

"What is his age?"

"Oh, he must be thirty," Hazel answered, as one who speaks, with both pity and reverence, of a life well-nigh spent.

Her uncle chuckled amusedly. "Is he bald?" he asked.

"He has got most beautiful thick hair," Hazel returned indignantly.

There was a pause.

"By the way," her uncle remarked, "where did you get your dark looks?"

"It is a sort of freak," Hazel rejoined, half apologetically. "It occurs in the family every now and again. Years and years ago there was a Hazel Le Mesurier like me, only very much prettier; there is a portrait of her in the gallery at home, dated 1661, taken of her when she was five years old."

"It is a relief to hear she was prettier," Mr. Desborough said drily. "But about Hugh: what does young Charteris want with a private secretary?"

Hazel opened her eyes. "Oh," she explained, "he has heaps of things to see to and look after. He was saying only the other day that he thinks, if Hugh does not mind, he will get an older man, and let Hugh be assistant secretary."

Mr. Desborough stared at her aghast. "That would be nothing more nor less than an act of charity bestowed upon the lad," he said at length. "Nothing will make me believe that Charteris requires two secretaries. He wants an excuse to help the family, so he keeps on a worthless young man."

"How can you say such a thing!" Hazel cried hotly. "Mr. Charteris begged to have him, and told mother it would be a great convenience, because, Hazelhurst being so near, he need not live at Earnscleugh, as most secretaries would have to do."

"A good argument, truly," her uncle remarked curtly.

"I shall inquire into the matter directly I get home," the girl continued, more quietly, "and if I see or suspect the faintest reason to believe there is anything in what you say, Hugh shall at once come away, and look for something else. Worthless, indeed!"—her wrath rising again—"Why, he would be a very clever artist if only he could learn."

"There, there," said her uncle pettishly, "I may be wrong." But he was fairly well convinced of the way in which matters stood, and felt a twinge of discomfort as he made a shrewd guess at the feelings entertained towards himself by young Charteris, should that young man learn of the suspicion he had sown in the mind of his niece.

Luncheon over, they returned as they came—under the safe escort of

Thomas—and were once more established in the library.

Hazel consulted the clock. "I ought to leave here in half an hour," she observed, making an effort to regain her composure, and resolutely setting aside this new matter for troubled thought till she should have quiet and leisure.

"By the way," Mr. Desborough began, "you said just now you were short of pocket-money." He took from his pocket a book, and produced therefrom a crisp piece of paper, which he handed to Hazel. He was experiencing a new and strange sense of remorse, in that he had caused this bright girl, if but for a moment, a disquieting thought, and he took himself to task for a meddling old fool, interfering in matters that were better left alone. He was anxious to conciliate his great-niece, but a trifle doubtful as to how his overtures might be met. He, Percival Desborough, was growing distrustful of himself, and oddly solicitous for the good opinion of a slip of a girl, of whose very existence, a couple of hours earlier, he was scarcely aware.

Hazel took the bit of paper. "What is it?" she asked, unfolding it distrustfully.

"A banknote," her uncle returned. "Put it in your purse, and let me know when it is gone."

Hazel flushed, refolded the note and handed it back. "You must not think me ungenerous," she said gently, "or imagine that I am brooding over anything that you have said; especially as you retracted the most—the most unpleasant of your ideas about us; but you must own I could not accept this."

"Tut-tut," her uncle retorted, surprised and somewhat disconcerted, "stuff and nonsense! As if a young girl like you could not take a tip from an old fellow like me! and her uncle to boot."

"I am sorry," Hazel replied determinedly, "but I really could not"; and she again tendered him the note.

"Afraid of losing your dignity, are you?" he said. "Well, I have my pride too, and I refuse to take it back."

Hazel pondered the situation. She was not unsympathetic with her uncle, in the rather trying predicament in which he had placed himself, and could enter into his feelings very nearly. But, strive as she might, she could not put away his unkind, nay, his cruel, words, at the beginning of their interview, spoken in pain as they were, and, mayhap, in all thoughtlessness. But they were too fresh in her memory.

"I see your difficulty," she said at length. "What shall I do?"

"Do what you will," her uncle returned testily. He was not to be worsted in the struggle.

There was a long pause, and the two combatants eyed the small, innocent-looking cause of contention, that now lay upon a little table beside them.

At length Hazel took it up, and was about to tear it to shreds and transfer it to the waste-paper basket, deeming such a course the best way to right the embarrassment, when suddenly light flooded her mind.

"I may do anything I like with it?" she demanded, her spirit rising, her eyes flashing. "Anything, and in your name, seeing that the money is not mine?"

"I don't care what you do with it," her uncle returned with asperity.

Hazel rose and rang the bell, then reseated herself and steadfastly returned her uncle's gaze of mute hostility. The door opened and the same servant appeared, silently closed the door behind him, and stood awaiting orders.

"Thomas," said Hazel.

"Yes, Miss."

The man advanced a few steps.

"Your master wishes to make you this little present in recognition of your long and faithful services," and she handed the astonished man the obnoxious ten-pound note. "Doubtless he will do much more for you some day," she added.

"Thank you, Miss," said the dazed Thomas.

Mr. Desborough threw back his head and broke into a hearty laugh, to the added confusion of the poor man, who had not heard his master laugh for years. But Uncle Percival offered no explanation. Recovering his serenity, he turned to the servant.

"Order the carriage for 2.30 to take Miss Le Mesurier to Paddington Station," he said briefly. "That is the least you can do for the young lady; eh, Thomas?"

The footman left the room, and Mr. Desborough turned to his niece. "Well," he said, "I acknowledge that you have worsted me in the fray; and now, I suppose, I am committed to leave the fellow a legacy," and he laughed again.

"You would wish to do so whether I had committed you to it or not, would not you?" Hazel asked. She had fastened on her hat, and was now proceeding to draw on her gloves.

Percival Desborough regarded her critically. "Have you any lovers, child?" he asked abruptly.

Hazel was about to deny stoutly the existence of any such factor in her life, when a vision of Digby Travers rose before her startled imagination, to her discomfort and dismay.

"Well?" queried Uncle Percival. "You seem to be in uncertainty. Don't tell me that a girl does not know when a young fellow is making himself a fool over her."

Hazel raised a somewhat perplexed and flushed countenance, but she looked her august relative squarely in the eyes. "If you had asked me that yesterday," she said, "I should have answered no, without hesitation—no one could have been more sure; but it was only this morning that I began to be half afraid——"

she paused.

"Don't like him, eh?" her uncle interposed. "What is his name?"

"I think I won't tell you, please," she answered. "You see, I simply must be mistaken: it would be too ridiculous."

"Quite so," returned Uncle Percival. "You probably are mistaken. It would be too ridiculous, quite too inconceivable," and he regarded her quizzically.

"There is the carriage," Hazel said. "Good-bye, Uncle Percival."

She gave him her hand, and was surprised to find it retained—awkwardly and without sentimentality, but, nevertheless, Uncle Percival held on to the small member with a goodly grip.

"You would not care to give a cross old man a kiss, I suppose?" he asked, in an odd voice.

Hazel bent lower, and with gracious dignity saluted her uncle's cheek.

At the same moment Thomas opened the door. "The carriage is waiting," he announced, with a slight catch in his voice. Hazel walked out of the room. Her uncle's eyes followed the little figure until the closing of the door hid it from his sight. Then he looked, slowly and discontentedly, around the room.

"It is quite true," he murmured aloud, "it is dark—much too dark."

CHAPTER XI

Doris and Phyllis Travers clung close to their friend and guest, Hazel Le Mesurier, for the eve of her departure had come. This was the last long day to be spent together, and they were determined to make the most of it. With arms twined about one another's waists, the three slim maidens sauntered through the sunny meadow toward the river, with the intention of spending a couple of hours upon its banks in the quiet enjoyment of one another's society.

"If you could only stay a day or two longer," sighed Doris, while Phyllis edged yet closer, and in silence pressed the hand she held in hers.

"I must go," Hazel said resolutely. "You see," she reiterated for the third time, "you must be home for your birthday, rather particularly for a seventeenth birthday."

With the first part of this assertion her friends agreed cordially, but upon the soundness of the added clause they were dubious. Twelve-year-old Phyllis nodded, meekly puzzled; sixteen-year-old Doris looked for more, as one who,

while wishing to be perfectly reasonable, yet felt an explanation of so bold a statement to be her due.

Hazel was conscious of the lack of absolute sympathy, and set about removing any doubts upon the point that it was but natural the two young girls should entertain.

"Seventeen," she resumed, "is rather a special age. You might almost say it marks an epoch in one's life. It is a great step from sixteen. At sixteen you may think childhood is completely over and for ever gone, but it isn't. Only you have to be seventeen to be aware how young sixteen was"; and she regarded Doris meditatively. "It is an age," she went on, "when, if your parents can afford it, you are presented at Court and 'brought out.' You generally begin with a dance at home. You put on your first long dress, you do up your hair, though, to be sure, some young women wait for all this till they are eighteen." She paused.

"I think that is wiser," Doris said boldly, though with an inward misgiving that Hazel might hold that her ideas upon the subject were not valid, as issuing from the mouth of sixteen. "Seventeen seems too young for all that sort of thing; and it is always sad to cut short one's youth. I always tell Phyllis to keep young as long as ever she can."

"I don't see that it is sad! I don't know that youth is such a particularly happy period of one's existence," Hazel began, but Doris pursed her lips warningly, glancing significantly toward her young sister, giving her worldly-wise friend to understand that they must suit their conversation to the most youthful among them.

Hazel, while appreciating the wisdom that dictated the caution, could not bring herself to own, in this instance, that such prudence was necessary. She was about to make reply, when excited voices of children, raised in distress, attracted the attention of the three girls, and next moment they were running at full speed toward the spot whence the cries proceeded.

"I am afraid one of them has fallen into the water," Doris panted.

"Leave it to me," Hazel gasped back, "I can swim. They may be only quarrelling."

But a strange fear at her heart gave denial to her words, and urged her on, ever faster. As they neared the bank, a small child emerged from behind the line of willows that edged the water, and sped toward them in wildest distress.

"Bobbie," she sobbed, "oh, he's drowned dead, he's drowned dead."

"Come and show me," Hazel called to the child as she passed, but the little thing only stood wringing her hands.

There were other children upon the bank, however, and Hazel soon learned that Bobbie had risen twice since his immersion, each time lower down the stream. There was no time to lose if she would save the boy's life. Tearing off her

hat, she ran several yards lower, so far as she could judge, than the spot where he had been last seen, and, springing into the river, struck out and reached its centre, where the current was strongest, at the same moment that the child's unconscious form rose for the third time and drifted against her. With a little cry of thankfulness, Hazel seized the helpless body, and, careful to keep the head above water, began to return. It was difficult: the current was strong, and she had only the use of one arm; her clothes hampered her terribly; but at length she succeeded in bringing her burden to shore, where many willing hands were held out to rescue. Hazel was panting distressfully, but she did not lose a moment in setting about the task of bringing breath back to the seemingly lifeless body. Phyllis she sent post-haste to the house for brandy, and, bidding the little group of children to stand back, she gave the child into Doris's arms.

"Hold him so," she gasped, "head down, so," and pulling the little tongue well forward, she proceeded to give several smart punches upon the pit of the stomach, thus ridding it of much of the water that the child had swallowed in such large quantities. Then laying him gently upon his back, she continued the work of resuscitation, lifting the arms above the head, round and down to the sides, with slow, rhythmic motion, expanding and contracting the lungs. So engrossed were the two girls, that they were wholly unaware of the fact that a small party was hastening toward them from the house, headed by two young men, who were running some distance in advance. Doris was the first to perceive them, and she gave an exclamation of relief. Hazel never looked up; her eyes were riveted upon the small face, noting its death-like pallor; the purple eyelids; watching, so far in vain, for the first tinge of colour, for the first flicker of the eye-lashes that should tell of returning life.

"Is the brandy coming?" she asked. Her back was well-nigh broken, but she never paused in her labour of love and mercy, did not even wait to wipe her hot brow, or to put back some teasing locks of hair that were dripping into her eyes and down her cheeks. Indeed, she was hardly conscious of aught else, in her growing anxiety, but the fact that life was strangely long in returning to the little frame.

"I can see Phyllis coming," Doris replied, "but there are others much nearer: Digby and—yes, Mr. Charteris, are nearly here. Perhaps they are bringing the brandy."

Hazel worked on. In another minute the two young men were beside her, eagerly proffering aid; and, to her immense relief, a large firm hand was tendering her a flask. She seized upon it, and grew sick with alternate hope and fear. She felt that the fiery liquid was the poor little child's last chance—a very little while would decide now. Trembling with anxiety, she set Doris to chafe the wrists and hands with the potent fluid, whilst she moistened the blue, pinched lips, dabbed

the temples, and endeavoured to pour a few drops down the throat.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, for Christ's sake," the girl prayed, but her dry lips refused to voice the prayer.

Did the little face look less ghastly, or was it her imagination? And surely—yes, surely the eyelids quivered. With redoubled energy she worked on.

"Can we help? Do tell us what to do," Paul's voice said. He was kneeling at the child's feet, arranging a blanket round the limbs; Digby paced up and down, never taking his eyes from the little group. Hazel did not turn or start. It seemed natural that Paul should be there, in case she wanted him. She made an effort to speak, but her throat was too contracted. She could only answer him with a shake of her head.

Of a sudden the boy's eyes opened, and a faint colour stole into cheeks and lips. Hazel gave a little sob of thankfulness—Doris began to cry; it was saved, saved, this little life! The tension was broken; Hazel staggered to her feet, dizzy with excitement and fatigue. Digby and Paul lifted the child from the ground, and Digby made for the house with his burden, well covered in the blanket, with all speed.

Hazel stood staring blankly after her charge; then, of a sudden, self-consciousness stung her, acting as a momentary stimulus. What a guy she must look—what a guy she had looked all this time, kneeling in her clinging, dripping clothes and hair! How could she meet the little party of people now close upon them, how manage to walk to the house! She turned blindly, tremblingly, flushing red, to Doris and Paul. Then the question answered itself; for the next moment Paul was wrapping a second blanket around herself and, relieved of this and all other need for thought or care, she quietly fainted away, and was borne to the house in Paul's strong arms, all shame and distress gone from her.

Paul Charteris had come to pay a morning call at The Beeches, with leisure to stay to lunch if asked to do so. He was yearning for a glimpse of Hazel and desirous of learning the day that should terminate her visit. Mrs. Travers was about to propose to her guest a stroll down to the riverside in quest of her girls, at the moment of Phyllis's breathless entrance and alarming demand for brandy. Paul's heart ceased to beat for a space, for in the first confused account rendered by the panting girl he only understood that Hazel had been in the water!

Quickly ascertaining the true state of affairs, the whole household fared forth hurriedly, bearing blankets, and the invaluable liquor that had saved the child's life—Paul and Digby running at top speed ahead.

Rescued and rescuer were soon warm and comfortable, for, once at the house, nothing was lacking that could aid in their quick recovery. Mrs. Travers and Doris soon had Hazel in dry clothes, and after the administration of a hot drink of Mrs. Travers's own concocting, the spent girl was easily persuaded to

rest upon her bed. Every comfort, too, was lavished upon little Bobbie; so that, when the child's mother, Mrs. Boutcher, arrived, nothing remained but for her to sit beside his couch and watch, with thankful heart, his peaceful slumber.

Hazel also slept; which circumstance Phyllis crept halfway down the stairs to report, Paul halfway up, to learn; and he was able to leave after lunch, satisfied that all was well with the patients. He stoutly refused to have his coat dried, assuring good, kind Mrs. Travers that it was not damp, or in the least way the worse for its close contact with his dripping burden; in face of the fact that in the middle of the shoulder of the grey tweed was a round dark patch of wet, where Hazel's head had lain, and long streaks down his sleeve, where her dripping hair had clung—a circumstance to be observed by all blessed with eyes to see, and which Digby Travers noted with a pang of jealous misery. He fully appreciated the feeling that prompted Paul's stout resistance, for it would indeed be desecration to subject the garment to the rough handling of a servant and to the drying influence of the kitchen fire! For a while he left Paul to fight it out by himself as best he might. Presently more generous feelings came to him, and he quickly put a stop to his mother's importunate suggestions for the supposed comfort of her guest by a half sullen, but affectionate: "Don't bother Charteris, mother, he is all right"; and Paul darted a grateful look at his rival, which, however, the other refused to meet.

Thus Mr. Charteris set out upon his homeward way, well pleased with his visit. He had obtained his glimpse of Hazel—nay, more, had for the space of nine or ten blessed minutes held her within his arms—here Paul reverently touched the damp patch upon his shoulder; he had learnt that she was to return home on the morrow; and, incidentally, so far as he was concerned, he had called upon the Traverses and paid his somewhat long-neglected respects. Further, he had learnt from the despondent gloom upon Digby Travers's countenance, that this young man's love affair was not prospering. Altogether it was very satisfactory.

A somewhat shaky Hazel descended to the drawing-room for tea, and right gladly was she welcomed. No one could do enough for the little heroine. She was soon installed in the easiest of easy chairs, and the dainties of the tea-table were lavished upon her by Doris, Phyllis, the morose Digby, and the sturdily admiring Francis.

"I say, where did you learn it all?" the potential farmer asked, sinking down, with her cup in his hand, upon a hassock at her feet, and gazing up at her from his point of vantage.

Hazel did not at once reply. She had lifted shy eyes, so soon as she was settled to her friends' liking, and took a survey of the room. Mrs. Travers was smiling upon her from the tea-table, where her duties as mistress of the house held her prisoner; Mr. Travers, seated near his wife, was nodding kindly approval;

but Paul—Paul was not there, and the girl at one and the same time experienced both disappointment and relief.

"You might tell a fellow," pursued Francis. "If the little chap had been left to me, well—he would not be alive to know it: that is one good thing."

"I don't quite know—I must have read it somewhere," she answered a trifle absently. Then rousing herself, she turned to Digby. "But Bobbie owes his life to you and Mr. Charteris, as much as to me. You were so prompt with the brandy and blankets; Phyllis was quick too, and Doris helped so much. Please don't put it on to me, for we all worked together."

But Bobbie's mother, who presently begged for, and obtained, an interview with Bobbie's rescuer, was not to be put off in this wise. She admitted that all thanks and praise were due to God; "but you were His chief instrument, Miss," she averred again and again, "and as such you might have done the work badly."

Hazel did not quite see the logic of this, but she held her peace, believing it to be the kinder part to accept the thanks that the grateful woman was so anxious to render her.

CHAPTER XII

Time—five o'clock in the afternoon. Scene—the homestead of Paul Charteris, or rather that portion of the house, the windows of which opened upon the verandah overlooking the green lawn that merged into the Le Mesuriers' ground. The sky was dark and lurid. Thick, straight lines of silver rain were striking slantwise upon the lawn, like giant harp-strings, the wind playing discordant notes upon them, until the prelude ended in a crash of thunder, and the whole power of the invisible orchestra began.

For the last few days the weather had been immoderately hot, and it seemed that, their last atom of patience chafed away by the discomfort of the extreme heat, even the most worm-like among the spirits of the air had turned at last, and in an access of irritable sensibility were giving vent to their opinions, and flinging inertia and exhausted forces to the winds. Some rode upon darkling clouds that scudded across the angry heavens, colliding with one another in their haste: or, who shall say, perhaps deliberately charging one another in their tempestuous rage, making a veritable tilting-ground of that usually peaceful realm, the clash of their invisible lances striking fire in vivid zig-zag streaks, whilst the thunder

of their contact seemed to shake the very earth. Others again put their whole energy into the rain, as if seeking to deluge the countryside; and mercilessly did they beat a little bowed and huddled figure that emerged from the comparative shelter of the trees, after a moment of fearful hesitation, and sped across the open, making directly for the verandah.

Paul Charteris sat within his library, deeply brooding. He appeared to be occupied at the writing-table, but for long his pen had remained idle. He found difficulty in concentrating his thoughts upon the work in hand; all sorts of pleasant and congenial fancies had hold of him. But presently a tapping upon the window-pane began to attract his attention intermittently, unconsciously teasing, till, shaking off his reverie, he fell to blaming the gardener.

"That jasmine down again," ran his thoughts. "But perhaps it is hardly Tompkins's fault, though I did tell him to see to it himself last time—such rain and wind as this! But no, it cannot be the jasmine."

For the taps had become insistent, to an accompaniment of what sounded like the kicking of a foot against the lower wood part of the door-window—little, sharp, imperative kicks—and Paul, fully roused at last, sprang to his feet, faced about, and saw in the dim light, to his no small amazement, a muffled figure, the head shrouded in a long dark cloak. He opened the window, and was about to resent this intrusion at so private a part of the house, beginning with directions as to where the doors were to be found, when the figure darted past him into the room, with gesture and movement familiar to him; and letting the cloak drop in a damp heap upon the floor, Hazel Le Mesurier stood laughing at him.

"How astonished you look," she cried, "and it certainly is a queer afternoon to choose for calling; but I did not have to put on my best things to run over here, and I particularly want to see you; I have not slept much for two nights thinking about it," she added, suddenly grave, and seating herself in a lounge-chair with something of the gesture of a tired child.

Paul stood still, his hand upon the open window, collecting his senses. What a delicious, unexpected, utterly unlooked-for treat. He could hardly believe in his good fortune.

"You had better shut the window," Hazel resumed, the least hint of petulance in her tone. "See, the rain is driving in. Even the verandah roof is not broad enough to keep out such rain. Oh dear, it was a business to get here—but I had to come."

A slight uneasiness was beginning to mingle with Paul's delight. Did the girl's mother know of her daughter's visit to him in this somewhat unconventional, impulsive way? Probably not. Yet he durst not risk offending the little lady by such a question, which, to say the least, would hardly sound polite. Any way here she was, here, and the storm-darkened room. seemed flooded with

sunshine! Then a thought struck him: Hugh had not left the house. He felt he ought to propose fetching Hugh, but he was much afraid that Hazel would eagerly jump at the chance of seeing her brother, in her sociable little way, and in her utter indifference as to whether she was alone with Paul or not.

"You have not had tea?" Paul asked, closing the window and advancing into the room. "Shall I ring for some, and—and ask Hugh to join us?"

"You can ring for tea," Hazel rejoined decisively, "but I don't want Hugh here—at all events not just yet. He would be the very worst person to overhear what I have to say. I must say it to you quite alone."

Paul felt immensely relieved. He had done his duty; he had left the settlement of a slightly embarrassing situation to the lady, and if that lady forbade him to call a third person to the interview about to take place, it was not for him to insist. Yet, on looking at her again his conscience smote him. The lady was so young, so unsophisticated—his bonnie Hazel—perhaps he ought to act for her, give her brotherly advice and hints as to what was customary.

But no, he could not do it. If he succeeded in making her see at all what he meant, it would be at the cost of embarrassing her, and nothing would be more cruel than so to wound the girl.

He seated himself at some distance from her and divined, to his amused chagrin, from her look of surprise, as she involuntarily glanced at a chair near her own and thence to the one he had taken, that she had momentarily deemed him unfriendly inclined, but was the next instant content and satisfied with the reason of his action: the chair he had taken was the more comfortable!

"You have forgotten to ring," she began; "but it is just as well, because I shall only keep you a few minutes and then you can have tea, and Hugh." Paul felt a third misinterpretation of his movements would be a last straw. "I daresay you are pining for company this dull afternoon," she continued; "and oh, Mr. Charteris," she broke off, "it is very serious what I have to say."

"You shall tell me in a moment," he replied; "but are you not very wet? Had I not better put a match to that firing? We could dry your cloak, and you could put your feet to it. It seems I am always to see you dripping, like a mermaid."

Hazel flushed at this allusion to the incident of two days since; but now that he had brought it to her recollection, she took furtive glances at the grey coat he was wearing, an uneasy sense that it was familiar to her pervading her mind; and surely, yes, surely—or was it her imagination?—a patch upon the right shoulder showed slightly darker than the rest, as the flames he was kindling played upon his figure, as if it was still somewhat damp.

She was in ignorance of the exact mode of her conveyance to the house, but had shrewd suspicions—suspicions that made her too shy to ask questions. She was sure of one thing: she had not walked.

"You are none the worse for your immersion, I hope?" Paul asked, still busy with the fire. He knew that he was embarrassing her, but his pleasure in her company made him mischievously inclined.

"No, thank you," Hazel answered demurely. "I am quite well."

Silence fell between them. "This is going to be a big blaze," Paul remarked presently. "I hope you won't find it too hot."

"Oh no," Hazel replied rather vaguely. She was trying to screw up her courage to ask that which she had come to ask. Why not out with it now, whilst his eyes were turned from her? Indeed, if she slipped into that other chair, she would be quite out of his range of vision.

"Mr. Charteris," came a very small voice from somewhere behind him—she had contrived the exchange of seats so quietly that he, intent upon his work, had not noticed the movement—"Mr. Charteris, are you giving—that is, are you in a sort of way—I mean, do you—" Her voice quavered, and she stopped.

Paul wheeled round and stood before her, regarding her in amazement. She looked up at him piteously, and then away again. Paul, half amused, half concerned at the obvious perturbation and perplexity of mind under which she was labouring, waited in silence, a silence fraught with sympathy, for her to continue.

"Oh, could not you turn your back again?" she cried in desperation, "and—and I'll try to tell you."

Paul, with one stride, was beside her and, kneeling upon one knee to bring himself to her level, took both tremulous hands in his.

"What is it, little one?" he asked. "What is this dreadful, 'serious' something you have on your mind?"

"Won't you please to go away or walk about?" she besought him.

But Paul knew that this would be just as difficult for her. "No," he said firmly. "Just tell me, Hazel, and get it over."

"But perhaps it is horrid and—and unladylike of me," she wailed. "Perhaps you will be hurt or offended."

"Tell me," he repeated gently.

Hazel moved restively in her chair. "I wish I had not come here," she said rebelliously.

Paul waited, and then, with a little gasp, it all came out.

"It is about Hugh. Are you having him in—in charity?" Her voice sank to a whisper upon the last, fateful word, and she lay back in her chair, and tightly closed her eyes. What would he say? How would he take it? She had not the courage to look at him.

But Paul never seemed to fail her—he did not fail her now. "Hazel," he said quietly, after a long pause, "what put such an idea into your head?"

"Uncle Percival," Hazel answered laconically, with startling promptitude. Slowly she opened her eyes, but she turned her look away from him.

Paul rose to his feet and quietly began to pace the floor. "Uncle Percival ought to be—boiled," he said at length, indignantly. "How came he to mention the topic at all to you?"

"I called upon him," Hazel rejoined; and she proceeded to relate what had passed between herself and her relative.

"You are a plucky child to have 'bearded' him," Paul observed, when she had finished. He had heard much of "Uncle Percival," but little to his credit.

"Oh, he was not so bad," Hazel said, modestly disclaiming the compliment. "I was frightened of him at first, but he got nicer and nicer. In the end," she added naïvely, "he asked me to kiss him. That was quite friendly of him, was not it?"

"Very friendly indeed," Paul answered, his views concerning "Uncle Percival" undergoing a quick change. "I had no idea he was so—so human. And—and—did you?"

"Oh yes," Hazel said blandly. "Just a quick one on the cheek, you know—not at all as you would kiss mother, or as you would hug the boys."

"Just so," Paul returned meekly. "The old ruffian did not deserve such luck," was his inward comment.

There was a somewhat lengthy pause, devoted by Paul to pondering the subject. But of a sudden he looked up to find the girl regarding him beseechingly.

"You—you have not answered yet," she said, timidly reminding him.

"Need I say anything?" he asked, amused at her insistence. "Do you not know me better than to suspect me of doing such a thing? Why, it would not only be an insult to Hugh, but Mrs. Le Mesurier would be quick to see through, and resent, such interference."

Hazel gave vent to a sigh of relief; and Paul went on. "How could you credit such a suspicion for a moment? Don't you see how pleasant it is for me to have some one about that I know and like? Why, that in itself is worth the—the mere salary, let alone the fact that he is really useful. Are you satisfied? Do you believe me?" And he regarded his visitor quizzically.

"Of course," Hazel said generously, and with a little flush. "Between you and me," she continued, "I could not help feeling, from what I know of Hugh, that there might be a certain amount of truth about the char—, in what Uncle Percival said," she amended. "There is no denying that Hugh has not much of a business head, and—and that, therefore, it follows that he cannot be quite as useful to you as you would wish. I—I could not help feeling that the new man you think of engaging could easily do it all, you know. But I quite believe you," she added sincerely, feeling apologetic for harping upon the subject, or, indeed, for adding a single word after having acknowledged herself satisfied; having clinched, so to

say, with Paul in faith and trust. "But he would make a splendid artist, would not he?" she said enthusiastically.

"Yes," Paul replied, "he is very clever. It is a thousand pities that he cannot take it up; for, I will admit, he would make a better artist than secretary."

Hazel glowed with gratified pride. "Well," she said, "I must go. Hugh had better not see me. He would, of course, want to know why I had come."

Paul smothered a sigh. "But your feet," he objected. "Are your shoes properly dry?"

"Oh, I think dry enough," she returned. "They will be wet again by the time I am home."

"You will change then, of course?" Paul asked anxiously, and Hazel promised she would.

"By the way," Hazel remarked, "it was my birthday yesterday." They had both risen, and the girl turned her back upon him as she spoke, and stood looking pensively from the window.

"Yes," Paul returned.

"You knew?" Hazel asked.

"Of course," he answered. There was a pause.

"Why didn't you come then? We—they quite missed you."

"I was not asked," Paul explained earnestly. "I thought you might have special plans for the day, and that I might be in the way."

Hazel waited, dissatisfied, for more; but no more, it seemed, was forthcoming.

"You did not even wish me many happy returns of the day," she commented, still turning from him.

"No," Paul admitted, with unwonted and seemingly unnecessary sternness.

"Well," she remarked, not knowing whether to be more hurt or surprised, "I—I think you might."

"You know I wish you everything the world has to give—all good and all blessings," Paul broke out, a marked fervour in his tone, and paused.

"Yes?" Hazel asked, a little breathless, with a sense of being somewhat overpowered.

"As to gifts," Paul went on desperately, "I would come with my arms full—I would lay all I had at—" He broke off, and with an effort seemed to pull himself together.

"You need not make such a lot of it," Hazel expostulated, in innocent surprise. "It is not a twenty-first, or anything so important as that. And even if it were, I should only expect, supposing you wished to give me anything at all, that is, I should only expect one present; just a small remembrance, you know, the—the usual thing."

"There is no usual—" He stopped short and endeavoured to recover himself. "Hazel," he said quietly, "you have not thought the omission due to carelessness, or doubted my—my friendship?"

"Oh no," Hazel declared, "and I did not think of presents: they never entered my head. And as to the wishes—well, you have wished them now, and thank you very much," she added, somewhat hurriedly, half fearful of a repetition of the very full measure, so fervently expressed. "The rain has stopped. I will start at once."

She left her cloak, at Paul's urgent request, to be dried and returned to her later. She stepped out of the French window and, turning, gave her hand to Paul.

"I am so glad I came and cleared it all up—about Hugh," she said warmly. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he rejoined, "and many, many happy returns of yesterday," he added, dropping the hand.

Something in his tone puzzled Hazel, and she looked at him wonderingly.

"How odd Paul, that is, Mr. Charteris, is to-day," she mused as she sped across the lawn.

CHAPTER XIII

"My dear child," exclaimed Helen Le Mesurier, "what an afternoon to choose for walking!"

Mrs. Le Mesurier was seated in the recess of the sparsely furnished hall, where tea was usually served. She had already partaken of that refreshment, but set about making more at sight of her daughter. Hazel gratefully accepted a cup and seated herself for a chat.

"I have not been for a walk," she said; "at least, I have walked, but not for walking's sake. I have been calling upon Mr. Charteris."

Helen looked surprised, as naturally she might.

"Hazel!" she expostulated. "What purpose could you have had? He comes here so often. Could you not have asked my advice as to going? It looks a little odd—a young girl calling by herself," she added gently. "Paul will think it odd."

She knew her child, and that slight reproof was enough—the least hint that intimated forwardness, in a way, too much; yet both must be given: such was a mother's duty.

The girl's face flushed red, and hastily setting down her cup, she looked at her mother in mute distress.

"Oh, surely not," she pleaded; "surely he thought it perfectly natural—just as I did, mother. I—I wanted to see him very particularly. I could not wait for him to come. If I had waited I might not have had the opportunity of saying what I wanted to say—it was about Hugh."

"You found Hugh there, of course?" Helen interposed comfortingly. "That makes things better. May mothie come into the mystery about Hugh?"

She had made the useful and necessary suggestion of incorrectness in her young daughter's action, and knew that she need say no more upon the subject—that she might with safety pour oil upon the little wound she had perforce inflicted, and bind it up to her child's comfort: for the sensitive girl would not so err again. But the kind words, spoken to bring consolation, brought instead new apprehension to Hazel.

"He was in the house," she admitted: "but he was not——" She broke off, of a sudden recollecting how Paul had proposed Hugh's presence, and how she had forbidden it. "Mr. Charteris wanted to call him and I would not let him. Oh, do you believe he will think me a horrid, bold sort of person?" and she looked beseechingly for her mother's reply.

Helen had difficulty in restraining a smile, as her eyes rested upon her daughter's face: the idea of the possessor of that face being considered a "horrid, bold sort of person" proving almost too ludicrous for the maintenance of gravity: delicate, sensitive, refined, beautiful as a flower; just now tremulous, beseeching.

"No," she admitted, after what was to Hazel an agonised pause, "I don't think he will." And the smile had its way. "But tell me, dearie, why you went at all."

So Hazel told all, beginning at Uncle Percival's uncomfortable and startling suggestion, that Paul Charteris was giving in charity to the Le Mesuriers, through the medium of the "worthless young man"—Hugh. She had before told her mother of the visit to her uncle; and Helen, half amused, half concerned, had not wholly disapproved of her girl's spiritedness; but this portion of the conversation during that visit Hazel had before omitted to report, not wishing to anger her mother against Mr. Desborough, or indeed to disturb her peace of mind until she, Hazel, had first ascertained the truth.

"So you see how I did it all for the best, mother. You see how important it was to learn the truth, and at once, without troubling you, dearest, if I could possibly help it."

"Yes, dearie, I do see. So, I know, does Paul. Do not be troubled about it any more. Only remember that we must, none of us, defy certain conventionalities—we must observe rules by which to regulate our behaviour. They mostly have

their good sense and usefulness, though at times we may find them irksome, and tiresome to follow, and feel impatient at their restrictions.”

”Yes, mother,” rejoined the pretty penitent, meekly.

And then followed one of those close embraces in which mother and daughter were wont to indulge at the termination of every discourse between them, that held in it anything in the nature of reprimand and submission; expressing full, free, and loving forgiveness on the mother’s part, and sincere contrition and penitence on the part of the loving daughter.

But the discomfoting impression that Hazel had received, that Paul might be thinking her forward, proved disastrous to that young man’s peace; for Hazel did her utmost to avoid him, and managed, with most unlooked-for success, to elude meetings—generally slipping away to her own room if he came to the house, and seldom risking discovery by spending much time in her tree; though, had he but known it, one Sunday morning she was holding church there, as was her wont; but she kept so absolutely still, as he passed beneath the branches, the full midsummer leafage of which afforded so complete a screen as to hide entirely any living thing that took refuge there among, be it bird, beast, or—girl, that she was not discovered.

One morning poor Hazel’s story was returned, with the editor’s compliments and regrets. The girl retired within herself, concerning this great disappointment, until such time as she could confide in Teddie, and receive advice as to her further movements.

Saturday came at last, and a very sober Hazel met the afternoon train, bringing Teddie alone. Gerald, he said, was following by the next.

”And it is just as well, Hazel,” the boy added, wearily. ”I am nearly off my head with worry. And though, of course, you cannot help a fellow, still you can sympathise with a chap and ease him a bit.”

At once Hazel’s own troubles became insignificant, and she was all attention; but, as was her custom, she did not press her sympathy upon him in words, but walked on beside him, earnest-faced and ready-witted, waiting for what he should choose to tell her.

”I want five pounds,” her brother broke out at length, ”and five pounds I must have.”

Hazel’s heart sank. What a nuisance money was!

”Now the question is how I am to get it,” Teddie went on. ”Your story will bring in quite that—and you would, I know, lend me the cash. But goodness knows when you will hear of it again. Editors are the dickens for keeping people waiting.”

”He did not keep *me* long,” said Hazel, mournfully, and she drew from her pocket the ill-fated manuscript, and Teddie, with incredulous horror in his eyes,

read slowly: "The Victoria Cross and How it was Won," twice through before he could believe the evidence of his senses.

"The fellow will never get on," he told Hazel dispassionately. "He will come to no good end. He has not the first essentials for getting on in his particular business. He does not know a good thing when he sees it; he does not know what suits the public taste, and probably cares less. Well, I pity him."

"But his magazine is a very good one, I mean of high standing"—Hazel ventured timidly, thinking Teddie's calm not altogether natural or healthy—"and it is very well known."

"Mere luck," announced Teddie. "It won't last It can't. But I shall go and ask for an explanation," he continued, his anger rising, somewhat to his sister's relief. "He will have to satisfy me."

"He seemed rather nice, if you remember," Hazel observed, in just defence of the roundly abused editor. "That is the worst of it. If he had been, well, a disagreeable sort of man, whom you strongly suspected of being ultra-critical and ill-natured, why, then, one would try again with a light heart. But, Teddie, I cannot help thinking he would have taken it if he could."

"You either forget what I told you of the stories he has accepted, or else you have no faith in my judgment, Hazel," Teddie returned censoriously. "I can assure you he has taken all sorts of trash. I have seen it—in print."

"And you do not think mine trash?" Hazel asked doubtfully.

"No," declared the loyal Teddie, half defiantly, "I don't. And that moonlight scene after the battle, and the battle itself, if it comes to that, are just ripping."

They halted upon the roadway, Teddie to light a cigarette, Hazel to open and unfold the manuscript, to refresh her memory on the parts so highly commended. Together they stood awhile, he reading over her shoulder; but the re-consideration of her work brought the girl no comfort. Even to her youth and inexperience the story appeared crude, obviously the writing of a beginner—and a very young one, of no especial talent. Even her brother began to experience a disquieting sense of imperfection as he read on. Somehow the tale lacked the brilliancy of dramatic force that he had, on first reading, attributed to it; and for the first time he was uneasily conscious of a desire to laugh in quite the wrong places. But he was not going to discourage his sister altogether for all that, though perhaps it would be true kindness to discontinue such unqualified commendation.

"I expect your bad writing put him off," he said at length, with brotherly bluntness. "You ought to have got me or Digby or some one to write it out neatly for you."

"Yes?" questioned Hazel, only half reassured. "Do you think that would have made all the difference, Teddie?"

"It might," Teddie affirmed with, however, less assurance than heretofore.

It was, after all, false kindness to give nothing but praise. "But if it is not that, it may be the—the 'vision' they don't like; and you know, Hazel, I am beginning to doubt myself whether it has not got a ludicrous side. Do you think yourself that it is natural? *Would* the mother be knocking about a battlefield, thousands of miles from home?"

"Perhaps she would not," admitted poor Hazel. "But you see, Teddie, she was supposed to be a widow with no other children, and very, very fond of this only son, whom she follows to the front unbeknown to him, having no home ties to keep her in England."

The girl looked wistfully for her brother's next comment.

"I think," he said decidedly, as they walked on again, "that you have too much killing in your style. I admit that you are good at it, but it may not be liked, especially in a woman writer. It is—it is hard, you might say blood-thirsty. Just look how you kill them off," he continued ruthlessly, waxing eloquent in his theme, "wholesale!"

Hazel looked somewhat shocked as this appalling idea was presented to her.

"Teddie," she gasped, "where—where have I killed them off so? Of course you have to have deaths in battle. It is one of the horrors of war."

"It is not only the battle," Teddie insisted. "It is not only generally, so to speak, but you delight in bringing deaths into private life. Look at your hero's family, for example: how you have to make that wretched woman widowed and childless; excepting, of course, the hero himself, but even him you bring to the point of death. It is not good art," he concluded, shaking his head.

"Yes," she admitted sadly; "perhaps it is a rather unwomanly trait in my writing."

"I am glad you see it," her brother returned, softening somewhat. "Why, you have only got to have a murder in it to make 'Battle, Murder, and Sudden Death' an excellent title."

"Well," Hazel declared, after a pause, "I shall give up trying to make money in that way. My only real gift is music. There is no doubt about it, that I should never make an author. If only people would hire me to sing at little concerts. You know what a success I am at the school concert at Christmas-time, and how old Jonathan Higgins would walk ten miles to hear 'My mother bids me bind my hair,' as I sing it. I am thinking of that five pounds, old fellow," she added dismally.

"Yes, by Jove!" Teddie rejoined, and relapsed into silence. "Since my rise," he began presently, "I have been in constant difficulties. It is always the way. When you have not a halfpenny, you do nothing and go nowhere."

Hazel nodded. She longed to ask her brother to what extent he had broken through this wise régime, but held her peace.

"I date my difficulties from the day when I gave a champagne lunch to five fellows I know."

"The day of the rise?" his sister asked shrewdly, awed by this peep into dissipated life.

"You have got it," Teddie admitted. "It may have been foolish, but the fellows have stood me treat often enough—or offered to—and my usual answer, that I did not go in for society because I could not afford to do my part, did not always work, you know. I got talked over. Since then," he continued, "I have stood a theatre or two, and—well, the long and short of it is, that Mrs. Walters, our landlady, wants her rent, and is beginning to make a nuisance of herself."

Hazel thought of the ten pounds that she had bestowed on her uncle's servant; but, troubled as she was for her brother, she could not repent her of the deed.

"You can't borrow of Hugh or Gerald?" she ventured gently.

"No," Teddie told her. "We have once for all agreed not to borrow from each other, and it is not a bad plan: for though it is dashed hard luck that *I* am bound down not to borrow of them, I am thankful to think they cannot borrow of me," he added ruefully.

"Yes," Hazel returned, struck with the sense of this, "that certainly is a good thing. Well," she added, "you must let me think it well over. I will do my best, Teddie, to help you."

Already a half-formed plan had arisen in her mind, but she greatly wondered whether she could bring herself to go through with it. Certainly she could not for herself; yet for Teddie it was different—for Teddie she could do much.

Presently they left the roadway, clambered up a high bank, and plunging through a tangle of brambles, entered the cool, leafy walks of their own grounds—a delicious relief after the dust and glare. The foliage was just now at its full, and for the most part of a dark green, each leaf heavy, thick, and strong, with as yet no hint of autumn in its perfection of maturity. Elm, lime, beech, horse-chestnut, oak, copper beech, silver birch, feathery larch, ash, fir, and pine; what an enthralling medley of delight! The great tree branches, heavy to repletion, waved stately in the gentle summer wind, dignified, majestic, all the sportiveness of youth and spring-time gone; rugged-barked, smooth-barked, light grey; green trunks, whitey-grey trunks, almost black trunks; gnarled, veined, moss-grown, creeper-covered; the unspeakable grace of the smaller boughs growing from out the larger limbs: each shapely twig, after a series of knots and delicate articulations, terminating in a leaf of perfect outline, each indentation clearly defined, the edges of some almost fluted in the vigour of their full, crisp growth.

What was there in her beloved woodland that the girl did not know and love; from the swelling, bursting buds of spring—nay, before that, when the bare,

brown twigs had nothing to show, save a certain swollen look, and yet seemed instinct with life—to the falling of the leaf? Some leaves there were of such tenacity that only the insistent pushing and shooting of the spring buds could at last succeed in ousting the poor crumpled yellow or brown thing from its place. And oh, the flooring of the woods in autumn; the rustling of one's tread through the fallen leaves of many hues; the crunch of the little triangular beech-nuts, still in their rough, brown, lily-shaped, gaping pods, or fallen out of them, the more ready to hand for the squirrels; the acorns, smiling up green and smooth, half in half out of their dainty brown cup, looking as if a squeeze at the cup's base would cause the slippery nut to shoot out like a benignant green bullet; fir-cones like miniature pineapples cut in cork; spiky pine needles, that only bent in mockery if you tried to prick anything with them; softly bristling chestnut burrs, all agape, discovering the shining red-brown treasure within; and patches of bracken, never far to seek.

In another month's time, Hazel knew, such autumn delights would begin. Just now, nothing could be lovelier than the dense, heavy foliage of full summer; for the shades of green were rich in their many gradations, whilst the grey mosses and woodland grasses gave change in plenty to the eye.

On reaching home, they found a visitor with Helen, in the person of Mr. Charteris. Hardly a visitor, so Hazel thought, in momentary dismay—he seemed to live at Hazelhurst. There was no escaping this time, as hostess and guest were awaiting the two to begin tea, at which her mother liked the girl to preside. Down she sat in their midst, pink-cheeked, and very busily did she occupy herself—tea-making seemed to have become the most soul-absorbing work, calling for her undivided attention.

All this was terribly apparent to poor Paul. It must be himself she was shunning—she was not usually so engrossed, surely, as not to be able to join in the chat, or notice any one, but just steadily fill and refill cups, with stern precision, taxing her memory upon the momentous question of little milk, much milk, one lump, two lumps, no sugar, tea rather weak, tea strong, tea average. "Dear me," thought Paul, "what a lot there is in tea-making if one notices, and I have always thought it so simple."

Presently he asked her if he could help—do something besides handing dishes. She only grew yet pinker-cheeked, refused to look at him—Paul was sure she was aware that he was trying to make her look—and said there was really nothing to do. And she effected her escape as soon as possible, partly, Paul suspected wretchedly, to avoid giving him her hand. And yet, in contrarieness, no sooner did she hear him go than she felt inclined to cry, and longed, with a strange inconsistency that puzzled herself, to run after him—to let her hand rest in that strong, dear grasp of his for a few moments, whilst she assured him there

was nothing, nothing the matter.

CHAPTER XIV

"OSBORNE HOUSE, LANCASTER GATE, "July 12, 19—.

"MY DEAR HELEN,

"It may not be news to tell you that I am a lonely old man; but how lonely and, for the matter of that, how old, I am but now beginning to realise. The realisation came upon me with the visit of that girl of yours—Hazel, she said her name was; rather an absurdly fanciful name, by the way: but there, I won't carp, and it suits the child. I confess to you that she has taken me by storm; I have tried to fight against such feelings, called myself a sentimental old fool, in my second childhood, which is probably the right explanation; but however that may be, the feeling remains. She came into this dreary house like a breath of country, this Hazel of yours, and set me thinking of woods, nuts, berries, and flowers. Spirited, too: gave as good as she got from the old man. The long and short of it is: will you allow the child to stay with me for a short while? I know I have no claim upon you, no right to ask favours—I never for a moment imagined it possible that I *should* ever ask a favour. That I have, and no small one, I grant, is in itself an apology for the past—a holding out of the olive-branch and all the rest of it. Don't keep me waiting long for your answer. As I said before, I am a sentimental old fool, in my dotage, and I am lonely, or I should never have brought myself to the pitch of courage necessary for writing to you—of risking the probable humiliation of being denied what I ask—which, I admit, is all I deserve at your hands.

"However you may decide concerning my request, let there be peace between us for the girl's sake, and for the sake of old times. Let me once again have the privilege of signing myself

"Your affectionate uncle, "PERCIVAL DESBOROUGH."

"HAZELHURST, BERKS, "July 13, 19—.

"MY DEAR UNCLE,

"It was with mingled pleasure and pain that I read your letter. I know full well you are lonely. In my girlhood I can remember you as a kindly, sociable man—sociable in a domestic sense: I cannot remember that you ever cared for society. And it is unlikely that one should so change in one's later years as to be happy and content, with doors barred against one's nearest kin; living on alone, entertaining hard thoughts and, dear uncle, let me say unjust thoughts, of those of whom one was once fond. I gladly take the extended olive-branch.

"Do not think me ungenerous, if I say that I cannot make up my mind to allow Hazel to stay with you. She is my only daughter, and your house, devoid as it is of women-folk, is not the place I should choose for a young girl. May I suggest that she should come to spend a day with you, and, need I say, dear uncle, how pleased I should be if you would visit us here, if you could bring yourself to put up with our plain faring and simple ways?

"Your affectionate niece, "HELEN LE MESURIER.

"P.S.—We can easily accommodate your servant."

"OSBORNE HOUSE, LANCASTER GATE, "July 14, 19—.

"MY DEAR HELEN,

"I must not grumble at your decision. I will think over the proposal you make, that I should come down to Hazelhurst to stay a while. In the meantime send the girl on Friday next, if convenient to you. The carriage shall meet the train.

"Your affectionate uncle "PERCIVAL DESBOROUGH.'

When Hazel heard she was asked to go and see her uncle again, she was half pleased, half dismayed. The plan she was evolving for helping Teddie was at once made simpler: for it was to Uncle Percival that she was about to turn for aid, if she could sufficiently crush down her pride. The very difficulty of getting to him, had made her plan seem easy and feasible. But now that this difficulty was removed, she found her little scheme of a sudden assume terrible proportions. However, there was no harm in going: there was nothing *infra dig.* or humiliating in that; and once there, she could feel her way as to what she should confide and what leave unsaid.

When Paul Charteris heard of the prospective visit, he begged to be allowed to drive Hazel to the station; and Helen agreed that it was a long, hot, dusty walk with which to begin a day's outing.

"I think," she added, "that you may take it for granted that Hazel will like to drive—she is not here to ask—yet she was a moment ago. Where has she gone?"

No, of course, Hazel was not there. She had heard Paul coming, and, with a murmured excuse to her mother, had fled precipitately.

"By the way, dear, Paul proposes driving you to the station," her mother told her, when the eventful day arrived.

The girl flushed, and then grew pale. "Oh, mother," she exclaimed. "I should rather have walked. Miles could have taken me."

Helen looked her surprise. "But it is so hot and dusty, Hazel. You will be quite tired by the time you reach London. I am sorry, dear, but I felt so sure you would like to drive. You so love driving," she added, puzzled, somewhat at a loss.

Then a thought struck her.

"Has Paul offended you in any way?" she asked gently, of a sudden. "Is it my fancy, or are you avoiding him?"

"Oh no; he has not offended me," the girl made answer hastily, evasively. "But I love the walk, and—oh well, it does not matter, motherling." And the disturbed young face kissed the anxious one reassuringly, and Hazel went off to make herself ready.

It was a very demure young lady, whom Paul handed into the trap, half an hour later; but, though she had regained her outward composure, her spirit had risen in revolt against her charioteer. She felt like a little snared hare, and was angry and shy all at once. She sat beside him mute, looking straight before her, and Paul from time to time endeavoured to get a peep at the face beneath the hat-brim.

"We will drive slowly," he remarked at length. "If I give Ben Dyson his head, we should be at the station in ten minutes, and we have a good half-hour. Isn't it glorious weather?"

Hazel admitted that it was, and again relapsed into silence.

"You are very quiet," Paul observed presently. "Won't you talk to me, Hazel? I do hope you are not thinking it presumptuous in me, that I asked to drive you," he added anxiously.

Hazel's soft little heart began to melt. After all, it was very kind of him, and thoughtful. How was he to know she wanted to keep out of his way? She did not wish him to know; she hoped that, if by chance he noticed that he saw less of her than usual just now, he would put it down to mere coincidence. Probably he had not noticed; she hoped not—she did not wish to hurt or annoy him.

"No," she answered quickly. Then, with shyness, gratitude, and dignity all

fighting together, she added: "It was very kind of you—very. But I am fond of walking. I—I thought you might have asked me, and not mother," she concluded, with some severity.

Then Paul determined to have it out with her. "Hazel," he asked, with grave directness, "answer me truly. Have I offended or hurt you in any way?"

He tried to catch a glimpse of her face; but it was turned from him, her eyes in busy contemplation of the hedgerow.

"No; oh no," she said hurriedly. "You have never seen Uncle Percival, have you?" she asked, bent upon turning the conversation. Paul was rather alarming, when earnest and grave and unchatty.

"Hazel," he persisted, "tell me: Do you or do you not like driving?"

"Oh, very much!" she exclaimed enthusiastically; "and it is a long, dreary walk," she added, off her guard.

Then came a terrible silence. Paul was too generous to take advantage of the slip, and Hazel, feeling an irrepressible desire to know the worst that his face might be expressing, glanced up hastily as she turned to view, with absorbing interest, the farther hedge.

He was smiling quietly to himself and looking very satisfied over something. So much her brief look told her, and she felt her resentment again rising.

"One can like driving, and yet have reasons for wishing to walk," she said severely, again taking up her weapon, but this time in some trepidation.

"Of course," he answered lightly. "One might object to the companionship of one's driver."

No response from Hazel.

"Is that it, Hazel?" he asked presently.

Still no reply.

"I have feared for some little time," he resumed, "that you have been avoiding my society. I cannot tell you how the suspicion has grieved me. I have spent much time in wondering wherein I have erred. Won't you tell me, Hazel, and set me right?"

Sympathetic Hazel was much distressed. "You have done nothing," she said earnestly, "nothing. Please do not think so again."

"But something has happened," he persisted, "and I think I have a right to know what, as it concerns myself so deeply. Don't you admit my right?"

"It does not concern you," she repeated, and hesitated. "One can offend oneself sometimes," she added desperately, enigmatically. "I offended myself a little while ago. You are not in the least to blame. Oh, please, do not talk of it any more."

A silence fell between them. On reaching the station Paul secured a compartment for Hazel's exclusive use. This was easily done, as the early morning

city train, with its many passengers, was gone some time since, and there were few to go by this. A handsome tip to the guard settled the matter: Hazel was to be locked in. Having seen her seated, he proceeded to furnish her with all sorts of illustrated papers and a dainty basket of grapes from a fruit-shop outside the station. Then, everything completed to his satisfaction, he leaned upon the door of the carriage as she sat within, amidst a very sea of papers.

"Don't look at that yet," he pleaded, in remonstrance, as she took up a magazine. "It is only two minutes till time is up."

Hazel obediently laid down the journal. It would be unkind to go on puzzling him, now that she knew he had noticed her avoidance of him, and was aware that something had troubled her. It would be particularly ungracious too, after all this recent kindness. Besides, it was easier here: he was farther away, and she breathed more freely. Surely she could look at him once or twice, and talk in a natural manner? She did look at him. He was regarding herself earnestly.

"Hazel," he said humbly, "am I forgiven for not asking your permission, direct, for driving you?"

"Yes," Hazel said with dignity, rearranging the fruit in the basket.

"Thank you," he answered, with courtly gravity, "and—and you did not mind *me* driving you?"

"No," she admitted graciously. The train beginning to move, she handed him, through the window, half her bunch of purple grapes, as an earnest of her favour; and Paul, reading in the resolute little face, that protest was useless, accepted the gift in meek gratitude.

The short railroad journey was uneventful enough. The girl sat comfortably, immersed in papers. It is true, her mind was slightly distracted by their number; but when it had occurred to her to take them all with her to her uncle's house, it mattered less what she read first, the distressful doubt, that she might be missing the best things, being thus overcome. The grapes she left untouched. Grapes, she argued, were not a fruit for persons in rude health like herself; they were essentially a delicacy for invalids. She would try to take them home for her mother; but if her uncle should chance to be specially fond of them, and she caught him eyeing them in wistful greed—why, then he should have them. Was not the poor man more than half an invalid?

The well-contented guard passed with respectful salutation at every station, and lingered by her window—not intrusively or in any way causing offence, but in a manner that inspired confidence, and rendered communication easy, should his charge wish to say or ask anything. Generally it was a broad back that presented itself, a yard or two from the window. Hazel could not discover that he walked sideways, yet it was wonderful how the back was suddenly *there*; also was it marvellous how his numerous duties: seeing luggage in and

out of the vans, the shouting of instructions, the assisting out and showing in of passengers, even the closing of doors left open by phlegmatic men or ladies in clean gloves, finally the waving of the green flag—all seemed to be efficiently accomplished in front of, or curiously near to, her own compartment.

She had half a mind to give him the grapes: he looked so very warm; but upon reflection she came to the conclusion that a glass of beer, in which he might indulge at the cost of a very small diminution of Paul's tip, would be a more appropriate refreshment for a hot railway guard than grapes, and in all probability more to his taste. Besides, her mother, even her uncle, would appreciate them more.

At Paddington Station the guard could not do enough for her. He seemed quite distressed that more was not required of him, and inclined to think Thomas, Mr. Desborough's footman, officious! He was gratified, however, with the girl's prettily expressed thanks for his care of her, and by her friendly little nod of farewell.

If Thomas experienced any feeling of surprise at the surfeit of reading matter Miss Le Mesurier bade him collect, he doggedly concealed any such emotion, and followed the little lady down the platform with a pile, carried traywise, between his two hands, bearing in its centre the basket of grapes, to the waiting carriage.

A few minutes later she found herself entering the same room, in which her uncle had received her before; but this time she was not so fearful.

"You seem to have been plentifully provided with entertainment for the journey," her uncle observed, half rising to receive a timid kiss upon his left whisker, his eye lighting upon the heap that a servant was placing on a side-table. "Is that young Edward again, he of the buns, or are all your brothers given to reckless expenditure?"

"It was not any of the boys this time," Hazel replied laughing; "Mr. Charteris got them. I could not finish even one, so I thought I would bring them with me. It seemed a pity to leave so many in the train."

"Mr. Charteris, eh? That is the elderly Paul, is not it?" the old man asked, chuckling. He was in high good-humour, more free from pain than had been the case for some time, and bent upon enjoying the society of this naïve girl, his great-niece, to whose visit he had looked forward with a sense of pleasure that surprised himself.

"Elderly?" Hazel questioned, at a loss.

"Why, yes," her uncle returned. "You said he must be thirty and more. But you would not allow he was bald."

Hazel had at once noticed the absence of wrappings about the poor gouty foot, which to-day was encased, like its fellow, in a comfortable slipper; and

guessed, in glad sympathy, that her uncle's health was much improved since her last visit. But she did not inquire after it; she did not believe in the wisdom or kindness of at once driving the poor man's thoughts back upon the subject that too generally held them, and from which, in all probability, they had not long strayed.

She seated herself in companionable proximity, and fell to talking of family news and family doings, since they two had last met.

"And your story?" her uncle asked presently.

"It came back," Hazel said, shaking her head dolefully. "I was particularly sorry, as I had a special and good purpose to spend the money on."

"A new frock?" inquired her uncle.

Hazel opened her eyes at this frivolous sally; her simple ideas upon dress began and ended with a few yards of inexpensive material, made up by the provident Mrs. Doidge—Hazel herself assisting with the long seams.

"Oh no," she explained, "I was expecting *five pounds* or so. If you like, you shall read it some day—coming fresh to it, you might be able to pick out faults that have escaped mine and Teddie's notice. But I very much fear," she added dejectedly, "that it is all faults from beginning to end, in which case, of course, it would not patch up."

"I daresay your talents lie in other directions," her uncle said, quite sympathetically for him. "You play and sing, don't you?"

"Yes," Hazel admitted.

"Thank Heaven you don't give the young ladies' invariable answer 'A little,'" Mr. Desborough exclaimed in approval. "The girl who plays and sings 'a little' is generally merciless in the number and length of her attempts, and in the frequency with which she renders them. Go to the piano now and let me hear what you can do."

Somewhat reluctantly, Hazel rose to do his bidding. Like all sensitive temperaments, the girl was influenced in a great degree by her surroundings and by the atmospheric conditions of the moment. Just now she felt utterly disinclined for this sudden and most unexpected performance of any musical ability she might possess, with her Uncle Desborough as auditor. The music-stool became a dock, and the little prisoner was put upon her trial before a severe and critical judge.

She seated herself and played, badly enough, a bright piece of Chopin—a sorry choice for nervous fingers and distracted mind. But under all his brusque, nay, hard, exterior there lay somewhere deep down in his breast a very human and sympathetic heart, a fact too often overlooked or forgotten by his friends, and consequently—there being no one to remind him of it—forgotten by himself. Hazel's friendly, gentle ways, and sweet spontaneity had gone straight to the cen-

tre of that long-slumbering organ, causing it to stir in new and warm pulsations, to his own no small amazement. He was better aware than the girl herself of the height and depth to which such delicate sensibilities as constituted her mental and spiritual composition, could rise and fall; and knew well enough that the present moment was inauspicious for showing her talent in its true dimensions.

"That is a beautiful thing," was all he said. "Play me something more."

At that there whelmed over Hazel a sense of shame. How unkind and unfair to make any one listen to such poorly executed music—most of all her uncle, who, she now gathered for the first time, was an artist, an expert—for she had instantly detected the sympathy in his tone—to whom, therefore, her best was due. How unkind to let her nervous self-consciousness entirely spoil that which, to such an one, might prove a pleasure, if she but did her best—a pleasure that she feared the old man all too seldom enjoyed in his lonely life. She played again, Grieg this time, with her whole heart in the rendering; then, with a quick change of mood and key, she began to sing a sweet, plaintive ditty, her fervent little soul in her voice, tender, exquisite; then another and yet another.

Tired at last, she rose from the piano.

"Good gracious, child," Uncle Desborough exclaimed, amazed. "Where did you learn to sing like that?"

"Mother used to teach me," Hazel responded simply; "but I don't have any lessons now."

CHAPTER XV

Lunch was announced, and the presence of servants did not permit of intimate talk; but, once again settled in the library, Hazel opened fire, very gently, it must be confessed.

"Uncle Percival," she began, "do you remember giving me a ten-pound note last time I was here?"

"I am not likely to forget that incident," her uncle replied drily, "and how royally you flung legacies at my servant, after bestowing the note upon him—for present expenses, it is to be presumed. Well?"

"Well," Hazel said gravely, "on that occasion you made it impossible for me to accept it for myself; but since then you have been so kind, so—so courteous that—Uncle Percival, will you give me five pounds?"

"What for?" Mr. Desborough asked bluntly, but with interest.

"Well," Hazel replied. "I should have liked to keep that a secret if I could; but it is quite impossible, because as soon as I have got it, I must go out, and you will want to know where I am going."

"Certainly," her uncle assented, "and you must have the carriage." He was looking amused now. "Shopping, I suppose?"

"No," Hazel said; "I want to leave it at Teddie's lodging."

"Whew," whistled Uncle Percival. "Sits the wind in that quarter? Is the boy out of pocket-money?"

"It is much more serious than that," Hazel told him gravely. "He has no money to pay his rent with, and the landlady is beginning to—to kick, he says."

Mr. Desborough raised his hand and coughed, to hide a smile. "How has he got himself into this mess?" he asked. "I thought he had a rise lately."

"He was given a rise," Hazel admitted, "but he says that from that time his difficulties began. You see," she went on confidentially, "he treated five friends to a champagne lunch, and a theatre or two—I suspect stalls; I did not want to worry him by asking; but Teddie is so generous."

"The young jackanapes," ejaculated Mr. Desborough.

"I must be very, very careful to keep from him that the money comes from *you*," Hazel said, with charming frankness. "If he knew, or even suspected, I should not be able to get him to accept it."

"Upon my—," Uncle Percival began, but checked himself. "Well," he continued, with pseudo-humility, that sat oddly upon him, "let him think it comes from you, as indeed it does."

"But where should I have got it?" she asked, with dramatic gesture. "However," she added, "let him puzzle, the truth will probably only strike him after he has paid his debts—and then, though he may scold me a little, it will be too late for him to refuse it."

"Well," Mr. Desborough said, "ring, and we will order the carriage and leave the money at the domicile of this grateful young man. He seems to be of a very independent character."

"For anything I know, he will save up and pay you back," Hazel announced cheerfully; "but that can't be helped, can it? We cannot allow him to be turned into the streets. Did you say *we* would go?"

"If you don't object to an old man's company," he returned.

"How nice," Hazel exclaimed, in genuine pleasure; "and it will do you good, Uncle Percival."

"Humph," was his gruff response, more for the sake of rendering less astonishing the unusual order to the servant, who now appeared—to seem at least in some way his ordinary self—than that he felt any displeasure in the enterprise.

Hazel's undisguised delight in the prospect of a drive in his, a cross-grained old man's company, warmed his heart, till he felt almost ashamed of a childlike eagerness to "be off."

With very slight assistance from Thomas, Mr. Desborough reached the carriage step, where he turned, and with courtly politeness helped the lady to be seated. Hazel named the address in Baker Street, and away they drove.

"How well a top hat suits you," Hazel said, eyeing her august relative in frank admiration. "You look like an old Duke."

"Pshaw," he returned, much pleased, and furtively twisting his moustache, "the fitter company then for a little princess like yourself," he added, with old-fashioned gallantry.

Hazel glanced in naïve amazement at her simple cotton gown. "A princess," she said amusedly, "dressed in stuff that cost sixpence-three-farthings a yard."

"No one would notice your dress with—" he ended abruptly and changed the subject. "With that face," he had been on the point of adding, but he disapproved of such outspoken compliments, and was afraid of making the girl vain. One of the chief charms of Hazel's unusual beauty was her complete unconsciousness of it—a charm that Percival Desborough fully appreciated.

Arrived at the lodging-house, Hazel made her way in alone. "I shall not keep you long," she told her companion, "but I have made up my mind to speak to the landlady privately."

"I am Miss Le Mesurier," she announced to Mrs. Walters, who herself opened to Hazel.

"The young gentlemen's sister, Miss, I presume?" the woman inquired respectfully. Indeed the sight of the liveried servants and handsome bays quite awed her, and set her wishing that she had sent Caroline, despite her dirty working apron, to open the door, instead of doing that service herself.

"Yes, and I should like to see their rooms, if you please," Hazel returned, "and I have a letter that I wish to leave on Mr. Edward's table."

"Certainly Miss, certainly," the landlady replied soothingly, manifestly anxious to assure the visitor that nothing could be more reasonable.

She led the way upstairs. "This is the sitting-room, Miss," Mrs. Walters informed her, throwing open the first door on a landing above, "and that is Mr. Gerald's room opening out of it—Mr. Edward sleeps upstairs, as did Mr. Hugh before he left."

The girl looked about her with much interest. It was a poor little room enough, but clean and sunny. Oilcloth covered the floor, with an occasional cheap rug stranded here and there. White lace curtains draped the little bow window, and a struggling geranium wrestled with existence in too small a pot, with pale, caked earth, on a little flower-stand with a green woolly mat. The

inevitable horsehair sofa and chairs predominated, covered with the equally inevitable white cotton crochet antimacassars, and a hideously designed clock ticked harshly on the little shiny black mantelpiece, behind which a wonderfully dim and speckled mirror had its place. Upon the walls hung photographs of Mrs. Walters at all ages, sometimes alone, sometimes one of a self-conscious group, attired in ugly large-hipped costumes.

"I don't put many ornaments on the mantelpiece, Miss," the landlady explained. "The young gentlemen likes to sit in them easy chairs, and to put their feet on it." She pointed out two chairs that looked to Hazel something misnamed, seeing that they were shiny and slippery and studded here and there with bristles, with a large lumpy dent in the centre of each.

A small sideboard, rather overloaded with wax fruit under glass cases, stood against the wall opposite the fireplace—Hazel suspected that some of these "ornaments" had given way to the feet, now absent—and a round table occupied the middle of the room.

"I suppose they have meals here?" Hazel asked, regarding it critically.

"Breakfast and dinner, Miss; late dinner, if you please. They get their lunches out."

"Yes, I know," Hazel told her; "but I mean, do they dine at *this* table?"

The piece of furniture in question, though standing straight, somehow gave one the impression of ricketiness, and the girl's warm heart was yearning over the comfort of her brothers.

"Oh yes, Miss; and there is room and to spare on it, now that Mr. Hugh is gone—he would always have the plant-stand drawn up for the potatoes or the second vegetable."

"I cannot stay long," Hazel announced; "I must not keep my uncle waiting, but I wanted to ask you a thing or two: I know you won't mind. Are their appetites good?"

Mrs. Walters raised her hands and eyes to the ceiling, smoke-begrimed above the gas bracket. "I have never known their like for eating," she declared solemnly. "I have a small appetite myself," she went on conversationally, bringing her eyes to the level of Hazel's face, and her hands to her sides, "a little I must have, but not enough to choke the system."

Hazel looked aghast. "But do my brothers choke their systems?" she asked, somewhat startled.

"No, Miss," the woman returned, hastening to reassure her visitor. "Oh no, but sometimes I can't but think it would not take much more. But there," she added, "it may be that I take so little myself."

"Yet you are not thin," the girl observed with kindly interest.

This was delicately put, for in truth Mrs. Walters was very distinctly stout.

The landlady shook her head. "It is not fat," she announced solemnly, pinching her own plump arm.

"No?" questioned Hazel gently, surprised.

"No," Mrs. Walters averred, with grave insistency, "it is not fat. I am blown out, you know, Miss. Puffy, as you might say."

Hazel crossed the room, and entered the tiny bedchamber beyond. So this was where he slept! Dear, old, plodding Gerald, how she hoped he was comfortable. She made bold to sit on the bed to test its springs. There was not much response to her vigorous bouncing. Everything was clean and tidy, but there was certainly no superfluity of luxury. The sight of the water-bottle put Hazel in mind of the distressed geranium. She took it up and made her way to the outer room again.

"You do not mind?" she asked brightly of the landlady. "I am so fond of tending plants."

Mrs. Walters replied graciously enough, but commented upon the amazing amount of water the plant "took." This expression of opinion went far to reassure Hazel on the subject of the boys' systems; food and drink were evidently subjects on which Mrs. Walters was wont to exaggerate.

Teddie's bedchamber was the counterpart of Gerald's, and Hazel had soon made her inspection of it. There was but one striking characteristic—not unusual to top bedrooms—to mark it from the other: whereas in the lower room all was concise, in pairs and sets, upstairs the ewer did not match with the basin, whilst an enormous tumbler overshadowed a diminutive water-bottle. The mirror was cracked across, making one's features appear horribly defective and out of drawing, and the few cheap ornaments were for the most part oddments—a detail which the girl's quick eye noted as a slight improvement upon the austere, unbending stiffness of the severe pairs, ranged upon mantelshelf and toilet-table in Gerald's sanctum.

The loving sister smoothed and patted the little white pillow—Mrs. Walters had remained without upon the landing—and, from her position at the head of the bed, took note of the exact view of the room that must needs meet her brother's waking eyes in the morning light. It was not particularly cheerful: a rickety chest of drawers, lacking two knobs; and above it, hung all askew, a large card bearing the words, "Lord, remember me, a sinner," was within his direct range of vision. The text was printed in silver letters, surrounded by a maze of pink roses, whilst from behind a large cluster of the same blossoms, upon the left of the card, there arose, with amazing abruptness and lack of warning, an emaciated church spire. Hazel could only hope that Teddie was not prone to lie long and reflect; or if he was, that, for his own peace of mind, he kept a clear conscience.

She left her bank-note in its envelope, together with a scribbled explana-

tion, in a conspicuous place on the little dressing-table. It was conceivable that he would prefer that Gerald should know nothing of it, so that she would not leave it in the sitting-room. She made her way downstairs, followed by Mrs. Walters. At the house-door she turned to say good-bye.

"I hope I have not troubled you," she said. "It is good of you to let me see the rooms: one is so interested, you know."

"Quite so, Miss," the landlady answered, "and I hope you are pleased, Miss."

"I think they look fairly comfortable," Hazel returned, somewhat cautiously, "and beautifully clean. I know," she added, anxious to be just, "I know that you do not ask a very heavy rent, so the boys must not expect anything grand."

Again bidding her good-bye, Hazel tripped down the steps, and seated herself in the carriage, which at that moment had pulled up, after a turn or two up and down the road.

"Well," her uncle said, "I am afraid, if you are to catch the train your mother mentioned, it is about time to be making our way to the station. Do you wish to return first, to fetch your papers and what not?"

"Oh, mother's grapes," exclaimed Hazel. "Yes, please, if there is time."

The order home was given, and soon, armed with the same provision for her entertainment upon the return journey, Hazel, still accompanied by her uncle, was driven to the station.

"Come and see me again soon, my dear," the old man said. "And you are quite sure," he added, lowering his voice, that the attendant footman might not overhear his words, "you are quite sure that you won't accept pocket-money for yourself?" for he had been pressing notes upon the girl for her own use.

"Quite sure, thank you, uncle dear. You must not mind. You see, I don't actually *need* it—Teddie did," and she kissed the wrinkled cheek that was presented to her with real warmth. "Good-bye."

And once again the old man was left alone.

It was in the loneliness of the hours that followed that Percival Desborough made up his mind to go to Hazelhurst.

Alighting from the train, Hazel's eyes encountered Paul Charteris. She looked up and smiled in frank affection, at once setting his anxiety at rest respecting his reception: for he had not asked permission to take the little lady home. Intimating by word and gesture that the guard was welcome to the very considerable amount of literature within the carriage, Hazel followed her chariteer out of the station, and was soon once more seated beside him in the trap. But alas for his new-found peace and elation of spirit, the girl's manner quickly returned to the determined evasion of eye, of question, of himself generally; and again Paul was profoundly troubled. Almost in silence they reached home.

Things had continued in this wise for many long days, when the young man, coming to call at Hazelhurst, chanced upon Hazel in the flower-garden. She made as if to flee, but the next moment, recollecting herself, she stood her ground, and awaited his approach.

"It is my birthday to-day," Paul announced, as they shook hands, feigning not to heed her timorous demeanour.

"Is it really?" she exclaimed, much interested. Hazel was young—a birthday was still a great event to her. "I wish you many happy returns of the day. Mother is in the house; shall we go to her?"

"Certainly," Paul answered, and hesitated. "You will not give me a tangible token of your well-wishing?" he asked wistfully.

Hazel looked her amazement. "How can I?" she questioned. "I did not know in time." How very odd and—and bold of Paul to ask for a birthday present! One did not ask one's nearest relatives!

"It would not take you long to gather me a flower," he answered, unashamed, although he read something of her thoughts. "I should prize that immensely."

Hazel turned at the suggestion, in a little flutter of eagerness, to select a rosebud, or whatever chanced to look most fitting, wherewith to honour the occasion; and after some diligent search was about to pluck, when of a sudden something stayed her hand. In an instant the sweet, unconscious child was gone, and a dignified maiden stood in her stead.

"You may take anything you fancy," she said. "Miles won't mind."

The young man stood appalled. "You—you won't give me one?" he expostulated.

"You can't want it very much if you find it too much trouble to take one for yourself," she answered evasively.

"Hazel," he said, much aggrieved, "you have given me flowers before. Don't you remember the little bunch of Shepherd's Eye?"

Yes, Hazel remembered—she was minded how glad she had been that he thought them so pretty, and had asked for them so eagerly. He was just as eager now—he was fond of flowers. How was it that somehow she could not bring herself to give him one? It was so little to ask of her! What had happened—what had come between her and this dear friend? What was it? It had been much happier then. Surely he was the same? Yet something was not the same, somehow things were different. She looked up: there was troubled questioning in the wistful brown eyes. Was she relenting?

"You will give me a flower?" he asked eagerly, drawing a step nearer.

His ardour frightened her. Had he spoken lightly and affected carelessness—had he managed to hide, or disguise, much of the fervour that

marked his simple request, she would perhaps, though troubled and perplexed at her own reluctance, have complied with it. She drew back as he advanced and put her hands behind her, looking half timid, half defiant.

"No," she answered determinedly.

Paul stood regarding her thoughtfully. "Why not?" he asked at length, bluntly.

"I—I don't know," Hazel murmured, truthfully enough. "Won't you please come to the house?"

For a moment they stood thus, regarding one another in silence: the brown eyes still in wistful questioning, the manly blue-grey ones half-angry, half-sad, wholly puzzled.

"I think not to-day," he said at last. Raising his cap, he turned upon his heel, and, retracing his steps, was soon lost in the shadow of the wood.

CHAPTER XVI

Two days later, at the same hour, Paul Charteris was seated in Helen's drawing-room.

"She is so young," Helen was pleading; "such a child."

Paul sat in silence, big, manly, and troubled withal.

"I feel such an unutterable brute to speak to you about it," he returned at length. "If you knew how I have struggled to keep it to myself; but it is too much, it goes beyond my strength."

He groaned, turning his eyes from the delicate face, in remorse at the conflicting emotions he had raised.

If only Hubert Le Mesurier were alive! There would be nothing about which to hesitate; they would talk as man to man. But the widowed Helen, so gentle, so defenceless, seeking only what was best for her child. What a brute he was! And yet, speak he must: he could no longer contain himself. He knew well enough that the next time he encountered Hazel alone he must demand an explanation of her strange manner towards himself. He felt it was highly improbable he could see Hazel without opening his heart to her. It was but right to warn Helen as to how things stood with him: it had become essential that Helen should be told all there was to tell.

"Paul," she said at last, very gently, "you must go away for a time."

Paul's face grew pale. He regarded her in mute consternation.

"It is for her good," she went on. "Does not that reflection make you willing to go—to bear a few months' banishment?"

Poor Paul, his elbow on his knee, his head in his hand, could only groan aloud.

"Do you mean I am to go, uncertain of my fate, before I speak to her?" he asked; and the pain in his eyes made Helen waver.

"Would it not be harder afterwards?" she asked, seeking to argue with him. "Suppose—mind, I do not know my child's heart towards you, though of this I am sure, that she is fond of you in her innocent, frank way—but suppose she—she gives you permission to stay—how can you go then, Paul?"

"I could go then," he cried vehemently, "far more easily than now, when all is uncertainty and torture. It would be hard; but I could go if need be," he added wistfully, "if you demand such trial of me."

"It is not to try you," she made answer. "It is for Hazel's good, that she may remain settled and undisturbed, that she may have time for reflection and to learn her own mind." She paused. Hazel's voice was heard trilling a light air as she passed through the hall.

"You mean that I may speak?" the young man asked, springing to his feet, an eager flush rising to his face. "She will never learn her own mind toward me if I do not speak—she will never think of me in that way. I should only return to find things as they are. You will let me speak?"

The two regarded one another for some moments—the two beings who, of all the world, loved Hazel best. She, with that wonderful mother-love that denies self, that sacrifices all to the good and the happiness of the child, that asks no return; he, with the strong man's heart-whole devotion, yearning, protecting, longing to have and to hold and to cherish, through all changes, but fiercely demanding love's tribute of love.

Helen sighed softly, and smiled.

"Go, then," she said. "I expect you will find her in the wood. And, Paul, if she does not know herself—if she cannot answer you now as you would wish, do not despair. Be hopeful, and leave things to time to put right."

In two strides the young man was beside her. Raising her hand to his lips, he reverently kissed the slender fingers, and without a word turned and left her.

As he walked through the wood, Paul Charteris soon descried the girl's form, flitting now here now there, now eluding his sight like some will-o'-the-wisp, strayed far from home during the night, and thus overtaken by day—a will-o'-the-wisp made visible to the eye now that its light was extinguished, or, rather, absorbed by the sunshine. Of a sudden he came upon her. She was standing in the middle of the clear space that commended itself to the purpose in hand: she was

feeding her pets, dispensing crumbs of bread and cake around her. A ringdove cooed upon her shoulder, whilst a pair of squirrels frisked about her feet.

"What a little witch she is!" Paul mused as he watched, himself unseen.

He tried to call "Hazel," but throat and tongue refused their office. Instead, he advanced and discovered himself.

Hazel nodded to him brightly.

"Did you come to see them fed?" she asked. "Are they not fascinating?"

"I came to see you," he made answer. "Hazel, I have something very special to say. Will you listen?"

Hazel looked about her, the brightness dying from her face. There was no escaping him now. The most direct path to the house he himself blocked. If she turned down a by-way he would but follow.

"Will you listen, Hazel?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said, reluctant, half defiant. "Tell me now, whilst I feed the birds," she added imperiously.

"No," Paul rejoined stoutly, "it is much too important and—and serious. I will wait till you have finished."

Although the girl had practically completed her task when he came upon her, the last few crumbs were scattered, one by one, from the small yet seemingly inexhaustible stock still left. And then, when he thought the time had come, when all seemed ready, Hazel sought to fix his attention upon a hundred-and-one different objects—this plant, that tree, the brightness of a pet squirrel's eyes, the bushiness of another's tail, the soft grey plumage of the wood pigeon. Would Paul like one on his shoulder? She believed she could coax it there. Paul was soon nearly frantic, fearful of offending or scaring her, divided between risking the one or the other, torn with indecision, yet determined throughout not to let so fitting an opportunity slip by ungrasped. Hazel had no faintest clue as to how he was minded: she only knew that he was grave again, and, though she had not so much as given one glance at his face, she knew his eyes to be serious and deep and unfathomable. In a word, he was in that tiresome mood that somehow troubled her. She must divert his attention from herself, she must distract his mind with all manner of interests; and these the wood amply afforded.

"Look at that green caterpillar," she exclaimed. "We might—"

"Hazel," Paul said desperately, interrupting her, "will you listen? It is so important—to me."

"You said 'serious' before," Hazel rejoined, a trifle flippantly. Her back was turned upon him. She began busily to collect fir-cones.

"I want to tell you that I love you," the young man said at last, simply and quietly. "I love you, Hazel."

"Thank you," Hazel said in polite good faith, half turning a flushed cheek

toward him. "It is—it is very good of you. But if you don't mind, try not to feel serious about it. Of course I like to hear you say it—just once; but I knew it, I—I mean I always felt you were fond of me."

"Child, child," Paul murmured. Then aloud: "Are you fond of me?"

"Oh yes," she answered frankly. "You know I am. But it is not a very usual thing to ask a lady," she added reprovingly. "Teddie says you have to guess at a lady's feelings. By the way, have you had tea?"

Despite his emotion, a smile of genuine amusement, mingled with exquisite tenderness, played about Paul's mouth as his eyes dwelt upon the little kneeling figure, so determinedly turned from him. He must try again. He did not want to startle her, he must endeavour to make his meaning dawn slowly upon her mind; and when he had achieved this, what, ah what would her answer be! Had the girl's feelings toward him only to be awakened? Was love dormant? Or—unspeakable anguish was in the thought—was there no love within her breast for him? He must know—he must know: the pain of uncertainty was becoming more than he could bear. He recalled Helen's words and found comfort in them. "If she does not know herself, if she cannot answer you now as you would wish, do not despair, be hopeful, and leave things to time to put right."

"Hazel," he said gently, "I am so anxious. I should be so grateful to you if you would stand up and—and give me your undivided attention, just for two minutes."

The girl complied, reluctant, wondering, half uneasy at the appeal in his voice, half curious. She stood before him with folded hands and waited.

Paul came a step nearer. "Hazel, it *is* a usual question to ask, when a man loves a girl as I love you, with all his heart, with all his soul; when he feels he must have her love, or live without it in misery all his days. Then he *must* ask her if she could ever love him."

For the first time Hazel looked up in his face, her own paling.

"Is this—is this a *proposal*?" she asked, awe and solemnity widening and darkening her eyes. "Do you mean—you want me to—to actually *marry* you?"

Paul's lips twitched at the corners. "Yes," he said stoutly. "Tell me—tell me that you will."

There was a pause, passed in agony by Paul, in amazed reflection by Hazel.

"Child, answer me," he said at length hoarsely, possessing himself of her hands.

"I might, after years and years," she said consideringly. "But, Mr. Charteris, I never dreamed you were a—that you felt like that. You are not at all a usual sort." Her mind had reverted to Digby Travers, his looks, his sighs, his serenades. How troublesome he was to manage; how he would always try to get her to himself, when she was longing for the society of others; how he would hold her hand

too long at every possible opportunity. That was the lover one read of in stories, one saw depicted in pictures. But—but she began to acknowledge to herself that it was possible that here was a "real one" of another type; his face, his eyes all strenuous, all—all. And he had this in common with the lover of her ideas: he held her hands—both! as if he would never let them go.

Hazel tried to free her hands.

"Yes," said Paul, "when you have told me that you love me."

Silence fell between them.

"If I say I do," Hazel asked slowly, weighing her words, "does it mean I must—does it mean I have got to marry you?"

"It would mean that some day you might love me enough to like to marry me," Paul answered boldly and simply. "But never mind that now, Hazel. Just tell me whether you love me, even—even a little, and I will wait so patiently for that little to grow."

Again she fell to reflecting. "I am fond of you," she said earnestly, "and, yes, perhaps you could call it—call it—just a very little, you know. But I don't know why you need ask me," she said resentfully; "and now will you please let go my hands?"

"Then you care for me—a little?" the young man asked joyfully.

"Yes," Hazel returned with gracious dignity, then, timidly, half in exultation, half in fear, "Am I an engaged woman now?" she asked.

"If you will accept me as your lover, yes," Paul answered. He was all aglow with happiness. It is true that she was timid, shrinking, only now half conscious of what he meant, of what he offered. Yet through it all, nay, because of that very timidity, he felt that she cared for him—a little, and a great yearning filled his soul to make that little much. As yet he must be content that she had not repelled him; for, child as she was, Paul felt assured that the sweet, strong woman-being within her would have rejected his love with none of the uncertainty with which she had half accepted it; would have rejected it finally and with decision—for the time being, at all events. How utterly adorable she was, this queen among girls, this innocent, but half awake, maiden! How could he ever deserve her—how make himself worthy? What an inestimable privilege was his: to teach her love. An intense, an infinite tenderness was astir in the young fellow's strong, manly nature. Ah, how patient, how gentle he must be! Nor could he ever be patient and gentle enough. He would bear that in mind, always.

"Hazel, my little love," he murmured. "Look in my eyes and tell me once more that you love me—a little. Say: 'Paul, I love you, and presently I shall love you more.'"

Hazel raised her eyes obediently, but only to his collar stud. "I—I love you a little," she stammered.

"You won't look at me?" he pleaded.

"I *am* looking, hard," she averred, blinking at his chin.

"And you won't say, 'Paul'?"

"It would be too silly," she objected, "when you are here, attending to me."

He longed to seal the compact between them with a kiss, a solemn, sacred kiss; but he felt the time was not yet. She had given him so much! Just now he must not ask for more. He must respect her sweet delicacy; he must not dismay or trouble her. He would be patient, gentle, all unselfish. In this wise he might grow to be worthy of her love, and, worthy, might gain it.

CHAPTER XVII

To return to the day of Hazel's visit to her brother's lodgings, Teddie's incredulous delight, when he came home to the rooms in Baker Street, and had toiled up to the little top chamber, somewhat dispirited, to find the bank-note upon his dressing-table, may be imagined. He eagerly seized upon and read the few lines that Hazel had written in explanation. They did not tell him much; only that he might spend the money with an easy mind; asking him to try to keep free from debt in the future, as next time she would find it far more difficult to help him.

Although Teddie knew of his sister's visit to their great-uncle, the thought never entered his head that he could possibly owe this very opportune aid to that circumstance. After much silent puzzling—for he was not going to confide in Gerald on the subject—he came to the conclusion that Hazel had, probably through the medium of Miles, sold her gold bangle, and so provided her distressed brother with pecuniary assistance. Mentally dubbing her a little brick, Teddie proceeded to make his toilet for the evening, with more zest than he had pursued any other of the day's duties. He poured a plentiful supply of water into the basin with the plain red band around its girth, from the ewer that was besprinkled with blue flowers. Removing his coat and collar, and thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, he plunged his hot face into its cool depths, whilst with wide-open eyes he glared glassily at the bottom of the basin, some two inches from his nose, in seemingly futile wrath; then rolled them from side to side in fierce, yet vacant, contemplation of his environments, apparently much to his refreshment.

He emerged blowing like a grampus, and fell to rubbing his rosy countenance vigorously with the somewhat harsh little towel of Mrs. Walters's provid-

ing. He seemed to get an astonishing amount of satisfaction from these drastic measures, only desisting when his arms ached and his face was aglow with the friction. After belabouring his curly head severely with surprisingly stiff hair-brushes, he prized open the handleless little top drawer of the chest, which had been pushed injudiciously far in the shutting, with his pocket-knife—a broken, rusty, and blunt implement, long since dedicated to such uses—and supplied himself with a fresh collar and a change of tie. He would have liked to make a more complete toilet, for the Le Mesurier boys religiously dressed for the evening; but dressing meant a fresh shirt, and it frequently fell out that toward the end of the week clean shirts were scarce. To-day was Friday; the linen would be home to-morrow, and Teddie knew without looking that the first long drawer, boasting two knobs and devoted to the warding of his underclothing, was devoid of this particular article of wearing-apparel; for he had recklessly indulged himself this week.

So, perforce content with his hardy ablutions and slight changes of attire, he descended to the little sitting-room, to find Gerald already ensconced in his easy-chair, his slippers feet duly in place against the mantelshelf, luxuriously smoking an attenuated cigarette. He, too, had regulated his toilet with skill and sagacity, in accordance with the day of the week; but, more favoured than Teddie—for Gerald was never in arrear with his half of the rent—he had used a pint milk-jug of hot water sent up from the kitchen from the landlady, by Caroline the hand-maid.

"By Jove, you look pink!" Gerald remarked lazily, as his brother seated himself in the opposite chair and settled his feet in position. "Cold water, I suppose?"

"I prefer it," Teddie answered, briefly but good-humouredly. "Whew, I am peckish! I hope dinner will be punctual."

The cloth was already spread, and in a few minutes Caroline entered the room with a loaded tray, somewhat short of breath.

Gerald carved the mutton, Teddie served the vegetables.

"Oh, if you please, sir," Caroline said before retiring, "missis says will you please to knock on the floor with yer 'eel when ye're ready for the sweet. It is my evening out, and missis says as 'ow I can get ready now and she'll answer yer."

She addressed herself to Gerald, but looked the while deprecatingly at Teddie, who, though perhaps the more severe of the two young gentlemen, and more particular to have things to his liking, was her favourite, even while she stood in greater awe of him.

"Very well," Gerald returned; "but why doesn't she—Mrs. Walters—ask us to ring as usual?"

"She's a-sitting in the cool, sir—she's in the first-floor front sitting-room." Caroline almost whispered this solemn circumstance; for the first-floor front

sitting-room was a marvel of shining lustres, hunting scenes, and crimson and gold furniture. "She mightn't 'ear the *bell*, but she's just under yer 'eel."

"All right," Gerald rejoined, and nodded dismissal. "We will make her hear."

"Don't be late home, Caroline," Teddie put in, warningly. "Back by ten sharp, mind."

"Yes, sir," Caroline answered docilely.

"And tell your young man from me that you are a good enough sort," he continued; "and I would say more, but I don't want to make you vain." He began to attack his dinner with youthful ardour and interest.

"Thank you, sir," the girl answered deferentially. She left the room, quite overwhelmed with Mr. Edward's compliment, a broad smile of pleasure pervading her countenance.

"You are very genial to-night," remarked Gerald presently.

The two had by this time made considerable inroad on their somewhat astonishing platefuls, and were at leisure to take matters a little more easily.

"Am I?" asked Teddie, gratified. "I feel genial." And he beamed about the room.

Without further comment the two finished with the mutton, and began a solemn tattoo upon the floor with their heels; becoming so interested in the martial sounds produced with military precision and kettledrum-like effect, that they only desisted on becoming aware that Mrs. Walters was calling desperately from below, "I'm comin'."

The "sweet" of which Caroline had spoken proved to be baked sago. When the landlady reappeared to remove this dish, Teddie, with well-assumed carelessness, addressed her.

"By the way, Mrs. Walters," he said, "I believe I have an account to settle with you." He drew from his pocket the five-pound note, and handed it to the mollified woman. "Give me the change at your convenience," he added; "don't trouble now."

Gerald, from his armchair, turned and regarded his brother in speechless amazement. Recovering somewhat, he glanced with apprehensive interest at Teddie's waistcoat pocket, trying to ascertain whether the huge Waterbury watch—which, by the way, if sold, might bring the owner half-a-crown—was still there. The silver chain was in its place, and he fancied he heard the tick of that strong and renowned piece of mechanism.

"Where the deuce——" he began, but Teddie frowned at him warningly.

"And I wanted to tell you that I wish to give a dinner to two or three friends one day next week," he went on, quite informally. "I think it would be more homelike to give it here, and less expensive. You could get in some cooked things, so as not to have too much to do: a meat pie, for instance. You could manage

soup, fish, and a joint, could not you? One entrée would do, game or something. There only remain the sweets and the savoury, cheese and dessert, and, of course, coffee."

"I should have to get in help," Mrs. Walters announced; "me and Caroline could never manage alone."

"No?" Teddie asked. "Not a simple little dinner like that? However, that is your look-out. Get all the help you want; and, by the way, have you another table that we could shove up against this, and cover the two with one cloth?"

When Mrs. Walters withdrew Teddie sat him down to write his invitations.

"It is only old Hugh," he told his brother, who was puffing at his pipe in silence and in seeming insouciance, but was in truth very anxious to know the meaning of Teddie's sudden affluence. "It has bothered me all along that the old fellow left us without our giving any farewell ceremony."

Gerald grunted. "Who is to meet him?" he asked.

"Well, I thought old Hamilton might like to come," Teddie answered. "He has seen Hugh once or twice, and has taken a liking to him."

Gerald nodded. "Any one else?" he asked.

"What do you say to having Charteris? He does run up to town for a dinner occasionally."

The notes of invitation were written and posted, and, before going down to Hazelhurst next day, Teddie had another interview with Mrs. Walters.

"It is settled for Monday night," he told her. "I don't like to have these things hanging on. As far as I know at present, there will be three guests. You have got about two pounds in hand—refund yourself from that if the stuff makes you out of pocket. Anything over and above you can mention in the bill."

But once more at home, Teddie got the whole truth out of Hazel, and dire was his wrath. He partially forgave his repentant little sister on hearing the history of her first visit to her uncle, and the fate of the former note.

"And we are such good friends now," Hazel told him, "that, although I could not possibly take anything for myself, I felt I could ask for you, Teddie: I was so miserable about you."

Teddie was mollified, when he learned that his sister had informed her uncle, that she should endeavour to keep secret how she came by the money. But Monday afternoon found him seated in the library of the house in Lancaster Gate, in conversation with that august relative.

Mr. Desborough's surprise was extreme when the curly-headed youth was announced, and, truth to tell, he was very much interested and amused in the subsequent conversation.

"I never expected to be sitting *here*," Teddie declared ingenuously. "But as I believe there is some talk of your visiting us at Hazelhurst, I don't mind meeting

you half-way.”

”Thank you,” Mr. Desborough said drily.

”As to what has brought me here,” Teddie went on, ”you may perhaps guess. I have only just learned from my sister, that she actually asked you for money with which to help me in my—in my private affairs.”

”What then?” Uncle Percival asked gruffly as Teddie paused.

”What then?” his nephew repeated hotly. ”You don’t suppose for a moment that I can sit down in that knowledge without making a protest, do you?” He regarded his uncle fiercely, and awaited an answer.

”I don’t know, I am sure,” Mr. Desborough replied at length. ”I have forgotten how I should have felt at your age. I think I should have taken anything I could get.”

”I don’t believe you,” Teddie rejoined warmly. ”You may be a cantankerous old man, but I wouldn’t make myself out worse than I am if I were you.”

Mr. Desborough was about to expostulate angrily with Teddie on this somewhat intemperate expression, but when he had recovered sufficient breath for the purpose Teddie was, with bland indifference to his feelings, pursuing the conversation.

”I shall, of course, pay it back with all the speed in my power,” he said. ”Unfortunately it is already spent, or you should have the very note back. But I won’t leave this house more in your debt than I can help.” He rose, and, ransacking his pockets, produced four shillings and fivepence halfpenny, which he proceeded to place beside his uncle.

Mr. Desborough had much ado not to break into a hearty laugh. He began to think that the young fellow was as pleasing in his way as his little favourite, Hazel.

”Look you here, my boy,” he returned, bent upon pacifying his irate nephew, ”give an old man the pleasure of feeling he is of some use to his young relatives.”

”I can’t do it,” Teddie declared, with, however, a softened mien, for he was touched by the unmistakable note of appeal in the old man’s voice; ”but I am forced to accept what is already spent on the rent and on to-night’s dinner.”

”Ah!” Mr. Desborough exclaimed. ”To-night’s dinner, eh? What are you going to have?”

Teddie rehearsed the menu, then began to explain matters further, as he became conscious of his uncle’s extreme surprise.

”Oh, we don’t fare like that every evening, simple though it is,” he said in self-justification. ”This is an entertainment long owed to my brother Hugh, and a couple of friends are asked to meet him.”

Silence fell between them. Once the old man cleared his throat and was about to speak, but checked himself. When he did speak, he had evidently put

something of moment aside.

"What shall you give them to drink?" he asked, in kindly interest.

"Whisky and soda or bottled beer," Teddie told him with prompt decision.

"I did hope to give them a glass of decent claret, but that is off, of course."

Again a silence.

"Look you here, my boy." Uncle Desborough seemed bent upon having it out. Fear of rebuff had caused him to hesitate, and a strange sense of the unwonted good-fellowship of what he was about to propose made him awkward.

"What do you say to asking me to your dinner? Would not that square matters?"

"We shall be delighted," Teddie made answer, very stiffly. "But, of course, we cannot let one of our guests pay for his dinner."

"An old fellow like myself won't be in the way?" Mr. Desborough asked.

The half-wistful tone of the question, meant to be brusque, was not lost upon his nephew.

"Not at all," he replied, more genially. "We shall be glad of your company. A quarter to eight, then, to-night."

A few hours later Gerald and Teddie were receiving their four guests with hearty welcome. The amazement of Gerald and Hugh when Mr. Desborough was announced can hardly be conceived, for Teddie had mischievously kept dark the circumstance of his coming. Their innate good-breeding and natural courtesy prompted them quickly to overcome the tendency to stand petrified with open mouths; for after only a momentary pause they were shaking hands warmly, as if their uncle's condescension were the most natural thing in the world.

"You are Paul Charteris, of whom my niece Hazel spoke?" Mr. Desborough asked of the latest arrival.

Paul flushed at the sudden mention of that name.

"Yes," he returned, "I have the good fortune to be a near neighbour of the Le Mesuriers."

It was marvellous to witness the little party being chivied about by the bustling landlady and her handmaid, till at length, finding it impossible to congregate about the hearth or by the window, the expedience began to dawn upon the group of dispersing singly. Thus they sat in formidable array round the walls of the room, whilst Hugh and Mr. Desborough conversed amicably together, seated side by side upon the horsehair sofa.

Presently Mrs. Walters, very red and important, beckoned Gerald out of the room to discuss with him the subject of chairs; for, beside the two miscalled easy-chairs, there were but two others in the boys' sitting-room, and under no circumstances could the landlady of the Baker Street rooms be induced to lend any of the gold and crimson furniture of the "first-floor front." She always said it would be "robbing Peter to pay Paul," but it was natural that her tenants should

not see the connection, or, seeing, bring themselves to regard the matter in that light. This evening she was willing to make a great concession. Mr. Gerald might have the music-stool from the "first-floor front." It was against her rules, as he knew, but the company must be seated somehow, and the music-stool did not belong to a suite, so that it could be replaced readily, should any mischance overtake it.

The boys were, of course, at liberty to use their bedroom chairs as they pleased; so that when the guests were finally seated, Mr. Desborough and Mr. Hamilton occupied the two chairs of the sitting-room; Paul Charteris was accommodated with the cane chair from Gerald's bedroom, its somewhat low stature being at once remedied and rendered easy by a pillow; Hugh was perched upon the music-stool, whilst Gerald and Teddie affably dispensed hospitality, seated side by side on the sofa, which had been drawn up for that occasion.

"I am awfully sorry," Gerald said, "there is nothing much to offer in the way of drink." He glanced apologetically at the little sideboard, where bottled beer, whisky, and syphons of soda-water were arranged.

Uncle Percival cleared his throat.

"I—er—took the liberty," he said—and he glanced deprecatingly at Teddie—"I took the liberty—I hope an old uncle may be excused—of bringing some wine with me. My servant is still below, if you like him to bring up some sherry for the soup."

"Uncle Percival, you are a brick!" Hugh exclaimed, whilst Teddie gave his august relative an approving nod.

Thomas answered the bell, with decanter and glasses. A well-trained servant was he; for nothing could exceed his grave and deferential respect as his eyes lighted upon his master, seated upon the left hand—for Hugh was the guest of the evening—of the two flushed and eager young hosts upon the sofa. Yet the scene must of a surety have put a severe strain upon the risible muscles of any human being, necessitating a strong curb upon his sense of humour. Burgundy was handed round with the joint, and presently a suggestive "pop" from the region of the sideboard brought Mr. Desborough's eyes to meet Teddie's guiltily.

"Uncle, you are a trump," declared Teddie, slapping his uncle upon the shoulder.

Gerald rose and, leaning over Teddie, solemnly and in silence gripped his uncle's hand.

"I thought it might help with the evening's joviality," murmured the recipient of these attentions. "My dear fellows, what an excellent dinner you have provided—my compliments to your cook."

Which was tactful of Uncle Desborough.

Presently Paul Charteris rose and asked whether he had permission to pro-

pose a toast to the guest of the evening. Hugh modestly cast down his eyes as the company responded to the call with enthusiasm; Teddie meekly petitioning Providence that his shadow might never grow less.

Hugh rose to return thanks. He made a short speech, to the effect that, though happy in the capacity of Charteris's private secretary, he could never cease to regret that he had broken up the happy trefoil. He was half sorry that his brothers had not asked *his* whilom boss to this festive gathering, but that, perhaps after all, they had done rightly: Mr. Hooper might not have cared to come. He and Hugh had never had the luck to hit it off together as his brother Edward and *his* superior, Mr. Hamilton, had always done. Mr. Hooper was one of those men who did not appreciate the earnest endeavours and well-spent energy of the best years—or rather of a best year—at all events nine or ten months of a fellow's life. He had never liked or encouraged his, Hugh's, taste for drawing. He concluded by expressing his pleasure at finding himself in such thoroughly genial and sympathetic company, and he heartily returned his brother Edward's wish concerning his shadow—might all their shadows expand, if there must be any change in them. He begged to propose the health of their uncle, Percival Desborough.

Mr. Desborough acknowledged the courtesy and begged to be excused from either rising or speaking. His gout troubled him somewhat, and he had no gift for putting choice words together. He could but say he was sincerely glad to be among them all that night.

Upon this Teddie rose and asked the company to drink to his superior, Mr. Hamilton, to whom he had, he feared, in times gone by, been somewhat of a trial in his wild days. That, however, was all over. He had grown steady and was better understood than of yore. Nothing could exceed the happiness of the relations now existing between them.

Mr. Hamilton rose, was about to speak, but instead he broke into a hearty laugh and slapped the steady young man on the back. He declared that he would not say more than that he heartily concurred with all that his young host had deposed, and that he sincerely reciprocated his young host's feeling towards himself.

Gerald rose and said that since no one seemed inclined to name him, he thought he would waive ceremony and drink to himself if they would all join him, which they did amidst shouts of laughter. Gerald proceeded to remark that if he might be permitted he toasted his fellow-host Edward, more generally known as Teddie, who had taken upon himself almost the entire trouble and responsibility of the little dinner they were now enjoying. The company responded with cheers, waxing so warm that at length Teddie felt it incumbent on him to rise modestly and bow, which he did, somewhat bashfully.

He was about to reseal himself when Gerald gave him a sharp dig in the ribs and murmured a word, lost to the company amid the general turmoil. Teddie nodded comprehendingly and, placing his hand on Gerald's shoulder, together they stood and awaited silence.

"Gentlemen, you may smoke," issued from their lips, as through one mouth-piece, so soon as quiet was attained; and the two proffered their dilapidated cases, containing the excessively lean cigarettes they were in the habit of smoking.

The glances of the two elderly men present had met more than once during this unique entertainment—they met again now, and each drew from his pocket a well-stocked cigar case, and offered in return their contents, the while, in perfect gravity, they courteously accepted of their hosts' store.

Paul also came to the fore well provided with cigars, at the sight of which the boys' eyes glistened.

"Smoke your own stuff, any one who would rather," Teddie said graciously. "Thanks, yes," he added, "I'll have a cigar."

So that, while the hosts and their brother Hugh puffed contentedly at the fragrant and ever-coveted weed, Mr. Desborough, Mr. Hamilton, and Paul Charteris feigned to enjoy the worst cigarettes it had ever been their fate to taste, praising them most unduly in that they did not "bite," and were a pleasant, light change for an after-dinner smoke.

"Quite so," Teddie agreed: "those who like a light smoke will—er—will find them light. For myself I confess I prefer a cigar. But then, you know," he added ingenuously, "cigars are rather beyond my means just now, and are consequently a treat."

"I am glad you are thinking of running down to Hazelhurst for a visit," Gerald said conversationally, addressing his uncle. "Run down with me and Teddie on Saturday."

Percival Desborough was suffering from remorse. What an old fool he had been! What an unconscionable old fool! All these years, these bitter, lonely years of mental and bodily pain, years that were a nightmare to look back upon, were of his own contriving. These three handsome young fellows, of whom any relative might be proud—what an interest they would have brought into his life, and to what better purpose could he have put his money than to educate them and start them fair, upon a better footing in the world, than could be attained by their own and his poor niece Helen's unaided efforts? There were two more, he remembered, conceivably as artless and ingenuous as the four of Hubert Le Mesurier's children with whom he was already acquainted. What a fool, what a fool! He saw it now, and all for what? Fancied slights, imaginary affronts, from this or that member of the Westmacott family; probably the outcome of a distorted mind, fed upon morbid fancies, rendered irritable by bodily pain. Real

or fancied, they no way included his niece Helen; but in shutting himself away from the world, his injustice had embraced all within its narrow, bigoted bonds; contention and discord had rankled in his poor, warped mind, and burned fiercely, with little or nothing to feed the fire but his own imaginings.

As, in the long hours of the evening spent alone after Hazel's visit, when the determination came upon him to accept the invitation to go to Hazellhurst, so, in the lonely night hours that followed the entertainment provided by the Le Mesurier boys, did Percival Desborough make up his mind to agree to Gerald's proposal to run down with his young relatives the following Saturday.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I don't see how I can go on being engaged to you," Hazel announced.

It was a chilly day in October. Autumnal tints abounded in splendour. Hazel herself suggested autumn to Paul's mind. Her soft, nut-brown hair was surmounted by a little scarlet cap, fur-trimmed; and she wore a scarlet coat, edged also with brown fur. She seemed a combination of wych-hazel and mountain ash. They were driving in Paul's trap, on visiting intent. The persons about to be honoured were Bobbie Boutcher and Bobbie Boutcher's mother.

"Why not?" Paul asked, in no wise visibly dismayed.

"The boys," Hazel declared tragically. "You don't know what I have to endure: you have no idea. Even Uncle Percival teases now."

"What do they do?" Paul asked, much interested.

"Some of it is too—too awful to repeat," she averred solemnly. "But the names they call you—and me!"

"Give me an example," Paul said encouragingly.

"Yesterday, for instance," the girl pursued, "Teddie said: 'Hazel, I have not seen old Peter for two whole hours: I wonder if he has fled the country—you must not be too surprised if he has.' Sometimes they call you Moses, and bring up the old joke: Why is it known for certain that Moses wore a wig—only, of course, they don't apply it to you."

"I would not mind all that," Paul returned, laughing.

"There is one person who calls you Pau—calls you by your rightful Christian name," the girl amended hastily, "and that is Uncle Percival; but then he spoils it by putting the adjective 'elderly' before it."

"How do you mean?" Paul asked, somewhat startled.

"Oh, it is a silly old joke," she answered scornfully. "Months ago," she continued, with an emphasis that seemed to intimate years, "before I was seventeen, I had an absurd notion that you were about middle-aged. Of course, you are no longer young," she went on, in frank self-justification; "but when I told him—Uncle Percival—that you were over thirty, he asked if you were bald, and has ever since asked after you as the elderly—er——" she hesitated, slightly embarrassed.

"Paul?" suggested that young man, and he broke into a hearty laugh. "Child," he pursued, his laughter subsiding into a merriment something mischievous, "can't you even quote my Christian name, let alone call me by it?"

"It comes to the same thing," Hazel returned severely, "and I don't at all see why one must call you by it, because one happens to be engaged to you."

"You'll have to come to it, Hazel. What do you call me at home?"

"By it, sometimes," she admitted, "but I don't often mention you."

"Would you not think me very stiff, if I called you Miss Le Mesurier?" he asked, seeking to plead with her.

"Yes," she confessed, "but that is—that is different." Then she glanced up swiftly. The appeal in his voice was not lost upon her, and she wanted the evidence of her eyes to aid in reassuring herself, that he was not really hurt—that he did not seriously care. The eyes that met hers were brimming with fun, but beneath shone love and tenderness—love and tenderness so unmistakable, so all-convincing, that even Hazel could read, though she hardly understood. And just discernible, though on the surface only, Hazel comforted herself, was a faint, wistful shadow, a tiny cloud over the depth of brilliant happiness, and all because she could not bring herself to take the leap—such a little leap it must appear to him—of calling him Paul to his face.

"I will try some day," she said piteously, "but you must not mind if I can't. You don't mind, do you?" she asked anxiously.

"I should like to hear you say it, Hazel," he answered gravely, tenderly. "Is it so very hard, little one?"

For all answer the red cap nodded vigorously.

"Then I must be patient a while longer," he said, suppressing a sigh. When would the child know her mind and love him? It was inexpressibly sweet, this shy reception of his loving attention and most inadequate response to the warmth of his advances. There was an indescribable charm in the quick glance that returned his steady regard, in the slight, cool pressure of the little hand that could only be retained in his warm clasp very much against its will. She still preferred the presence of her beloved brothers with herself and Paul, to being alone with him.

Then, to his comfort, a vivid recollection of her face recurred to his mind, when he had told her he was going away for some months. She had faced round

upon him quickly, looking very white and perplexed.

"But you can't," she had persisted again and again. "You can't—you are engaged to me."

"I promised your mother that I would go," he returned, watching her face closely. "Only she can release me, but I shall not ask her to do so—it would not be honourable. Shall you care, Hazel? Shall you miss me?"

But she would not tell him.

A few days later Helen, with her gentle smile, had most unexpectedly cancelled the sentence of banishment.

"It is of no use your going, Paul," she had said. "The child will fret and you—you will be miserable."

"And so you feel you cannot endure the boys' banter?" Paul asked of his companion, somewhat ruefully.

"Oh well," she answered cheerfully, "I must, for the present. It is rather nice being engaged to you," she continued naïvely, "and it is so convenient."

"Convenient?" poor Paul echoed blankly.

"You see," she explained, "I never could get about anywhere: the boys being almost always away, and Miles busy. Besides, it was very lonely, with only a servant, about twenty yards behind you. But now, now I can go great distances, in the trap if we wish, and we can talk, and altogether it is very comfortable."

"Very," agreed Paul, at once amused and dismayed.

Something dry in the tone of his response made her look up quickly.

"I hope you don't misunderstand me," she said timidly. "I should not like you to think I was only making use of you. I—I am very fond of you," she added, her voice sinking, "and I enjoy being engaged, very much."

Paul sighed. It was a great admission, this, from her; but oh, how unsatisfying! It was but a whet to his appetite, it made him hungrier than ever.

A silence fell between them.

"You have not yet told me what the boys call *you*," he said presently, trying to speak lightly.

"I really could not," she replied, and he was surprised and distressed to see that she shrank from him, albeit the movement was scarcely perceptible.

By dint of long and earnest persuasion he wrung from her a promise that she would tell him—some time—and then, with a sense of being hunted and driven to bay, their destination reached, Hazel, with a desperate courage, feeling that she had better get over the inevitable at once, seized the opportunity when Paul's back was turned to her—whilst he examined the horse's hoof for a suspected stone—to whisper almost inaudibly, somewhere near the region of his ear:

"Mrs. Charteris."

Paul caught the words, and, starting up to capture and question the whisperer, was surprised to find that, quick as were his movements, he was already too late. The small back of the future Mrs. Charteris was already presented to him as she stood sedately, some yards away, knocking at the door of the Butchers' cottage.

Mrs. Boutcher opened to Hazel with a gratified beam upon her shining, pink, well-favoured countenance.

"You're welcome, miss," she said, with a quaint, bobbing curtsey, "and the gentleman too, I am sure. Won't he come in, miss? It is a poor place, but he is heartily welcome."

Hazel glanced behind her. Paul was securing the horse and trap to the stone post of the gateway.

"Thank you," she returned, "Mr. Charteris will like to come in, I know. We came to see little Bobbie, and I wanted to give you a pinafore for him, that I have made all myself, after Mrs. Doidge had cut it out."

Bobbie himself, present, but invisible behind his mother's back, was now dragged forward.

"For shame!" Mrs. Boutcher exclaimed, gently shaking him. "Don't you know the young lady what saved you from the very jaws? Say 'Ow do you do?' this moment, and none of your nonsense. He'll understand some day what an obligation he is a-labouring under to you, miss," Mrs. Boutcher hastened to explain apologetically. "At present he is no more grateful nor what he would 'ave been if you'd just let him be."

Hazel had been to see her *protégé* twice before to-day, and found the constant references to what Mrs. Boutcher termed her "'eroism" somewhat embarrassing. Nevertheless, the good woman's conversation caused her much diversion. One singularity of hers was never to mention death by name, though the meaning of the dread word was conveyed to her audience frequently, in all manner of ingeniously wrapped up and elegantly expressed phrases.

Paul came in, and Mrs. Boutcher, with ready hospitality, dusted a second chair and asked him to be seated.

"And if I might make you a cup of tea after your drive, I'm sure I should be honoured," she assured her guests.

She proceeded to bustle about, on hospitality intent, whilst Hazel lost no time in coaxing Bobbie to come to her and try on his new pinafore. She had a way of her own with children. She did not appear to notice the small individual himself, but seemed deeply interested in the toy he held, and begged to look at it more nearly. The boy drew nearer, lost his shyness little by little, and was soon exhibiting his treasure and expounding its many virtues to an apparently absorbed auditor.

"It is wonderful," Hazel commented. "I have something in this parcel besides the pinafore. Come and sit on my knee and see if you can untie the string."

Presently the child was seated in Hazel's lap, contentedly eating chocolates. He was a pretty, fair-haired, blue-eyed boy, and Hazel felt real affection for the little fellow. Beside her innate love of children, she felt a proprietary interest in Bobbie, whose life she had undoubtedly saved. Mrs. Boutcher regarded the pair with admiration and maternal pride, her head on one side, a steaming kettle in her hand, poised for discharging.

"Look at that, now!" she exclaimed, turning to Paul for sympathy, "and him so shy as he'll run away when the minister shows his face at the door, as if it was the bogeyman's." She approached Paul and lowered her voice. "You'd never guess, not to look at him," she said confidentially, "as it's but three months ago as he was rescued from out the Valley of the Shadow. Dear me," she continued, shaking her head, "yes, it was a mercy—not vouchsafed to all of us neither. There was Mrs. Jones's now—she's moved since, and it's no wonder—her little boy fell into the water, just as it might be my Bobbie, and he crossed the River," she whispered hoarsely.

Paul looked relieved.

"The child could swim? That was fortunate."

"Law bless you, no, sir. Swim? He went down like a stone in the middle of the stream."

"I understood you to say he crossed the river," Paul explained, nonplussed.

"The Jordan, sir," Mrs. Boutcher returned in a hushed voice, somewhat shocked at the practical way in which her guest interpreted her words—it was not clear to her whether in ignorance or wanton inadvertency—"the River as we must all cross some day, to reach the Golden Shore."

Paul nodded comprehendingly.

"Poor little fellow," he murmured.

"You should hear our minister speak, sir," Mrs. Boutcher went on. "E just draws the tears to your eyes. But you don't attend our chapel?"

"No," Paul admitted, "but Miss Le Mesurier often takes me to church. We have a clever preacher there."

Hazel, catching her name, looked up. "Yes, Mrs. Boutcher," she said, "it is so nice. I used to go very seldom: the boys were often lazy or careless, and sometimes really tired after their week's work. Mother, of course, could not go so far."

Mrs. Boutcher had fervently spread a fair white cloth, and poured out two cups of tea. She now begged her guests to be seated, and whilst they refreshed themselves, she again took up the conversation.

"Our minister," she said solemnly, slowly shaking her head, "surpasses all I

ever 'eard in the preaching line. Preach? His father preached afore him, and he has two sons what preach."

"A clever family," Paul commented.

Mrs. Boutcher's feelings did not allow her to find words readily, but presently she wisely gave up endeavouring to express herself, and went on in lighter vein.

"It seems to come to them natural like, the moment they ascend the pulpit. It's just child's play to them, father and sons alike, as it was child's play to the minister's father afore them."

For one brief moment the eyes of Paul and Hazel met, but they very creditably maintained their gravity. Paul wondered what a clever preacher, and a good earnest man to boot, would feel if he could hear the strenuous endeavour, the never-ceasing watching, praying, and battling of his life, pronounced child's play.

Hazel could not let it pass. "Mrs. Boutcher," she said gently, "we surely cannot call the great and good work of clergymen child's play to them. It is his work, is not it? and the cleverer he is the more he is bound to do his utmost, as an artist would, for instance."

Mrs. Boutcher was not convinced. "It may be with some," she admitted, "but it's no work to our minister, Miss. You should hear him—it just flows from him, with no effort on his part."

It began to dawn upon Hazel, that her hostess had not used the term child's play in its usual sense, a suspicion that was confirmed a little later, when the good woman placed a large log upon the fire.

"That is a fine fellow," Paul remarked. "Couldn't I chop him in two for you, Mrs. Boutcher?"

But the hospitable Mrs. Boutcher demurred. "I could not think of troubling you, sir. To be sure, it's a fine log," she agreed, "a regular masterpiece."

Paul and Hazel did not stay long with the Boutchers: they had promised themselves a half hour with the Traverses that afternoon. They set forth again, therefore, so soon as tea was finished, reaching The Beeches within the space of a few minutes.

Hazel breathed again when, on entering the drawing-room, one glance assured her that Digby was absent. There was the usual warm reception: Doris, Phyllis, and Francis, who was present with his mother and sisters, could not do enough for the young couple—surrounding them on all sides, besetting them with questions and attentions. Finally Hazel was ensconced upon the sofa—in the very middle—with cushions at her back, a hassock under her feet, Phyllis and Doris on either side of her, and Francis gracefully reclining on the floor in front of her. Mrs. Travers and Paul were seated together a little apart from this sociable group,

but their interest seemed to be with it; the eyes of both were directed upon it and upon the little gracious central figure, and Paul could have embraced his hostess there and then for the affectionate admiration and motherly pride that beamed from her kind eyes.

"I have congratulated you before," she said, turning to him, "many times, but I must do so again. I think you a very fortunate young man, and, if I may say so, I also think you are worthy of your happiness," she added warmly.

"Ah no," disclaimed the devout lover, "who could be that? But I shall never cease to try to be so."

"Do you always do your hair up now?" asked Phyllis of Hazel.

"Always," she replied, "except week-ends, and when I am riding."

"Riding?" Phyllis and Doris exclaimed in unison, breathless with interest.

"Oh, do you ride? Who with?"

"With him," Hazel replied, nodding towards Paul, without looking at him.

"We go for the most lovely rides—twelve and fifteen miles."

"Oh, how lovely." The breathless auditors were again in unison.

"I wish I was engaged," sighed Phyllis.

The elder sister nudged Hazel to gain her attention. "Try not to appear too happy," she whispered earnestly. "You know the trouble I have with her—how I try to keep her a child."

Hazel nodded sympathetically. "But I am afraid I cannot help it," she whispered back. "I am so happy, you know. What shall I do?" she added helplessly.

"Can't you hint that for many things you are sorry that childhood is over?" suggested the demure maiden, anxiously regarding the fresh, sweet, rosy face, the happy brown eyes.

"But I am not," Hazel replied, bluntly frank.

"Oh, Doris, don't keep Hazel all to yourself," Phyllis exclaimed plaintively.

"Hazel, have you got a riding habit?"

"Yes, a lovely one, made by a London tailor. Uncle Percival gave it me—he is always wanting to give me dresses, but mothie does not like him to."

"What colour is it?" Doris asked, interested herself, and deeming her little sister's interest in this subject—and possible envy—legitimate.

"Brown," Hazel made answer—"almost exactly the colour of my horse."

"Your horse?"

"He did," Hazel said, anticipating the question, again nodding in Paul's direction.

"How many hands?" inquired Francis from below. He had never taken his eyes from Hazel's face.

"Sixteen," she answered promptly.

"What breed?" he inquired further.

"Now, Francis," Phyllis said, "don't begin a lot of your tiresome farming questions. Hazel, how brown it must all look! I suppose one can hardly notice whether your hair is down or not. But why do you have it down for week-ends?"

"The boys," Hazel explained laconically. "It entices them to tease and call me names if I have it up. Besides," she added resignedly, "they only take it down, so what is the use?"

"So should I," observed Francis lazily. "I wouldn't have it up now, if I were Charteris."

"But you look so fearfully young," she complained. "And you must remember that I—I am an engaged wo—, that I am engaged, you know," she amended.

"Perhaps I shall be in four or five years' time," Phyllis said, with a little eager bounce of anticipated pleasure. "Oh, I wish the time would come."

"Phyllis!" poor Doris remonstrated, appalled. "Be young while you can, dear," she urged.

"Hazel does not look any the older for it," retorted Phyllis. "Oh, Hazel, do tell us some of his pet names for you."

Hazel gasped and glanced hurriedly at Paul. Paul, who had not caught Phyllis's words, smiled at her and wondered within himself whether he read her glance aright: it seemed to appeal to him for help.

Francis came to the rescue. "Look here, Phyllis," he expostulated, "don't make any more of an *enfant terrible* of yourself than you need. I say," he continued, tactfully seeking to change the conversation, "how sick Digby will be when he hears that you called."

This announcement effectually turned the current of Hazel's thoughts. She tried to appear properly concerned, but relief and gratitude were all that Francis could read in the look she turned upon him.

Paul somehow contrived to bring Mrs. Travers and himself nearer the sofa, and the conversation became general.

When the adieux were made, Phyllis's contrite look was rewarded by an extra good-bye kiss and a forgiving little squeeze of Hazel's hand.

CHAPTER XIX

But that was to befall which gave Hazel cause to wish that Digby Travers had been present, during Paul's and her visit to his father's house. It would have

proved uncomfortable, embarrassing, a sore trial of endurance for the moment; but once over, once the inevitable first meeting after the event of the engagement was ended, she could but have felt immensely relieved, albeit her heart would have ached with compassion for the poor young man, if, indeed, she saw reason for such emotion. She was always buoyed with the comfort of that doubt. Perhaps he was no "lover." He and Paul were as the poles asunder; and Hazel could not doubt Paul. Therefore, either Digby was not in love with her, or there were many sorts of lovers and many grades of being in love. Paul seemed to be of a somewhat high grade, she thought.

Hazel was walking through the Hazelhurst woods alone, pondering these matters in her heart. She had set out for an hour's brisk exercise at about three o'clock in the afternoon, intent upon completing a favourite round within the limit of that time, a round that took her across the comparatively open space where she was in the habit of feeding her pets, past the great oak, down many winding paths to the boundary fence, then, turning at right angles, a short way terminating in a hazel copse, and thence home.

She walked rapidly: the early November air was chill and crisp, making quick movement enjoyable and exhilarating. The woods were almost dismantled, but the many trees that were evergreen did not allow their thinness to be very marked, nor their nakedness too pronounced. Everywhere stood clumps of sturdy green that endured through all changes, brave and gravely cheerful, as if possessed of spirit too strong to know airy flights of imagination or mournful droopings of soul. They were never more than gravely cheerful, even in spring-time's tremulous joy or summer's triumphant glory: sober enough, indeed, to give one—at such seasons—occasional vague feelings of irritation at their seeming stolidness. But ah! the gratitude with which one gazes upon these reliable, impervious old friends, when all else green in the dear woodlands is shrivelled and dead; whilst the more sensitive trees, that undergo so many phases of experience, are fortifying themselves with the long sleep of winter.

Hazel was grateful to the evergreens now, as she sped along, throwing them many and admiring glances, vividly realising their sterling qualities. She was just emerging from the hazel copse, all aglow with exercise, when a shadow fell across her path, and Digby Travers spoke her name.

"At last," he said, "and alone."

Hazel's presence of mind did not desert her.

"Why, Digby!" she exclaimed, "how did you know I was here?"

"It was rather early for calling when I arrived," he answered, somewhat wearily, "so I strolled about in the woods; and presently I caught sight of your scarlet coat through the trees."

It had been but one o'clock when the poor young man reached Hazelhurst,

and for two hours and more he had been roaming the woods.

"How dull you must have found it," she returned, a trifle puzzled. "You ought to have gone straight to the house. Being early does not matter with informal old friends. Come with me now and have tea."

She was concerned for him: he was pale and haggard, but she dared not express her sympathy too openly, and tried to appear brisk and matter-of-fact.

"Tired!" echoed Digby Travers, in a somewhat hollow tone. "If that were all!"

"You are not ill?" she asked quickly, in alarm.

"I wish I were," he answered, with a short, mirthless laugh. "I am sick to death of living; but no, I am not ill in the ordinary sense of the word. I am fortunate to have met you," he continued. "I have longed and yearned to see you alone, if only for a few minutes, to satisfy myself with my own eyes that you were happy."

It was not quite clear to Hazel why he must see her alone to ascertain that fact, but she did not care to question him upon so delicate a point.

"Are you happy?" he asked, as she continued silent.

"Oh yes, very, thank you!" she assured him fervently.

But the assurance did not seem to gladden him.

"So I hoped and supposed," he rejoined, with increased gloom. "And that being so," he added, after a pause, "what does one crushed spirit matter?"

"Do you mean yours?" asked Hazel blankly.

"I don't blame you," he went on, evading the question. "From the first you tried to show me that my attentions were unwelcome, and I am a fool not to have overcome my feelings long ago."

His words could leave no doubt in Hazel's mind. He certainly was, or had been, in love. She was at a loss what to say to him, but she was, nevertheless, profoundly pitiful, for occasional glimpses of understanding were beginning to come to her; brief glimpses of slow-dawning light, that grew grey again before any vivid pitch was reached, were now and again permitted her youthful mind and tender sensibilities, rendering her capable of a depth of compassion toward the poor young man, that would surely have brought comfort to him, had she but expressed something of what she felt. And, all unknown to herself, it was Paul's influence and Paul's teaching that were thus awakening her woman's heart.

"I am dreadfully sorry if I have crushed your spirit," she said at length; "I never meant to. I cannot quite imagine how it has come about. You have always had me for a friend, and you have me still. Now you have another friend in him, haven't you?" she added, seeking to cheer him.

Digby groaned. Now indeed was he convinced that his suit was hopeless. If she had spoken of "Mr. Charteris," or even of "Paul," it might conceivably mean

that she had yet to learn her own mind; but when a girl alludes to "him" simply, that girl was lost for ever to Digby Travers.

"You like him, don't you?" Hazel pursued, slightly startled at the reception that met her question.

"Oh yes, well enough, that is, very much," poor Digby stammered, writhing under her innocent and puzzled look. He could not, in justice to Paul, feel that the girl's heart had been stolen from him, for he knew he had never for one moment possessed it. Yet there was always the possibility that she might ultimately have grown to love him, if Paul Charteris had not come between them. And now he was asked to look upon "him" as a friend!

"Then try to be happy," Hazel said persuasively, giving him her hand, "and don't feel crushed any more. You shall—shall stay with us, you know, often, and we will all be such friends. Still, of course, that will not be for years yet," she added, blushing.

But this was too much for his fortitude. He dropped Hazel's hand, and, turning very pale, he walked a few steps unsteadily, leaned against a tree as if for support, and, sinking his head upon his arm, stood motionless, save for the laboured heaving of his breast. Hazel hovered about him in greatest distress.

"Digby, Digby," she cried, "I never thought you would mind so much. You shall see a good deal of me; you shall indeed. I will ask him—I will ask him if he would mind your *living* with us, if that would comfort you," she added desperately. "But you must wait. We don't want to—we don't want to do it yet for years."

"Hazel," Digby answered, speaking in short, panting breaths, "you don't know what you are saying. How should you? You are only a child. But for God's sake, don't tantalise a poor wretch like me with such cruel words."

"Cruel?" poor Hazel exclaimed, with a sob. "When I am thinking all the time of what I can do and say and promise to comfort you! What can you mean, Digby? And a child indeed! Me a child!"

Digby raised his head, and regarded her with haggard eyes. A very tender smile played over his drawn features. He seemed suddenly to have become a grave and thoughtful man—ten years older than the Digby she had known but a few months since.

"Yes," he said, quietly persistent, setting his back to the tree, and folding his arms upon his breast, "a child, a sweet, kind, impulsive, gentle little girl; and as such you are distractingly adorable. Well"—he straightened himself and advanced a few paces—"God make the man of your choice worthy of you, and capable of loving you as I would have loved you."

"I did not exactly choose him," Hazel said quickly, seeking to justify herself in Digby's eyes, "he—he chose me. Not but that I like being engaged to him very

much," she added hastily, fearful lest he should misunderstand her.

But Digby understood her better than she understood herself. He read the new happiness in her face aright—the shy and almost tender light in her eyes when she spoke of Paul. And he envied Paul, as he had envied no man yet, the hour to come when the realisation of her love for him should dawn and break over her soul. He smiled again, a brave smile, and held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said, making a resolute effort to compose himself. "You are just home: I will leave you here."

"You won't come in?" she asked piteously, holding him fast.

"No," he said; "I could not face the others to-day. And don't let me feel I have been a brute and distressed you. I shall get over it some day—and—"

"Do you think you will soon?" Hazel asked eagerly, raising tearful eyes to his face.

"Perhaps quite soon," he returned cheerfully, with a slight gulp. "And then, as you say, we shall all be friends. Good-bye." He wrung her hand and walked abruptly away.

Hazel was not to be deceived by this sudden assumption of lightheartedness. She stood for a few moments looking after him. He did not look back—never even halted in his walk, but kept straight on, turned a bend in the path and was gone.

She walked slowly through the flower garden, and, blinded by tears, went stumbling up the steps, and would have fallen over the threshold if she had not, instead, fallen into Paul's arms, outstretched to receive her. And there she remained passive, like a wounded bird, fluttered home. Paul found the situation too blissful to risk the result of speaking for the moment. But Hazel had no intention of moving just yet. The breast of that tweed coat, now that she was shut in before any alternative had been given her, was a very convenient place, safe from his scrutiny; she was conscious of a sense of comfort that began to steal over her, and was vaguely surprised to find how very pleasant it was, to have strong protecting arms about her, just when she was feeling weak and helpless and sad.

He knew that she was crying, for he had seen her face as she came up the steps. He tried to obtain a glimpse of it now, but she kept it hidden in his coat. He gently removed the red cap, and softly kissed the tumbled hair. He must know what it was that troubled her. So, tightening his hold, he asked her gently what the matter was.

"It is Digby," she answered, suppressing a rising sob. "It is all dreadfully complicated. He is very unhappy at my being engaged to you. It—it seems that he wanted me himself."

Paul smiled broadly. The next moment he was grave enough.

"What right had he to say such things to you—now? I must ask him to explain himself," he rejoined.

Hazel could divine from the energy with which he spoke that Paul was angry.

"If you want to fight," she said, a little nervous tremor running through her, "you will have to wait. He is too weak just now, he—he had to lean against a tree to talk. But oh, you would not be so unkind, would you? He is so unhappy," she added beseechingly.

"No, no," Paul hastened to reassure her. "I don't want to fight the poor fellow. But he ought to have been man enough not to have troubled you, Hazel."

"He was so unreasonable," she went on. "I tried to comfort him, and he told me not to tantalise him with cruel words—*cruel* he called them."

Hazel raised her head a moment in order to see what Paul thought of such perverseness. Paul, who made a very shrewd guess at the nature of Hazel's "comforting," hurriedly raised his hand and stroked his moustache. Hazel's head hastily resumed its former position, after one brief glance.

"But he was very manly," she pursued earnestly, anxious to do poor Digby justice. "I have never known him so—so nice as he was just at the end. He—he said he should get over it soon," she added, more cheerfully, "but—but he does not seem to want to live with us."

"What?" Paul cried, with such vehemence that Hazel jumped. "What?"

"He seemed so fond of me," Hazel explained modestly. "So I said, if he liked I would ask you if you would mind his living with us—in after-years, you know. I am sure *I* did not want him," she added plaintively.

"Hazel," Paul said, gently bantering, "I begin to see that to the seclusion of your life alone is owed the fact that our future home will not be overrun by disappointed swains."

By this time Hazel was so far recovered as to be able to emerge from her place of hiding. As she sought to release herself from the enfolding arms, Paul bent his head and looked tenderly into her flushed, tear-stained face.

"Little one," he whispered, "may I, just for once, kiss away those last tears from your eyes?"

"Oh no, thank you," she said hastily, somewhat frightened at the suggestion. She proceeded energetically to dab her eyes, in order to remove all temptation, and, making a more determined effort, succeeded in freeing herself, Paul most reluctantly releasing her.

He opened the inner door of the hall. As Hazel entered, her eyes fell upon Hugh's back, or, rather, upon the back of an easy-chair, above which the top of Hugh's head was revealed. A fire blazed and crackled on the hall hearth, and the young man was enjoying its warmth, very much at his ease. He and Paul had been

up to town that morning, the former to see his uncle; and, returning to Hazelhurst together, Hugh had soon settled himself to marvel over the restlessness of a lover in the absence of his beloved; whilst Paul, learning from Miles that Hazel was out walking, had taken up his position on the threshold, impatient for her coming, yet afraid to venture forth, not knowing by which way she would come.

Hugh did not look round on their entrance: hearing Paul's voice, he at once concluded that Hazel had returned. Hazel made her escape upstairs to bathe her eyes. After succeeding in removing all traces of her late emotion, she entered Helen's room to propose that her mother should come with her and hear the result of Hugh's visit to their uncle. Helen readily consented. They were all much interested concerning Hugh's future prospects. As for Paul Charteris, he was relieved as well as interested; for the farce of Hugh as secretary was apparently about to terminate most agreeably—a circumstance almost as pleasing to his employer as to Hugh himself. He was to study art for a time, and if he fulfilled the hopes his uncle had been led to entertain of him, he was to be provided with a studio of his own, and started in life.

"Don't you trouble about finishing up work at my place, old fellow," Paul said to him. "You will like some time off, before beginning the new work."

Hugh readily acquiesced. "All right. I do feel the need of a bit of a holiday," he admitted.

"So do I, by Jove," Teddie observed. He and Gerald, noiselessly opening the inner door, had overheard Hugh's remark. "Hullo, Mrs. Char—! Hullo, Charteris, I did not see you."

The two proceeded to place hats, coats, and portmanteaux aside, whilst the group about the hearth pushed their chairs farther back, at once enlarging the circle and inviting the new-comers within its hospitable radius.

"If I had not completely forgotten it was Saturday!" Hugh commented, regarding his brothers something patronisingly, as one to whom all days in the week were alike, so far as momentous settings forth and comings in were concerned. For was not Hugh a gentleman at large?

Gerald and Teddie did not take possession of the two vacant chairs that Hazel—who had not forgotten to expect them—had been careful to provide, preferring to seat themselves upon the rug and support their backs against mother and sister, in such pose as should render the stroking of the two curly heads a natural and easy occupation.

When Hugh's affair had been thoroughly discussed, Helen produced two letters from her absent sons, Guy and Cecil, each announcing his intention of being home for Christmas. Further debate followed this gratifying news; and many and ingenious were the propositions tendered by the Le Mesurier boys for the entertainment of their brothers; till interruption on the part of Miles roused

them all to a sense of the present, and to the necessity of dispersing, in obedience to the butler's preemptory injunctions, as voiced by the gong.

CHAPTER XX

Teddie Le Mesurier sat in the inner office with his superior. Mr. Hamilton had a knack of contriving to get the boy to himself, in a manner which eluded the particular notice of the other young men in his employment, and which seemed always perfectly natural and without artifice. Neither did Mr. Hamilton keep rigorously silent throughout the long working-hours; for, greatly as he believed in discipline, Teddie's ingenuous talk had an odd fascination for this elderly man, bereft of an only son; and there were times when, if not directly encouraged to lay aside his pen, Teddie at least found a most attentive and appreciative auditor, when he was pleased to regale his friend with stories and anecdotes pertaining to his and his brothers' younger years.

"Get on with your work, my boy," Mr. Hamilton would say, with a brusqueness that was supposed to cover any ill-concealed delight that might have been apparent to Teddie; whilst many a burst of hearty laughter was of a sudden checked, in the hope that such mirthful sounds had not yet reached the ears of those in the outer office: thus seeking to save his own dignity, and his young friend from any possible ill-feeling among his colleagues.

To-day Teddie had not been invited to sit in the private office; but, preferring Mr. Hamilton's society to that of his fellow-clerks, and calling to mind that the leather-padded chair was more desirable than his own high stool, and that the writing-table was pleasanter to write upon than his own desk, he decided to make use of these advantages.

Gathering together his working materials, he walked boldly in, after a slight but withal a defiant knock, seated himself, and was immediately profoundly wrapped in his task. Mr. Hamilton looked up, somewhat surprised, coughed to gain the young man's attention, and ejaculated: "Well, upon my word!" But Teddie, beyond one abstracted look and mechanical nod, sat on imperturbable, his elbows on the table, his fingers run through his hair, so deeply immersed—only, indeed, altering his attitude for the purpose of distractedly turning over papers—that Mr. Hamilton, passing his hand over his moustache, and giving vent to a suppressed chuckle, at length desisted from his attempts to attract Teddie's

eye or ear, glad enough not to press for an explanation of such unaccustomed behaviour; for he liked the boy's company above any other, and was secretly flattered that Teddie had evinced a similar feeling. But he decided that the young rogue, as he mentally termed him, should not go unpunished.

It was early—about ten; work for the day was but just begun. For two long hours not a word was exchanged. Soon Teddie's most exaggerated ardour began to wane. He plunged his fingers into his hair less feverishly, and turned over papers in a less distraught manner. Slowly but surely he assumed his normal bearing: calm was succeeded by lassitude. Teddie yawned, stretched, fidgeted, and drummed softly with his fingers upon the table. Never had he known his superior so unsociable.

Finally he leaned back in his chair and deliberately regarded Mr. Hamilton, upon whom he had hitherto bestowed only fleeting and furtive glances. All to no purpose: his companion remained deeply engrossed with the work in hand. Never had Teddie known him so utterly impervious to his surroundings. In the outer office he knew well enough that occasional murmured remarks were made now and again, or a joke was cracked: all helping to pass the tedium of the long morning with less insupportable dryness than seemed to be his fate here. Three hours had now elapsed in unbroken silence. With an impatient sigh he languidly resumed his work. But that sigh was too much for the soft-hearted side of Mr. Hamilton's nature. He looked up. Teddie was viciously making a full-stop with the point of a long-suffering pen. In truth, so hard had he dug into the paper that the withdrawal of the pen caused a splutter of ink, destroying the fair surface of the foolscap. With a low-breathed imprecation he, too, looked up, somewhat guiltily, and met his companion's eyes.

"You don't seem quite so busy just now," Mr. Hamilton observed drily.

"No," Teddy returned shortly. "Hang it all," he added, in his old, peppery way, "a fellow cannot keep up the pace that I have been going these three hours and more."

He certainly had done more in those three hours than he often achieved in a day, the elder man noted with amusement.

"Perhaps you have leisure to answer a question or two?" he asked cheerfully. "I am rather puzzled. I am not aware that I had expressed a wish—that I had, in short, asked any one to come in this morning. You were so very busy, I did not care to disturb you by inquiring why you had come."

Teddy was somewhat abashed, but he still looked his interlocutor squarely in the eyes.

"I thought perhaps it was a bit dull in here for you alone," he said coolly. "I don't care where I sit; but this chair and table are more comfortable than that rotten stool and desk."

"So you put up with my company for the sake of the more agreeable furniture?" Mr. Hamilton rejoined, eyeing him keenly.

"As to that, your company is good enough," Teddie admitted. "I thought, you know," he added, dropping his pen on the floor and diving after it, "we might get on rather well, if this table were looked upon as mine."

Mr. Hamilton was conquered. "Put your work away, and let us have a chat before going out to lunch," he said. "And yes, my boy," he added genially, "suppose we consider that your table, and let us for the future share this room together. What do you say?"

"Done," Teddie resumed briefly. But his companion was content with the reply. The boy had flushed up and was looking immensely gratified.

At this juncture there came a knock on the door, and a clerk entered to say, that Mr. Desborough's servant desired to speak with Mr. Le Mesurier. In some wonder Teddie followed him into the outer office, and, taking the man apart, asked his business.

"My master is very ill, sir," Thomas returned, "and is asking to speak with you, sir."

"What is the matter with him?" Teddie asked, blankly.

"The doctors don't exactly say, sir, but the heart's action is giving out, as I understand it. Can you come at once, sir? It is a matter of a few hours, at best."

Teddie nodded and re-entered the inner office, to acquaint Mr. Hamilton with the sad intelligence.

"You had better take a cab and be off instantly," was his kindly advice.

And Teddy, accompanied by the man, followed his counsel, only stopping at a telegraph office on the way, to ask Helen to come to Lancaster Gate.

A doctor turned from the bedside as Teddie entered his uncle's room. He motioned the young man aside, and laid great stress upon not exciting the patient, and expressed the opinion that relatives should be informed of the approaching end.

Teddie was relieved to see his uncle look much as usual. In his utter inexperience he had supposed the fatal illness must inevitably have worked terrible havoc in his appearance. Beyond accentuation of the lines, with which age and suffering had furrowed his face, the boy could perceive but little change.

At once reassured, he grasped the feeble hand that was held out to him, and began to pour forth boyish words of cheer and comfort, bringing a smile to his uncle's lips.

"This is only a bad attack. You'll be over it in no time," he assured him. "Doctors are mostly old women and love croaking. Shall I shake up your pillow?" he asked, at a loss what to say or do next, "and—and give you a dose of medicine?"

"Teddie," Mr. Desborough said—and at the sound of his voice Teddie's hope

sank again—"Teddie, we must look this thing squarely in the face. I am dying, my boy, and I sent for you. I had one or two things to speak of. I leave all I have, unconditionally, to my niece Helen, which circumstance you will all learn soon enough now. But what I wanted to say is this. That little sister of yours, my little Hazel"—his face softened strangely as he spoke her name—"who has always been wanting to 'earn money,' to quote her own words"—again he smiled—"for the most unselfish purposes, ought to be told that she, and she alone, has redeemed the fortunes of her house. But for her I should never have become reconciled to my niece Helen, or learned to love her and her children."

"It was my intention," he continued, after pausing to rest, "to leave all to Hazel; but she will be well provided for; and I know her well enough to feel convinced that, were she here, she would tell me how infinitely she would prefer that this money should restore the old home and the old name to their former status. The child can then go to her new home, and enter upon her new life with a light heart. Will you tell her this from me?"

Something gripped Teddie's throat. "All right," he said huskily, "I'll tell her."

"As for you, my boy, you are not going to refuse, for your own part, to be benefited by your old uncle's money, in that hot-spirited way of yours?" Mr. Desborough asked, half anxious, half amused.

Teddie cleared his throat. "No, no," he assured the dying man, "we will take it and use it. But, I say, uncle, hang the money," he burst out. "Don't talk like this. You have got years to live yet. You get well and let us all go on in the good old way. Why, mother and Hazel were saying how they hoped you would spend Christmas with us, and we—they—think an awful lot of you. Don't go and die yet."

A gleam of pure and genuine happiness passed over the face on the pillow. He was not to die, then, quite unmourned; and as for this warm-hearted boy and his little pet, Hazel, and his niece Helen, for the matter of that, he could believe that they would rather keep the crusty old relative among them than be possessed of his money, incredible as it seemed.

"I should like to see Helen," he said suddenly, and he looked wistfully at his young nephew. "Do you think she could come?"

"I have already telegraphed to her," Teddie replied; "she could be here by about five o'clock, I think."

At about that time Helen arrived, eager to be of use, if only to help to comfort the last hours of the poor life that was slipping away. She sat by his bed and talked softly to him in her gentle, affectionate way, careful not to agitate or excite him, keeping all painful subjects from his thoughts. Once, despite her endeavours, he began to blame himself, and Helen was infinitely touched at the yearning and distress his eyes expressed, at the bitterness his words evinced, for

the long years of estrangement from her and her children.

"Do not blame yourself too much," she said tenderly. "I, too, was wrong. I ought to have pushed my way into your heart and forced you to love me, instead of allowing you to shut me out. My only excuse, dear uncle, lies in the fact that I was poor and you were rich, and I shrank from the possible construction that might have been put upon my behaviour by others, had I seemed to force my friendship upon you. Now I see that such shrinking was morbid and selfish. So, dear uncle, don't be troubled any more. We understand each other now, and freely do we forgive one another. Is it not so?"

He made no answer, but feebly returned the pressure of her hand.

"All is well with you," she murmured presently, as she noted the weary droop of his eyelids. "All is well and happy. We all love you. Think only of that—we all love you, we all love you."

She murmured the words again and again. They seemed to soothe the dying man, as a lullaby might soothe a little child, who had awakened, distressed, from a bad dream. His eyes closed, a tranquil expression spread over his worn features, and he sank into sleep, still grasping his niece's hand.

From this childlike slumber he passed gradually, peacefully, into that sleep, the beatific happiness of whose dreams was already stamped upon the face, smoothing away all troubled lines, leaving a slight, strange smile upon the lips.

Thus the troublous life, that had somehow missed happiness, passed away to the keeping of Him who understands all things, so fully, so widely, so comprehensively, that in His eyes there remains but little to forgive: for such is the Divine Compassion.

CHAPTER XXI

Hazel was standing before the mirror in her room, thoughtfully fastening her riding habit. "It is *beginning* to get shabby," she reflected; "but as he says I am never to wear anything but brown for riding, there is no purpose in having another made for the sake of change: dark green, for instance. I wonder whether he would find a name for me in dark green. Let me see: in brown I am Wych-hazel; in my scarlet coat I am Witch; and in my white dresses I am just Hazel—in rather a special voice, of course," she reminded herself, blushing. "But dark green—"

"What name would you give me if I had a dark green dress?" she asked, a

while later, as she and Paul Charteris brought their horses from a brisk canter to a walk.

"Moss Rose, of course," he answered, without hesitation. "I am so glad that Uncle Percival insisted that no one should wear mourning for him. I should not like to see you in black, child. It would look tragic, and I don't know what I could call you."

"Won't Teddie find it funny going back to college, after being a clerk so long?" Hazel said, laughing.

Paul agreed. "When are you going to call me Paul?" he asked of a sudden. "I am longing to hear you."

Hazel looked dubious. "Some people never do," she answered, desirous of showing him she was not peculiar. "We once knew a man named John Dalrymple, and his wife called him Mr. Dalrymple, and when she was very friendly, just Dalrymple, but never John."

"Then suppose you begin by calling me Charteris," he suggested.

"Perhaps I don't feel friendly enough," she returned mischievously. "Shall I go ahead here, or will you?"

They had entered upon a bit of woodland, through which a bridle track led to the open country beyond. It was a somewhat dangerous path to traverse on horseback, save in the full light of day: for here and there a far-stretching tree would reach out a powerful limb, as though to stay the rider's further progress; and, as if angered at the prudence of the low-ducking horseman, would make a desperate endeavour to clutch at his hat. It successful in this attempt, the trophy would be flung to the ground in malicious glee, causing a considerable amount of trouble to the hapless owner; there being nothing for it but to rein up, dismount, and retrace the distance already passed over to recover the ill-used headgear.

Under foot the way was smooth enough, well beaten, and, to-day, frost-bound; so that no distraction offered itself to divert the mind from close attention to these dangers overhead.

It was a lovely scene. Dew and frost had combined to set a sparkling filigree upon patches of bracken, whilst in the less-sheltered spots whole groups of trees stood as if carved in white glistening coral, the knots and articulations of each massive trunk, shapely branch, and twig clearly defined against a sky of such steely blue, that the scarlet of the holly berries was rendered doubly vivid in compliment, and the shining dark blue-green of the holly leaves looked almost cruel in the strength and sharpness of their stiff outline—the hard, even curves between the tiny spikes seeming only to serve to strengthen the merciless little weapons, as though Nature, in her vein of architect, was aware of the support lying within the arch-like fashion of shape, and revelled in the knowledge. Upon the ground dead leaf-drifts in masses shimmered white and hard-caked together;

hollow hazel-nuts and dry alder cones lay stiff and stark; touchwood abounded—all wreckage of the passing year, most beautiful in death, keeping life in whatsoever it covered, giving warmth and protection to delicate root and bulb, to grey lichen and green mosses; whilst the dead brake fern helped to nurse next year's glory of bracken—all jealously guarding the priceless treasures locked within the earth, showing that death is not vain.

Rest in life was upon all things; beautiful in itself and in the promise it gave forth. For oh, the transcendent loveliness of a few months later, when Nature should arise from her long, long beauty-sleep, warm-flushed, star-eyed, instinct with tender vigour, to bathe in dew and sun baths!

Hazel gazed upon the undergrowth with reflecting knowledge. It was one of her delights to separate with the eye, briar and bramble, whortleberry and woodrush, from out the delicious tangle it exhibited, to paint and fashion it all in spring colours and shapes of scarlet bells and purple berries.

Now and again Paul looked round at the girl, smiling to himself at her abstracted face and mien. Twice he called to her to beware of a treacherous branch, and Hazel obediently ducked. He was about to do so on a third occasion, when that befell which, terrible as it appeared to Hazel, left Paul thankful in that the seeming mischance wrought him nothing but good, and bid him enter into his man's heritage: a woman's love—to taste of its fulness. For, in an unguarded moment, when stress of emotion had unlocked the close-fastened child-heart, there was no time to secure it again before Paul had entered and taken full possession.

At the moment of turning in the saddle to call Hazel's attention to the third and last limb along the track, that threatened danger, his horse had sighted a wheel-barrow—left by some woodsman beside the pathway—before it stood revealed to his master; and, swerving, with a sudden leap plunged forward, dashing his rider against the low-hanging bough that, with nice calculation, he had given himself ample time to avoid, had not the unforeseen so altered the measured pace that the riders had adopted.

Struck full in the chest, Paul's progress was effectually stayed, the startled animal swept from under him, and the next moment he was stretched his length upon the ground.

With a low cry of dismay, so soon as she could check her horse's wild curvetting, before, indeed, bringing him to a stand, Hazel slipped from her saddle and, speeding to the spot, knelt beside Paul's inanimate form. In an agony of tender solicitude she raised his head, that her arm might pillow it. The ground was slightly stained with blood from a small scalp wound and, in most unwonted sort—for the girl was ever prone to look at all ills in their best and most hopeful aspect—Hazel was under the appalling conviction that her lover was dead.

Lowering his head again, she opened his coat and waistcoat and placed a

little, trembling hand upon his heart, but could detect no motion. She bent her cheek near his mouth, but the cold air permitted no warm breath to penetrate to her senses. In wild grief the poor girl called frantically upon his name.

"Paul, Paul," she cried; "Oh, Paul, darling old fellow! I am saying it now, but you can't hear me! I am kissing you, Paul, but you can't feel it! You are dead—dead—and can never know that at last your Wych-hazel was able to tell you how she loved you!"

And, with a piteous little moan, the stricken child sank down beside him, and with her head upon his breast, one arm flung appealingly about his neck, she mercifully lost consciousness.

Paul, who was but momentarily stunned, heard her without at once being able to rouse himself from the stupor into which the fall had thrown him. In dreamy delight he drank in the words that fell upon his ears, even while he could not comprehend their full import. He felt two tremulous kisses upon his cheek; but it was not till her voice fell silent and he felt her weight against him, that he realised she had fainted.

Then necessity came to his aid. With a desperate effort he shook himself free from the torpor of mind and body, and succeeded in collecting his wandering senses. Placing his arm about the unconscious girl, he raised himself to a sitting posture, and proceeded to chafe the hand that his movement had caused to slip from his neck to his breast, whilst in his turn he called her name, beseeching her to open her eyes. And presently Hazel, with a little fluttering sigh, obeyed his agonised appeal, and, opening her eyes, looked up into his face, while Paul talked softly and watched consciousness returning to their depths.

Lying there, placid and content as a little child, the memory of what had happened of a sudden flooded her mind. Paul was smiling quietly upon her, and, strangest of all, was looking quite his usual self! The fearful dread her heart had held, rendered her speechless for a moment, wrapped in silent thanksgiving.

Then she drew away from him and rose to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. "Do you think you can move up and down, however slowly, while I look for your horse? You must not freeze, you know."

Paul had risen also, and, pacing backward and forward, declared himself quite unhurt and well able to search for his truant steed.

Hazel's horse was in the near neighbourhood, restlessly moving from place to place; nor was the other far to seek. The animal had been but momentarily startled: his panic having quickly subsided, he could now be heard whinnying at a short distance from the scene of the misadventure. In a few minutes Paul had secured both bridles, and at Hazel's suggestion they retraced on foot the woodland pathway, after she had trundled the cause of the mischief—the woodsman's wheelbarrow—deeper into the wood, lest some other hapless rider should meet

with like calamity.

As she grew more and more assured that Paul was really none the worse, a very agony of shyness seized upon Hazel. What had she confessed in those moments, when unspeakable desolation had fallen upon her soul? And how much had Paul heard and understood? She took occasion to glance furtively at him, as they two rode slowly homeward, side by side. It was generally to find him regarding herself with a new happiness in every line of his countenance and added light to his eyes, such as greatly disquieted her.

Arrived at Hazelhurst, Hazel acquainted her mother with the circumstances of the accident. After dressing the slight hurt with the aid of her daughter, Helen insisted upon rest and refreshment before Paul should be allowed to depart for home, despite the shortness of the distance between the two houses.

So that dark was falling when he bade his kind hostess farewell, and Hazel accompanied him to the door.

Emboldened by the dimness of the fading light, she crept close up to him, bending her head that he should not study her face.

"You—you knew what I thought?" she asked, trembling a little.

"Yes, poor child," he answered tenderly, stroking the soft hair.

She guessed by his half-soothing, half-bantering tone, that he divined her thoughts. Creeping yet closer, she placed her two hands upon his breast. His own closed over them.

"You—you heard?" she whispered, her eyes downcast.

Then he had pity upon her.

"Hazel," he said earnestly, "I heard you say you loved me, and I heard you call my name. But it was not till you fainted that I was able to rouse myself."

He might have added he could yet feel the two timid kisses that had fallen upon his cheek, but he was merciful.

A silence fell between them. Hazel was wrestling with her shyness. She must know.

In desperation she raised her head and looked quickly into his face. Her lips parted, but it was a quick blush that asked the question.

"And that too, little love," he murmured.

FINIS

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HAZELHURST ***

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