

ROSE OF THE WORLD

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ROSE OF THE WORLD

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"THE SECRET ORCHARD" AND "THE STAR DREAMER"

*O Dream of my Life, my Glory,
O Rose of the World, my Dream*
(THE DOMINION OF DREAMS)

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BOOK I

ROSE OF THE WORLD

CHAPTER I

It is our fate as a nation, head and heart of a world empire, that much of our manhood must pursue its career far away from home. And it is our strength that

these English sons of ours have taught themselves to make it home wherever they find their work.

The fervid land of India had become home to Raymond Bethune for so many years that it would have been difficult for him to picture his life elsewhere. The glamour of the East, of the East that is England's, had entered into his blood, without, however, altering its cool northern deliberate course; that it can be thus with our children, therein also lies the strength of England.

Raymond Bethune, Major of Guides, loved the fierce lads to whom he was at once father and despot, as perhaps he could have loved no troop of honest thick-skulled English soldiers. He was content with the comradeship of his brother officers, men who thought like himself and fought like himself; content to spend the best years of existence hanging between heaven and earth on the arid flanks of a Kashmir mountain range, in forts the walls of which had been cemented by centuries of blood; looked forward, without blenching, to the probability of laying down his life in some obscure frontier skirmish, unmourned and unnoticed. His duty sufficed him. He found happiness in it that it was his duty. Such men as he are the very stones of our Empire's foundation.

* * * * *

Yet though he was thus intimately satisfied with his life and his life's task, Bethune was conscious of a strange emotion, almost a contraction of the heart, as he followed the kitmutgar to Lady Gerardine's drawing-room in the palace of the Lieutenant-Governor, this October day.

The town below hung like a great rose jewel, scintillating, palpitating, in a heat unusual for the autumn of Northern India. Out of the glare, the colour, the movement, the noise; out of the throng of smells—spice, scent, garlic, the indescribable breath of the East—into the dim cool room; it was like stepping from India into England! And by the tug at his heart-strings he might have analysed (had he been of those that analyse) that, after all, the old home was nearest and dearest still; might have realised that his content beneath the scorching suns, amid the blinding snows of his adopted country, arose after all but of his deep filial love of, and pride in, the distant English isle.

He put down his bat and looked round: not a hint of tropical colour, not a touch of exotic fancy, of luxuriant oriental art anywhere; but the green and white and rosebud of chintz, the spindle-legged elegance of Chippendale, the soft note of Chelsea china, the cool greys and whites of Wedgwood. From the very flower-bowl a fastidious hand had excluded all but those delicate blossoms our paler sunshine nourishes. Some such room, dignified with the consciousness of a rigid selection, reticent to primness in its simple yet distinguished art,

fragrant with the potpourri of English gardens, fragrant too with memories of generations of wholesome English gentlefolks, you may meet with any day in some old manor-house of the shires. To transport the complete illusion to the heart of India, Bethune knew well must have cost more labour and money than if the neighbouring palaces had been ransacked for their treasures. It was obvious, too, that the fancy here reigning supreme was that of one who looked upon her sojourn under these splendid skies with the eyes of an unresigned exile.

"The wife of the Lieutenant-Governor can evidently gratify every whim," he said to himself, bitterly enough, the while he still inhaled the fragrance of home with an unconscious yearning.

In the distance the tinkle of a piano seemed to add a last touch to the illusion. In India one so seldom hears a piano touched during the hot hours. And scales, too—it was fantastic!

Suddenly the music ceased, if music it could be called. There was a flying step without. The door was thrown open. Raymond Bethune turned quickly, a certain hardness gathering in his eyes. Their expression changed, however, when he beheld the newcomer. A young, very young girl, hardly eighteen perhaps, of the plump type of immaturity; something indeed of a cherubic babyhood still lurking in the round face, in the buxom little figure, and in the rebellious aureole of bronze hair rising from a very pink forehead. It was evidently the energetic musician.

She came in, examining one finger of her right hand; and, without looking at him, began to speak with severity:

"I told you, Mr. Simpson, I could not possibly see anybody in my practising hours! How am I ever to keep up my poor music in this beastly country?" Then she added, in a pettish undertone: "I have broken my nail now!" And glancing up, accusingly, to behold a stranger: "Oh!" she exclaimed.

Major Bethune smiled. The sight of this creature, so unmistakably fresh from the salt brisk English shores, was as pleasant as it was unexpected.

"Oh, it's not Mr. Simpson!" she cried, with a quaint air of discovery.

The officer bowed. Life had taught him not to waste his energy on a superfluous word.

"Oh!" she said again. She looked down at her nail once more, and then sucked it childishly. Over her finger she shot a look at him. She had very bright hazel eyes, under wide full brows. "Perhaps," she said, "you want to see the Runkle? I mean," she interrupted herself, with a little giggle—"I mean, my uncle, Sir Arthur."

"I called to see Lady Gerardine," he answered imperturbably. "I wrote to her yesterday. She expects me."

"Oh!"

Every time this ejaculation shot from the girl's lips it was with a new lively note of surprise and a comical rounding of small mouth and big eyes. Then she remembered her manners; and, plunging down on a chair herself:

"Won't you take a seat?" she cried, with an engaging schoolgirl familiarity. Bowing again, he obeyed.

"Do you think Lady Gerardine will see me?"

She glanced at the clock on the cabinet beside her.

"My aunt will be here," she replied, "in just ten minutes. She is always down at the hour, though nobody comes till half-past." She flung a look of some reproach at the visitor's inscrutable face, and passed her handkerchief over her own hot cheeks. "I think Aunt Rosamond is wonderful," she went on, preparing herself, with a small sigh, to the task of entertaining. "The Runkle—I mean my uncle—is always after her. But I am sure there is not another Lieutenant-Governor's wife in India that does her duty half so well." Here she yawned, as suddenly as a puppy. The visitor still maintaining silence, she paused, evidently revolving subjects of conversation in her mind, and then started briskly upon her choice:

"Of course, you don't know who I am." Two deep dimples appeared in the plump cheeks. "I am Aspasia Cuningham, and I have come to live with my uncle and aunt in India. I wish I had not; I hate it. What is your name?"

"Raymond Bethune."

"Civil?" inquired Miss Aspasia, running her eye over his light-grey suit.

"No, military. Guides. Major," he corrected.

She nodded.

"I see—turbans and things," commented she.

Bethune gave a dry chuckle which hardly reflected itself on his countenance. Another silence fell; and, still scrubbing her cheeks with an energy calculated to make even the onlooker feel hot, the girl took a good look at him. A somewhat lantern-jawed, very thin face had he, tanned almost to copper; brown hair, cropped close, a slight fair moustache; and steady pale eyes beneath overhanging brows. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh about the long lean figure. No mistake (thought Aspasia sagely) about his Scottish origin. She cocked her head on one side. "He would have looked well in a kilt," she told herself.

Presently the silence began to oppress her. He did not seem in the least disposed to break it. His attitude was one of patient waiting; but, second by second, the lines of his countenance grew set into deeper sternness. Miss Cuningham coughed. She played a scale upon her knee, stretched out all her fingers one after another, waggled them backwards and forwards, and finally, with a pout and a frown, dashed into exasperated speech:

"Could not I take a message?"

The man brought his attention to bear upon her, with an effort, as if from some distant thought.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you not think you could give me a message fur Aunt Rosamond?"

"I am afraid not."

"Do you want her to get the Runkle—Sir Arthur, I mean—to do anything for you?"

"No."

"Do you know Aunt Rosamond—Lady Gerardine?"

He hesitated. Then he said: "No," and "No" again, with a cold incisiveness.

"Oh!"

Miss Cuningham was nonplussed; yet was she interested, in spite of herself. "What a rude pig!" she thought angrily, in her downright schoolgirl vernacular. But the next moment his saturnine face softened.

"Do not let me keep you," he said. "You want to return to your music. You were practising very hard. I have never heard any one play scales with such energy over here before. It quite brought me back to the schoolroom in the old place at home."

His expression softened still more as he spoke.

Aspasia was delighted to find him so human all at once; and, being herself the most gregarious little soul alive, hastened to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Oh, it does not matter now," she said. "Thank you. It is rather hot. I will finish my exercises later on. You see, I must keep up my *technique*." She stretched her fingers again, with an important air. "But, when he's at home, it annoys the Runkle—there it is again! I cannot help it, really. I only began it for fun, to tease him; now it's irresistible, nervous I think. You remember, I told you my name is Aspasia. A stupid sort of name. You cannot even shorten it into anything decent. You could not call me Aspy, or Pashy, or Asia, could you? So people have got into the way of calling me Baby. I do not mind. It's better than Aspasia. But uncle won't. He is my godfather, you see, and thinks it's a lovely name. There's a stupid old cousin of ours, Lady Aspasia Something-or-other, whom he thinks the world of. So he always will say: 'My dear Raspasia ... my dear Raspasia!' So I got into the way of calling him: 'My dear Runkle Rarthur!' Rather silly, but I began it in sheer self-defence. And now—it's really quite wicked—everybody calls him the Runkle, all the secretaries and things—behind his back, of course. And there's one of them, a silly sort of creature, Mr. Simpson—I thought it was him, just now—he's not got used to it yet, and he always goes purple and explodes. And the Runkle gets mad. He has to pretend he has not noticed anything, to save his dignity!"

Her frank young laugh rang out, one might have thought infectiously enough. But the visitor's eyes had wandered from her. And as now (perceiving suddenly that he had not been listening to her) she fell into an affronted silence, she noticed how they became fixed in the direction of the door with a curious intensity of gaze, like that of a hawk sighting his quarry.

One of the native servants, who kept squatting watch in the passage without, had noiselessly pushed the door-hangings aside; a soft murmur of muslin skirts against matting grew into the silence. Lady Gerardine came into the room. She was looking at a card in her hand.

"Major Bethune?" she said questioningly, as she approached.

"My name must be familiar to you," he replied gravely.

She paused a second, slightly contracting her brows; then shook her head, with a smile.

"I am afraid—I have such a bad memory. But I am very glad to see you."

She put out her hand graciously. He barely touched it with his fingers.

"Pray sit down," she said, and took her own chair.

One felt the accomplished woman of the world. No awkwardness could exist where Lady Gerardine had the direction of affairs. Sweet, cool, aloof, the most exquisite courtesy marked her every gesture. Had the new comer been shy he must promptly have felt reassured; for a long-looked-for guest could not have been more easily welcomed.

"You will like some tea," said she. "Baby, why did not you order tea? Dear child, how hot you are!"

A faint ripple of laughter broke the composure of her countenance. Miss Cuninghame ran to the door clapping her hands.

"Tea, Abdul," she cried. And, like the genie of the Persian fairy tale, the servant instantly stood salaaming on the threshold.

"Oh, Aunt Rosamond, may he not have a lemon-squash? Major Bethune, I am sure you would prefer a lemon-squash!"

Bethune sat stonily staring at his hostess from under his heavy brows.

* * * * *

So that was she—Rose of the World! Not so beautiful as he had fancied. And yet, yes—grudgingly he had to admit it—beautiful and more. With every instant that passed, the extraordinary quality of her personality made itself felt upon him; and his heart hardened. This grace more beautiful than beauty; those deep strange eyes startling with their unexpected colour, green-hazel, in the pallor of the face under a crown of hair, fiery gold; those long lissom limbs; the head with its wealth, dropping a little on the long throat. Oh, aye, that was she! Even so

had she been described to him: the "flower among women!"—even so, by lips, eloquent with the fulness of the heart (alas! what arid mountain wind might not now be playing with the dust of what was once instinct with such generous life!)—even so, had Harry English described her to his only friend. Save, indeed, that by his own telling Harry English's bride had been rosy as a Dorset apple-blossom, as the monthly roses that hung over the wicket-gate of the garden at home; and the wife of Sir Arthur Gerardine had no more tint of colour in her cheeks than the waxen petals of the white daturas that marked the Governor's terraces with their giant chalices.

Raymond remembered. But she—she had such a bad memory!

* * * * *

"Have you been long here?"

She seemed to take his visit quite as a matter of course.

"I arrived yesterday. I am on leave."

"Indeed. And what regiment?"

He told her. A change, scarcely perceptible, passed over her face. She compressed her lips and drew a breath, a trifle longer than normal, through dilated nostrils.

Just then a procession of soft-footed, white-clad servants entered upon them, and the tension, if tension there had been, was dispelled.

"Will you have tea, Major Bethune, or this child's prescription?"

The ice tinkled melodiously in the fragrant yellow brew. "Baby" was already sucking through a straw; she rolled her eyes, expressive of rapture, towards the visitor. But he was not to be diverted.

"I will have nothing, thank you."

He had not thought himself so sentimental. Why should he bear so deep a grudge against this woman? How could her forgetfulness, her indifference, now harm the dead? It was fantastic, unreasonable, and yet he could not bring himself to break bread with her to-day. He clasped his lean brown fingers tightly across his knees.

"I am afraid," he said briefly, "that my presence must seem an intrusion. But I trust you will forgive me when you understand upon what errand I come."

She disclaimed his apology by a wave of her hand. The emeralds upon it shot green fire at him.

"The fact is," he went on, doggedly making for his point, "I have been asked to write a life of—your husband."

He was interrupted by a commotion among the ice and bubbles of Miss Aspasia's long tumbler.

"Gracious," she sputtered; "but the Runkle is not dead yet!" She choked down, just in time, the comment: "Worse luck!" which had almost escaped her terribly frank tongue.

Lady Gerardine was smiling again in her detached manner.

"A great many people, distinguished people, Baby, have their lives written before they die. And they have then the advantage of correcting the proof-sheets. I dare say your uncle will not object."

Major Bethune allowed a pause to fall before continuing his speech. Then he said, with almost cruel deliberation:

"I beg your pardon, Lady Gerardine. I should have said your late husband. I refer to Harry English."

CHAPTER II

For the life of her Baby could not have said why, but she felt as if something had been broken by these last words—broken with a great crash. She put down her glass and turned and stared from her aunt to Major Bethune and back again. Lady Gerardine's eyes were cast down, her hands were moving among the tea-things: it would have been hard to divine if she had even heard. The man was leaning forward, devouring her face with unsparing gaze—a gaze that seemed to be looking for something with brutal intensity.

After a silence, so oppressive that Aspasia could have screamed, Lady Gerardine spoke:

"Is it necessary to ask for my permission?" she said, without lifting her eyelids. "I did not know that people were so particular nowadays." She paused. And then, with a perceptible effort: "Did you know Captain English?" she asked.

"Did I know him?" Raymond Bethune laughed out loud, unmirthfully. "You seem to have forgotten that he and I went through that siege together. I was with him from the day I first joined, practically till the hour of his death."

Rosamond Gerardine gave a faint gasp, as if breath had suddenly failed her; then she looked up sharply and veiled her glance again.

"Ah," she said slowly. "Through the siege—till—I had not known. I beg your pardon."

Once more there was the heavy silence. With round eyes Baby stared: things were passing here to the meaning of which she had no clue, but she felt,

as it were, the stress of a tragedy in the air.

Suddenly Lady Gerardine rose.

"I am glad to have met you," said she. He rose too, and she stretched out her hand to him. "Write his life," she went on. "I am sure no one could do it better."

As upon their first greeting, the man bowed ceremoniously, barely touching the fingers proffered. She sighed, sank into her chair again, then turned and smiled determinedly upon her niece with the air of one dismissing the subject. Bethune felt well enough that he too was being dismissed; but he took a step forward and stood looking down upon her.

"I do not think you quite understand," he said. "I cannot do this work without your help, Lady Gerardine."

"My help!"

"I am exceedingly sorry to be so tiresome"—his manner betrayed a curious mixture of patience and irritation—"but you see, that without the papers in your possession my task would be futile. I could not possibly do the work justice."

"The papers in my possession!" She echoed the words as helplessly as before.

"The papers in your possession," he repeated. "His letters to you, the journal he wrote during the siege, his notes, his whole correspondence—I brought them all back and sent them to you myself—afterwards. And you, you did receive them? You were too ill to see me, I was told, but your friends undertook that you should have them."

She was gazing at him, now, with wide eyes growing darker and deeper every moment. The colour rushed up to her face, then faded away, leaving it paler even than before. Her stricken look made him feel like a brute; yet the sheer perversity of her attitude exasperated him. At last:

"You want me to give you these papers?" she exclaimed, with a cry.

He sat down on the chair next her; and, like one endeavouring to make a fractious child hear reason, began to explain his meaning to her.

"I should not presume," he said, "to suggest that you should confide to me writings which can concern only yourself and him. He was a reserved man, and, though he was the best friend, the only friend I ever had, and I perhaps his closest, I should not dream of intruding upon his private life, now—now that he is dead. God forbid! But I want you to help, I want you to give me every necessary extract which concerns his soldier's life—that life which was such an example to all Englishmen—which I feel it should be given to England to know, as freely as it was laid down for her. Why, there is not even a cairn of stones to mark his grave! Mark his grave? Why, even that grave has been denied to us! But we can yet raise a monument to him that our country may know her dead."

His cold somewhat grating voice deepened into a note of such tenderness

that Baby wondered in her childish mind. She did not know that a man could so love and mourn a friend. Lady Gerardine had leant back in her chair, her hands clasping the arms. Bethune saw her revolving the question in her mind with such pallid suffering upon her features that he felt torn between anger and a sort of unwilling pity. Her lips moved:

"It is impossible."

He thought he could not have heard aright.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It is impossible."

"Lady Gerardine...!"

"You do not know what you are asking. I cannot!"

"I think it is you who do not understand. The matter is so simple; those letters, that journal—"

"No—no."

"You refuse?" he exclaimed. Indignation was even stronger than surprise.

"You do not know what you are asking!" she repeated. And the cry of passion in her voice again startled both him and Aspasia.

Bethune rose, took up his hat in silence; stood awhile, his steel-pale eyes flaming upon the woman whom his friend had, from all the world, chosen to make his wife.

"I trust you will think it over," said he at length, as soon as he could control himself sufficiently to speak.

He paused again; but Lady Gerardine made no reply. She was still fixing him with that inexplicable gaze that seemed one of terror.

"I shall call again," said he, well-nigh in the tone of a menace; then bowed and turned away. At the door he halted. "But perhaps you did not keep those papers?" he said, upon a sudden scornful thought.

Still she held her peace, and in his heart he knew that this random shaft of his had fallen wide of the mark; that, whatever might be the explanation of her attitude, it was not indifference.

Thoroughly dissatisfied with the result of his interview, with himself, and the whole situation, he strode down the long corridors into the cool echoing hall, where many pillars showed with faint barbaric tints between aisles of gloom.

At the very threshold of the colour and sunshine without, some one overtook him with patter of flying feet, some one nipped him by the sleeve with determined fingers. He looked, and it was Miss Aspasia. Her hazel eyes were rounder than ever; so was her button of a mouth. Her hair seemed to stand out, an aureole of amazement, from her baby face.

"Don't be angry with Aunt Rosamond. Perhaps she will change her mind."

He wheeled round.

"Have you any idea," he asked, "of the reason for her refusal?"

Aspasia shook her head so violently that the halo danced again. She pursed her lips with a long drawn-out:

"No. You see," she added quickly, arresting him, as with head bent in thought he was once more proceeding on his way, "you see, we never speak of Aunt's first husband here. At least she never does. There is no picture of him about, not a sign of anything that has ever belonged to him. As far as she is concerned, it is just as if he had never been."

Raymond Bethune, of the Guides, jerked his head upwards in melancholy and bitter confirmation. In the midst of his own preoccupation and disappointment he could not, however, help being struck with the engaging quality of the face thrust so confidently close to his. Those yellow hazel eyes had depths of almost infantile candour.

"At least there is a soul that can afford to be transparent," he said to himself. Then aloud, following his first perplexed train of thought: "Perhaps it is because of your uncle, of Sir Arthur?" he suggested. "Lady Gerardine may be afraid of annoying him. Some men are jealous of their wives' first husbands." He smiled, half derisively to himself, half genially upon her.

"The Runkle!" cried Aspasia, with a giggle. "Jealous? Oh no; I don't think so! Why, he is the only creature who ever does speak of Captain English in this place. Poor Runkle, he's so awfully pleased with himself, you know, that I don't think he could be jealous of anything or anybody."

"Why then——" Bethune's brow darkened at this confident removal of the only hypothesis that could put Lady Gerardine's behaviour in a favourable light. "Do you think," he said, regarding the girl reflectively, "that you could use your influence in this matter?"

Again Aspasia's head flew from side to side in violent negation.

"Oh, I could not! Aunt Rosamond, she's a darling, she is more than good to me; I love her, but—it would seem such horrible impertinence. I cannot explain, Major Bethune, but I never feel as if I knew her really, nor as if she wanted me to know her. She always seems to me to be all outside, somehow."

He reflected a moment; then he suddenly held out his hand to her, with that softening of the countenance she had already noted—and noted to approve.

"Will you? I want you to try and help me," said he. It was worded as a request; it was voiced, somehow, as a command.

She was preparing to twirl her curly mop, when she looked up and met his eyes. Then—she never knew how it happened—she said quite the opposite to what she had intended:

"I will try."

And this was a promise. There was no mistake about it. He held her hand

for a second in a firm grasp; neither of them wotted, or cared, for the white-clad, dusky-faced retinue that stood like so many statues awaiting the moment to proffer their services. If a liquid eye rolled curiously, however, it was an exception; your Hindoo has a dignified discretion of his own.

* * * * *

"Play me something, Baby."

Lady Gerardine was still lying back in her chair, almost as if she had not moved. Her face had perhaps a whiter pallor than before, but there was no other trace of emotion to be seen. Instead of obeying, Aspasia, with her promise heavy on her heart and all the indiscreet impulsiveness of her years, rushed over and flung herself at her aunt's feet, rubbing a coaxing head against her knees.

Rosamond laid her hand upon the curls. This Baby seized and kissed; then she looked up. Lady Gerardine smiled; it was a smile indulgent but of infinite detachment.

"It is perfectly absurd that I should call you Aunt," began the girl. True child as she was, she could think of no better scheme of attack than this wheedling. "You look as young as I do."

"Young?" echoed the Governor's wife, wearily.

Baby was counting on her fingers: "I was, let me see, just twelve when you married the Runkle, six years ago. So," triumphantly, "you are twenty-seven now. And that is, oh, quite ridiculously young for an aunt!"

Lady Gerardine sighed.

"Dear Aunt Rosamond," said Aspasia, suddenly, turning round to kneel and place her elbows on her aunt's knees while she looked earnestly into her face, "why won't you?"

"Why won't I what, Baby?"

"You know. Let that poor man have those papers. Dear Aunt Rosamond, I don't think it's quite fair."

The girl was trembling at her own temerity. But now the elder woman showed neither anger nor distress; only a marble stillness seemed to come over the living flesh. After a pause she placed her hand gently across Aspasia's mouth.

"Baby, never speak of that again," she said. And there was the most absolute finality in her voice. Then she leaned forward and kissed her niece. The touch of her lips struck Aspasia as deathly cold. "Now play me something."

Aspasia rose, baffled, not without a feeling akin to the irritation that Major Bethune had displayed a little while before. It was like being brought up by a smooth blank wall.

She marched to the piano, opened it, and plunged into a prelude of Bach's,

glad to be able to work off some of her pent-up feelings. As she played she set her pointed chin; and, while her fingers flew, her thought wove in and out with the intricate music to a settled resolution:

"I don't care. Other people can be determined too. It is not fair of Aunt Rosamond. And I'll not give it up."

She finished her "Bach" with a triumphant chord.

"Thank you," said Lady Gerardine, "I like your music, Baby. It is so intellectual."

CHAPTER III

Sir Arthur Gerardine was stretched in a bamboo chair on the white terrace overlooking the garden, taking his ease luxuriously. He had had his shampoo after his ride, he had had tea, and had started his second cheroot. It was growing delightfully cool. He had the conviction of leaving a well-spent day behind him; and now, an immaculately conscientious, immaculately attired English gentleman of importance, felt himself entitled to his virtuous relaxation.

He was perilously near the sixties, but young-looking for his age in spite of his oriental experience; handsome still, with a smile that, upon first acquaintance, was found irresistibly fascinating; a genial easy manner—a way with him, in fact, that seemed to promise the utmost good-fellowship. It was only after experience that people felt the steel behind the velvet glove.

"Uncle Arthur," Aspasia one day averred in an irrepressible burst of frankness, "is the sort of man the more you know him, the less you like him."

No one would have been more surprised than Sir Arthur himself had he been told that he was a tyrant. Yet very soon those who were brought into contact with him discovered what a domineering spirit dwelt behind that sweet smile; how, without ever departing from a form of speech and manner that, with his own family was almost always caressing, with the rest of the world affable, no human being had ever been able to move him from the prosecution of his own purpose. Such a character, combined with a mighty intellect, would have been an enormous power for good. Unfortunately, it was upon the slightest premises and with limited reasoning faculties that Sir Arthur formed his unalterable views of life.

One of the problems that had most puzzled Aspasia, since unexpected fam-

ily misfortunes had driven her to seek a home with the Lieutenant-Governor (her uncle and guardian), was whether her beautiful new aunt did not really hate Sir Arthur; and, "if she didn't," as the child phrased it, "how she could?" But not even Baby's shrewd young eyes could discover a flaw in the serenity with which Lady Gerardine listened to her husband's theories, or the grace with which she lent herself to the fulfilment of his wishes.

She now sat beside him with a half smile, her hands busied with some delicate work: a lovely picture of cool placidity.

Sir Arthur turned and gazed upon her with such an eye of condescending and complacent affection as that with which the Grand Turk may regard his last favourite.

"Well, dear," he pursued, "I have finally rejected the Rajah's request."

"Indeed?"

She shot a look at him as if she would have added something; but upon the second thought dropped her long lids and resumed her embroidery, while Aspasia, in her usual pose at her aunt's feet, broke into shrill protest:

"You never did? Why, Runkle, and everybody said the poor man was quite right! Only last night I heard General Staveley tell Aunt Rosamond that it was a mere case of justice, not to say one of expediency."

The Lieutenant-Governor's self-satisfaction waxed visibly to swelling point.

"Ha! I dare say," he commented. "Indeed, I flatter myself, my dear Aspasia, that there is not another man in India that would have dared to take the responsibility. Aha, Rosamond, firmness! I was firm. Very firm. Discontented, disloyal set! I won't give them an inch more than the measure."

"Oh Lor!" ejaculated Baby.

Lady Gerardine's eyelashes flickered a second.

"Quiet!" she said, giving her niece a tap upon the shoulder.

Baby subsided, growling to herself like a tiger cub:

"That nice prince...! If Runkle does not start a new mutiny---!"

Sir Arthur surveyed his womankind a second with that singularly sweet smile of his. They were his womankind, part of his personal belongings; and therefore it never even dawned upon him that they could be anything but superlative of their degree; much less that they could form an independent opinion really unfavourable to himself. His niece's petulance affected him not otherwise than as an agreeable *émoustillage* in moments of relaxation such as these, as well as an opportunity for the display of his own indulgent wit and wisdom. He had a pride in her smart tongue as well as in her pretty looks; and Aspasia's most earnest attempts produced no more effect upon her distinguished relative than would the gambols of a kitten. Thus he now beamed upon her. In his early years

of London society and successes, he had been noted for that beautiful smile. "The ass with the seraphic smile," a light-hearted St. James's comrade had dubbed him, little guessing that his country would, in the future, consider so well of "the ass" as to confide some of the gravest interests of the Empire to his charge. In spite of which (all unknown to its distinguished wearer) the nickname stuck.

"I have given orders, my love," said the great man, once more addressing his wife, "for the cutting down of the group of banyan trees at the end of the garden. I know you and Aspasia rather liked that little jungle, but it was really a nasty bit. Now I propose to have the place concreted and a summer-house erected—something in a pretty artistic style, say Early English—or a Norwegian hut, perhaps, where you can sit without fear of snakes."

Again Baby felt a warning hand pressed upon her shoulder, and was fain, with crimson cheeks of wrath, to compress her lips in silence, while Lady Gerardine drew a strand of silk through her needle and made a pretty little speech of thanks to her husband for his thoughtfulness.

"Why don't you carry the concrete down the garden walks," observed Miss Cuninghame presently, with withering sarcasm, "and set up a rockery, with shells and things?"

Sir Arthur ignored the sally.

"You will be glad to hear, Rosamond," he proceeded presently, "that I have been successful in a matter to which I attach great importance. I have found, I think, the exact person I have wanted so long: the native secretary, you know. All these young Civil Service fellows, with their translations, are no use to me. And my work was positively at a standstill."

Irrepressible Aspasia sniffed. A faint look of weariness crossed Lady Gerardine's well-trained countenance: this book of Sir Arthur's—a history of the Provinces confided to his charge, beginning from the earliest possible date and to be carried down to the triumphant conclusion of his own rule—this great work which was (as he was fond of saying) to be the monument of his career in India, was a subject which the Lieutenant-Governor's circle had learned to dread.

"Monument, indeed; it will be all our monuments!" had cried Aspasia one day, and Lady Gerardine had not rebuked.

The quaintest part about the matter, perhaps, was that, while Sir Arthur employed some half-dozen experts in obtaining material for him, and spent a fair part of his time in discussion of the matter provided, not one line of the folios which already filled his nest of drawers, some of which had been actually passed for press, had been either conceived or penned by the official author. And the guileless phrase, which often dropped from his lips: "I must really go; Macdonald (or it might be Gray, or Captain Smith) is waiting to read out to me the last chapter of my book," had ceased even to provoke a smile.

"It has always been my aim to get at the spirit of the people," said Sir Arthur, "to draw water from the source that springs in the soil of the land itself." He looked sideways for a second, reflecting. "Ah, not a bad phrase that; I must suggest it to Macdonald."

"And what's the name of the particular native spring?" inquired the pert Miss Cuningham.

"His name"—Sir Arthur drew a letter from his pocket—"is Muhammed Saif-u-din, if it makes you much the wiser, my dear Aspasia. It seems he's quite a remarkable individual. Curiously enough, a Pathan. Pathans, a real fighting lot, don't as a rule take to the pen. Yes, quite a remarkable individual. The son of a Subadar—who thought it fine to let his son have an English education. Thought it no doubt a form of loyalty that would pay. However it may have been, the fellow's as poor as a rat in spite of his learning—proud as Lucifer, of course. Drop of princely blood in him, it appears." The Lieutenant-Governor smiled pityingly. "They generally have, if you believe them—ha! Read his letter, my dear," he went on, drawing a sheet from his pocket-book and tossing it in her lap; "it may amuse you to note the grandiloquence of the native style."

Lady Gerardine turned over the sheet with a languid finger. It was scored with beautifully regular copperplate writing, which presented certainly no difficulty to the decipherer. Baby, whose young interest was more easily aroused, craned her neck to see also, and read aloud the opening phrase in a mock declamatory style:

Huzur,—By your Honour's Gracious Permission, your devoted servant Muhammed Saif-u-din. Will your Magnificence so condescend to my nothingness as to permit your Heaven-illumined eyes to rest upon this unworthy document....

"Oh, Runkle, that's even finer than your phrase. Hadn't you better pass it on to Macdonald? You must let him have a finger in your pie—your Monumental Pie!"

Sir Arthur smiled with his benevolent air.

He drew a second letter from his pocket.

"Another agreeable piece of news," said he; "Lady Aspasia is quite ready to give us ten days or a fortnight after her visit to Calcutta."

"Lady Aspasia!" cried Baby; "do you mean the horrid woman that went and had a name like that to make me a laughing-stock all my life?"

"Lady Aspasia, your own cousin, and the most agreeable woman I have ever met," rebuked Sir Arthur. "With one exception, of course," added the gallant

gentleman, bowing towards his wife. "You ought to be very proud, dear child," he went on, addressing his recalcitrant niece, "not only of your connection with a noble house, but also to bear a name which is perhaps unique. Had we had a daughter, Rosamond, my love, I could not have allowed her to be christened otherwise. Dear me," he went on, now throwing his remarks into space and inflating his chest with the breath of sentimental reminiscence, "dear Aspasia, what a fine creature she was; and how much in love with her I used to be in my salad days. You're not jealous, dear," he cried suddenly, struck by his wife's abstraction.

"Jealous?" she echoed with a start. Her gaze was really pathetic, as she raised it to his face; and Sir Arthur, satisfied that she had undoubtedly felt a little hurt by his reminiscence, smiled sympathetically and once more considerably selected another topic.

"By the way," he said, knocking the ash off his cheroot with a squat nail pared and polished to the last possible point of symmetry, "I met quite an interesting fellow just now. He tells me he has already called on you. Bethune his name is—Major Bethune, of the Guides. I asked him to dine to-night. I knew you would like me to show him some attention. You must know all about him, my love; he went through all that unfortunate business with your poor husband. I knew," repeated the Lieutenant-Governor, with a most intimate smile of self-approbation, "I knew that you would like me to show him some attention."

Baby, leaning against her aunt's pliant form, felt it suddenly stiffen into rigidity. But the needle poised in Lady Gerardine's fingers did not tremble; it hovered for a hardly perceptible moment, then resumed its languid course. Sir Arthur, after waiting for the expected tribute, threw down the stump of his cigar and looked round in surprise.

"I always wish to do the right thing about any friend of poor English," he insisted. "And Bethune was flattered, of course, immensely flattered at my asking him. I knew it would please you, my dear Rosamond."

Lady Gerardine finished the lilac petal, cut her silk, folded her work, and, then only, raised her eyes.

"Thank you," she said gently; "you are always kindness itself."

Those eyes of hers were so dark and encircled in her pale face that the affectionate husband was solicitously moved.

"You look tired, my love," he said, hoisting himself out of his lounge to approach her. "I trust you have not got a chill; I think we had better all adjourn. You must lie down an hour before dinner."

Lady Gerardine rose and stood, looking out across the still garden falling in terraces to the river edge, beyond the flaming masses of poinsettia, the heavy-headed babul, and the starred wide-flung hibiscus, towards the far-off hills, mauve and amethyst hued against a sky of translucent sapphire.

"I must go and say good-bye to my banyan trees," she said, almost as if speaking to herself.

Sir Arthur was horrified at the mere suggestion. Down into the lower garden, at the moment when the mists were rising! He would not hear of such a thing. And she was not looking well. He took her face by the chin and turned it to the sunset light. Even in that warm glow it showed wan; and the lids she dropped between her eyes and his gaze were bruised and shadowed, faintly purple like the petals of wood violets.

"I'll have to ask Saunders to look at you," said the Governor. "I hope and trust that you have not been so foolish as to throw off your vests again!" He slipped two fingers under the lace of her diaphanous blouse to satisfy himself. "I cannot afford to have you ill, dear," he wound up caressingly. "Now, I'll just tell Jani to measure you a couple of grains of quinine before you lie down."

Benevolent, consequential, he hurried indoors. Rosamond stood yet a moment, looking at the sky. Baby, a thousand shades of exasperation and scorn upon her expressive countenance, now melted all into tenderness.

"If ever there was a woman killed by kindness," she exclaimed, "it is you, poor Aunt Rosamond!" And flinging her arms round the still figure: "Oh, darling," she whispered, with the wail of an ever-renewed complaint, "why do you always, always give in?"

Lady Gerardine gently disengaged herself, bringing her eyes back from the distant loveliness with a perceptible effort.

"Oh, Baby," she said, in a tone of melancholy mockery, "when you have lived as long as I have, you will see how much simpler it is."

She trailed away, obediently, to seek quinine and couch. Aspasia kicked over the work-basket as a relief, summoning a couple of supple Hindoos to repair the damage; and, feeling that the balance of things was slightly re-established, she took her way also into the palace to select her attire for the evening.

In spite of her ruffled sensations, she was smiling to herself as she went, and the dimples were very deep in the pink cheeks. Something was singing in her heart—a soft, pleasant little song: that it was good not to have lived long yet, and to have everything still before one; and that she was glad that the man with the light eyes and brown face was not going to drift out of her life. She hoped he would not be angry with her for not having succeeded yet.

CHAPTER IV

The chief guest of the Lieutenant-Governor this evening was one Dr. Châtelard, a French savant of world-wide reputation, author of "La Psychologie Féminine des Races." Scientist—he had begun his career as a doctor, had specialised in nervous complaints, narrowed his circle again to *les névroses des femmes*; and, after establishing a school of his own, had gradually (though scarcely past the middle life) retired from active practice and confined himself to studying, teaching, and writing. The first volume of his "Psychologie"—under the distinctive heading "La femme Latine"—had created a sensation not only in the scientific world, where the author's really valuable contributions to observation and treatment could not fail to be recognised, but also among that self-same irresponsible yet charming class which formed the subject-matter of his investigation. Here, indeed, the physician's light turn of wit, the palpitating examples he cited, with a discreet use of asterisks, set up a great flutter. *Madame la Marquise* was charmed when she recognised, or believed to recognise, *cette chère Comtesse* in a singularly eccentric case. Friends hunted for each other eagerly through the delicately veiled pages. Now and again a fair whilom patient would plume herself upon the belief that no other identity but her own could fit that of *Madame D*—, *cette exquisite sensitive*. (M. Châtelard clung to style while he revolutionised science.) It is no wonder, perhaps, that the book should have had a greater vogue than the last scandalous novel. A second volume, "L'Orientale," was in course of conception. Indeed, it was the occasion of that tour in the East which brought M. Châtelard to India and, incidentally, under Sir Arthur Gerardine's roof.

Sir Arthur was in his element. To condescend, to demonstrate, to instruct, was to the Governor as the breath of his nostrils; he prided himself upon the Attic character of his French; he was justly conscious that, judged even by the Parisian standard, the urbanity of his manners was beyond criticism. And to have the opportunity of displaying to the intelligent foreigner the splendours of a quasi-regal position, filled to the utmost capacity; the working of a superior mind (not unleavened by sparks of English wit that again need, certes, fear no comparison with French *esprit*); a cosmopolitan *savoir-faire*; the nicest sense of official dignity; the brilliant jargon of a brother writer; and last, but not least perhaps, a young wife of quite extraordinary beauty ... it would have been difficult to contrive a situation fraught with more satisfaction! The presence of a minor personality, such as that of Major Bethune, was no disturbing factor. Apart from the circumstance that Sir Arthur was large-minded enough to appreciate the admiration even of the humblest, there was a subtle thread of pleasure in the thought that "poor English's" friend should see and marvel at the good fortune that had fallen to the lot of "poor English's" widow; while the little halo of pathos and romance surrounding the memory of the fallen hero cast a reflected light upon his distinguished successor, which any temperament so sympathetic as that of

the gifted Dr. Châtelard might easily be made to feel. A few well-chosen whispered words of sentiment, over the second glass of claret at dessert—and there would be a pretty paragraph for the Frenchman's next letter to the *Figaro*. For it was well known that the series of brilliant weekly articles appearing in that paper, under the title "Les Impressions d'un Globe-trotteur," emanated from the traveller's facile pen.

Matters had progressed according to programme. M. Châtelard, a pleasant tubby man with a bald head, a cropped pointed beard drawing upon greyness, a twinkling observant eye, a sparkling readiness of repartee, and an appreciative palate, fell duly under the charm of the genial Lieutenant-Governor. The latter figured, indeed, that same night in his manuscript as the most amiable representative of John Bull abroad that the *globe-trotteur* had yet had the good fortune to meet.

"Almost French," wrote the sagacious correspondent, "in charm of manner, in quickness of insight—thorough Anglo-Saxon, however, in the deepness of his policy, the solidity of his judgment, the unflinching decision with which he watches over the true interests of his Old England in this land of her ever-rebellious adopted sons. *Bien Anglo-Saxon*, too, in his ceaseless devotion to duty and stern acceptance of danger and responsibility. But he has received his recompense. These provinces of his are a model for all other colonies, and from one end to the other the name of Sir Gerardine is enough to make, etc., etc."

In very deed Sir Arthur had never been more brilliant, more convincing.

* * * * *

Coffee was served upon the terrace. Even the Governor could find no objection to this al-fresco adjournment upon such a night. A purple-blue sky throbbled with stars. Upon the one side the lights of the town gleamed, red and orange, far below, and its myriad night clamour seemed to emphasise the apartness of the uplifted palace; upon the other stretched the great flat, fertile, empty lands, still half-flooded, gleaming in the moonlight, widely still save for the occasional far-off cry of some prowling savage animal.

Étrange situation! (wrote M. Châtelard, in his well-known assertive rhetoric). Nous étions là, élevés au-dessus de la plaine, dans cet antique palais converti en résidence moderne, mais tout imprégné des souvenirs de l'Orientalisme le plus prononcé. A nos pieds grouillait la ville Indoue, intouchable, inchangeable, telle qu'elle avait été avant que le pied du maître étranger y eut pénétré. Appuyé centre

la balustrade, de la terrasse je laissais plonger mon regard à travers les ténèbres jusque dans la vallée où luisaient, mystérieuses, innombrables, les lumières de la cité et me disais en moi-même: Nous voici donc, petit comité de la race conquérante qui n'a pourtant pas conquis; de la civilisation Européenne la plus éclairée qui n'a rien su changer dans le fonds des choses là-bas! Oui, là-bas, l'Orient va toujours son chemin sinistre et secret, inviolable par l'étranger; et toujours il en sera ainsi; toujours ces deux races, destinées à être conjointes sans être unies, traverseront les siècles comme deux courants puissants qui cheminent côte à côte sans jamais mélanger leurs ondes!

While Sir Arthur and his guest exchanged the treasures of their minds with mutual satisfaction, Bethune sought to isolate Miss Cuningham, under the pretext of showing her from a particular corner of the terrace the tents of a new Engineer camp. Baby was nothing loth. Her innocent cherub face looked confidently forth upon him. Her light hair was spangled by the moon rays.

"Well?" said he, as soon as they were out of earshot.

The spangled mop began to fly.

"No use!"

He drew his brows together: "Did you try?"

"Did I try! Of course, at once—yesterday. Did I not promise?" The girl was reproachful. "She forbade me ever to speak of it again."

Raymond Bethune folded his arms, leaned them upon the balustrade, and turned a set profile towards the low hanging moon.

"Then I must try again," he said, after a pause.

Aspasia wished him to succeed; but something relentless in his looks filled her with a sort of fear of him, of pity for her aunt. He seemed as indifferent to human emotion, as immutable, she thought, as one of the stone gods that, cross-legged and long-eyed, in unfathomable inner self-satisfaction, had gazed forth from their niches in the temple walls below for unknown centuries upon the passing mortal throng.

Suddenly he turned and left her. Sir Arthur was now pacing the terrace with the globe-trotter, lucidly laying down the law of India, as interpreted by his own sagacity, his smouldering cigar making ruby circles in the night with every wave of an authoritative hand.

The second secretary, Mr. Simpson to wit, was sitting by Lady Gerardine's side, effusively receiving each indifferent phrase that dropped from her lips. As Major Bethune advanced towards them the young civilian rose and drew away,

with a crab-like movement, in the direction of the abandoned Baby.

Lady Gerardine clasped her hands together on her knees; the contraction of her heart, at this man's approach, painted her face ashen even in the pallid light. He took a seat—not Mr. Simpson's lowly stool, but one that placed him on a level with her; and then there came a little pause between them like the tension of the elements before the break of the storm. She had successfully avoided him the whole evening; but now she felt that further evasion was useless; and she waited, collecting her forces for the final resistance.

He went straight to the point:

"I hope you have reconsidered yesterday's decision. Perhaps you do not understand that this is a question of duty with me, of conscience."

He was trying to speak gently.

"You have no responsibility in the matter," she answered.

"I cannot accept that point of view," he said, flashing into icy anger.

She did not reply in words, but rose with a swift haughty movement, unmistakably showing her resolve of closing the discussion once and for ever. But in an instant he was before her, barring her way.

"Major Bethune," she exclaimed, "this is persecution!"

The blood rushed to her cheeks, her eyes flashed. For an instant she was roused to superlative beauty. Stronger became his conviction that here must be more than mere heartless caprice. Something of her emotion gained him.

"If you would only give me a reason!" he cried.

"It is impossible," she answered quickly. "Is it a thing to be asked for so easily, this raking up of the past? The past! is it not dead? My God—it is dead! What if I for one will keep it so?"

"That is no reason," he said cuttingly; "it is hardly an excuse."

She passed by him with long swift steps and a rush of silken draperies. And thus, once more baffled, Baby found him, stonily reflecting. She stopped, promptly discarding her meek admirer.

"No success?"

"No success."

"You had better give it up," said Aspasia.

"I was never more determined not to give it up."

Baby looked exceedingly sympathetic, fluffy, and engaging: something like a sweet little night-owl, with her round wide eyes and her pursed-up mouth. He suddenly caught one of her hands and held its soft palm closely between his own lean ones:

"Miss Cuningham," he said in an urgent whisper, "I know you can help me."

She stared at him. It would almost seem as if this strange being could read her vacillating thought. He saw her hesitate and bent to look into her eyes, while

the pressure of his hand grew closer.

"And if you can help me, you must. Remember your promise."

"Well, then," the girl became suddenly breathless, as if she had been running. She looked round over her shoulder: "I know it's beastly mean of me, but, there—you have only to make Uncle Arthur take it up...."

"Ah!" The teeth shone out in his dark face. "I understand. Thank you."

But Baby was already gone. With crimson cheeks and a deep sense of guilt, she was running hastily away from the starry terrace and the great mysterious, jewelled Indian night, into the lighted drawing-room. Here Lady Gerardine was quietly seated alone by a green-shaded lamp, reading her favourite Thoreau. She looked up and smiled at Aspasia's flurried entrance, marked the quivering, flushed face.

"My dear," she exclaimed, with a vague amused laugh, "what has happened? Don't tell me that you have had to box George Murray's ears again!"

George Murray was Sir Arthur's first secretary, a young gentleman with a weakness for the fair sex, whose manners and morals had (in spite of M. Châtelard's theories of Western immunity) been considerably affected by the lax atmosphere of India. Aspasia had found it necessary, more than once, to put him in his place; and on the last occasion had confided to her aunt, with a noisy sigh, that if the Leschetizky method was to fail in the glorious musical results for which she had once fondly hoped, it had at least had the advantage of singularly strengthening the muscles of her arm.

She now stretched out her fingers, and, half unconsciously sketched a buffet in the air; then she shook her head:

"Oh, no, indeed! He has not looked the same side of the room as me since Saturday."

"Poor man, I am not surprised!"

"Serve him right!" said Aspasia, indefinite but vindictive.

"It is not Mr. Simpson, surely?"

"Simpson?" echoed the girl, with supreme contempt, "that little worm!"

"Who is it, then? For something, or some one, has upset you."

"Oh, I don't know! It's Major Bethune, I think. I don't believe he's canny. He has got such queer eyes."

Then, thinking she saw her aunt shudder, she gave her a remorseful hug and flew to the piano to plunge into melodious fireworks.

With a sigh as of one oppressed, Lady Gerardine took up her book again and endeavoured to absorb herself. For years she had successfully cultivated the faculty of leading her mind into peaceful places; but to-night there was no wandering forth with Thoreau's pure ghost into the whispering green woods he loved. Stormy echoes from the past were in her ears; relentless hands were

forcing her back into the arid spaces where dwelt the abomination of desolation. Everything seemed to conspire against her, even Aspasia's music.

The girl's fingers had slid into a prelude of Chopin, and the familiar notes which she had been wont to reel off with the most perfect and heartless technique were now sighing—nay, wailing—under her touch.

"Stop!" exclaimed Lady Gerardine, suddenly springing to her feet. "Oh, Baby, even you! What has come into your music to-night? You have betrayed me!" she said, and bursting into tears, hurried from the room.

The girl's hands dropped in consternation from the keys. Never had she heard before to-day that ring in her aunt's voice, that cry of the soul. She did not dare follow the flying figure. "*You have betrayed me!*" ... Little, indeed, could the poor soul guess how completely she had been betrayed.

CHAPTER V

Dr. Châtelard expressed his desire to accompany the officer of Guides upon his homeward walk. It was part of his programme to study the lesser as well as the great. And, having to his satisfaction completed his psychological analysis of a ruler in chief, he told himself that half a page or so consecrated to one of the pawns in the great chess game of empire would not be without entertainment to his readers—especially as in the lean taciturn Scotsman he believed to have lighted on the *type le plus net* of the "Anglo-Saxon" soldier.

With this idea in view he had watched his subject with the keenness of the collector already some time before his departure, and had been interested in a little scene between host and guest. With a purposeful yet respectful stride, Bethune had approached the Governor and addressed him in an undertone. Sir Arthur had listened and responded with urbanity and condescension. Whereupon the officer had bowed in what seemed grateful acknowledgment; and, as he had turned away, the astute Frenchman had thought to read upon his countenance, saturnine as it was, a certain unmistakable satisfaction.

Therefore, when they started on their way down to the town, the traveller could think of no better topic for opening the conversation with his dissimilar companion than praise of the official who had evidently just granted him some important request.

"A charming personality, our host, is he not?"

"No doubt."

Bethune's tone was discouraging—but these *diabes d'Anglo-Saxons* (as M. Châtelard knew) wanted drawing out. So, undauntedly genial, he pursued:

"And one of your great politicians, *hein?* The square man in the square place, as you say."

This being a mere statement, Bethune did not feel called upon to reply; and M. Châtelard, amazed at a silence which he, with subtlety, interpreted as hostile, was fain to exclaim:

"Is it possible you do not think so?"

"I do not feel myself competent to judge," said Raymond Bethune.

"My faith," thought the other, "we do not make great progress at this rate. Let us try something more intimate. At least, my young friend," he went on aloud, "you have, I trust, yourself no cause to be dissatisfied with his Excellency. Some little demand you made of him to-night, did you not? Some matter concerning career, advancement?"

"My career, my advancement, are quite independent of Sir Arthur Gerardine's influence."

M. Châtelard pondered; was there not certainly something more than British reserve in the almost resentful tone—some deep-lying grudge that it would be piquant to find out?

"Why, then," he cried, with much artful artlessness of candour. "Why, see how one can deceive one's self! Just now I would have sworn, from your attitude, despite your national phlegm, that you had solicited and been granted some personal favour."

"A personal favour, yes. Nothing connected with my service."

"A personal favour, *hein?*"

"If indeed you would reckon it a favour—a mere act of justice I regard it."

"Indeed, my dear sir, an act of justice?"

"The whole affair is one that could not interest you, M. Châtelard."

"My dear young man, all interests me. It is my trade to be interested—always."

They had reached the end of the palace grounds; and, by the lights of the flaring booths that were plastered against the walls, Bethune halted a second to survey the shrewd, kindly, expressive countenance, quivering with eager curiosity, at his shoulder.

His own features relaxed with that twinkle of the eyes which was his usual approach to a display of amusement. After all, why should he not gratify this note-taking traveller with his tale? There was no mystery about it; and a plain statement of the situation might serve to put in order his own ideas which had been troubled by Lady Gerardine's unreasonable and unexpected attitude.

"My business with Sir Arthur to-night is soon told—" He broke off abruptly. "You are, I understand, a sedulous observer: did you happen to take any note of her Excellency the Governor's wife?"

"Did I take any note of—" the sentence escaped M. Châtelard in a breathless way—as if the words had been knocked out of him—and ended in a little squeak. He drew back one step and contemplated the younger man in silence for a perceptible moment. "Did I notice her Excellency?" he repeated then, in elaborately natural tones. "Why, my dear fellow, it would mean having no eyes not to notice her—one of the most beautiful women it has ever been my good fortune to see! In fact, to-night, still under the influence of the look in her eyes, I should say, my friend, *the* most beautiful! Lucky dog (as you say) your Governor!"

Bethune threw away the match with which he had been lighting his cigar and blew a contemptuous puff.

"Before she married Sir Arthur," said he, "she was the wife of a comrade of mine. It is my desire, it is my intention, to write the life of that comrade. I require the co-operation of Lady Gerardine. She refused it to me. I went to Sir Arthur."

"You went to Sir Arthur," repeated the Frenchman, in tones of one almost stunned with amazement.

"Yes," answered the officer, gravely. "To make her accede to my request."

"And he—"

"Oh, he has promised to see that she does so at once."

For a while M. Châtelard was fain to proceed in silence, words failing him before so extraordinary a situation. As he went he regarded the Englishman with ever-increasing respect, admiration, not to say enthusiasm.

"*Voilà qui est raide ... voilà qui est fort!*" he was saying to himself. "Was I not right to tell myself that there was something truly remarkable about this young man? What a drama! What could not our Balzac have made of it! The well-conserved—but elderly, yes, elderly husband; the young, lovely, bored wife—ah, but she bores herself, the young wife! And then this young, handsome, sinister officer who has known her before, loved her it is clear from the first—the wife of his comrade! He comes to her with a plan ... a plan of an astuteness to deceive an angel. But the woman who loves is never deceived. Because she loves him, she reads his heart. Virtuous, she refuses.... They are both young, she knows her weakness. She bores herself, yes, she bores herself, but she refuses. And he, what does he do, the young, silent, determined adorer? My faith, it is the simplicity of genius: he goes to the old husband, that the old husband may order her to yield to his scheme. And the husband—and this is the strangest part of it all—what does he say? Oh, it is simple, simple in the extreme. He promises to do so at once. What a story! And my friend here, under the starlight, qualifies it in three words: 'No favour—justice.' It is of a cynicism! Yet yonder he stands, as grave

and cold as a judge. Poor Sir Gerardine. But here is a young man who will make his way—and, for the psychologist, what a study!”

”My faith,” said he aloud, ”but you have courage, sir.”

”Courage?”

”Ah, you thought I did not notice Lady Gerardine! I will tell you something—as one man to another—she is one who will not make her lover’s task easy to him, nor amusing, hey! With her it will be all or nothing: the grand passion. Ah, my gallant friend, believe the word of one who has had experience in these matters! Avoid the grand passion, for it’s what makes cinders of our manhood.”

It was Bethune’s turn to halt amazed.

”I beg your pardon,” he exclaimed. ”But are you warning me against falling in love with Lady Gerardine?” Then, overcome with the humour of the idea, he threw back his head and gave vent to his short laugh.

In this laugh, however, M. Châtelard’s acumen was pleased to discover a concentrated bitterness; in the touch upon his arm, a menace to the interferer.

”Nay, heaven forbid!” he cried, dropping the personal tone with a hasty return to natural good-breeding. ”It only struck me, sir, that your programme was a little dangerous. And for one like myself, who has made a study of women, Lady Gerardine is a type—a type rare, fortunately, perhaps, for the peace of the world, but, heavens, of what palpitating allurements when one does come across it!”

”A type of a very selfish woman,” said Bethune, shortly. And this time the physician was not far wrong in noting bitterness in his tone. ”As cold as a stone, I should say, and as self-centred as a cat.”

”Self-centred, I grant you. But cold?” screamed the Frenchman.

”As cold at heart as she is white in face,” said Harry English’s comrade.

”White? so is the flame at its intensest! Cold? With that glow in her hair? With that look in the eyes—those lips? Touch that coldness and you will burn to the bone. Ah, it is not the old husband that will feel that fire! But the fire is there, all the fiercer for being concentrated. Ah, when she lets herself go, her Excellency, it will be terrible—it will be grand! There are conflagrations which make the very skies grow red.”

”My way branches off here,” interrupted Bethune, drily, ”and yonder are the lights of your hotel. Good night.”

He shook hands loosely, and was gone before the globe-trotter, interrupted in full eloquence, had had time to lay hold of his formal French manner for the farewell ceremony.

”I have pressed him a little too closely,” he thought, as he stood watching the soldierly figure swing away from light to darkness, down the narrow street

dotted with gaudy booths. "He is already on the fatal slope.... I must not let the end of this drama escape me."

Raymond Bethune, as he strode along, laughed to himself at "the French Johnny's" nonsense. Nevertheless a phrase or two seemed to circle in his mind round the baffling image of his friend's widow like a flight of birds round the head of a sphinx: "White? so is the flame at its intensest. Cold? Touch that coldness and be burned to the bone..."

CHAPTER VI

The walls of Lady Gerardine's room glowed like the page of an old missal, with carmine and cobalt blue, with beetle-wing purples and greens. It was a columned and arched apartment in the wing of the modernised palace which yet remained as the last dusky prince had left it. Here Sir Arthur's improving hand had been so far stayed.

Lady Gerardine sat in silence while the ayah brushed her hair. Though no word had passed between them, the woman, inarticulately, as a dog may, felt that her mistress's heart was troubled. And, while her dark fingers moved among the gleaming strands, they trembled a little with a vague anxiety. Jani had been Rosamond's first and only nurse. It was to the faithful breast that had practically given her life that the young widow had clung in the hour of bereavement. This creature, who could not reason but only feel, had been then the sole presence she could endure. To the house of altered fortunes, from comparative poverty into the almost queenly state of Lady Gerardine, the woman had accompanied her mistress, rejoicing; bringing with her the same atmosphere of unreasoning, almost animal devotion.

How much did she understand, this secret, dark-minded, dark-faced old Hindoo? More, perhaps, about her white child than Rosamond knew herself! But her theories of what was good for her mistress had not changed since the days when she had ministered to her with gaudy toys, scraps of gilt paper, and luscious Indian sweets.

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Sir Arthur's step, the resonant step of the master, rang on the marble without.

The ayah imperturbably continued to wield her brush. The faint tension that came over Lady Gerardine's figure was familiar to her, but evoked no sympathy; children and women know not what is their real good, in the Hindoo's opinion; the Lieutenant-Governor was a great and good lord, and her Ladyship's jewels were even nobler than the Ranee's.

"Tired, Rosamond?" cried Sir Arthur, breezily. "I was sorry, my dear, that you could not wait to bid good night to our guests. But I made it all right; I made it all right. Another time, love, you will consult me, before retiring. Governor's wife, you know ... *noblesse oblige*, eh? Well, well, let it pass! My dear child, the garden window open upon you, at this hour! We shall have you down with fever as sure as fate." He clucked disapprovingly. "Will you never learn sense?"

Rosamond stood up.

"Pull the blinds, Jani."

She came forward into the centre of the room, so strange a presence, with the long yellow tresses, the white skin, the tall proportions of her northern womanhood, in this haunt of oriental splendour, still peopled, one would think, with the small ghosts of bygone brown beauties.

Through the door left open by Sir Arthur the sound of the fountain playing in the great inner baths fell soothingly on the ear. A breeze gently swayed the scented matting blinds to and fro and brought in gusts of Eastern airs to their nostrils, spiced, heavy, dreamy. From below, where lay the town, rose rumours of revel—the poignant twang of the ghiter, the plaint of the reed, the dry sob of the tom-tom. The whole atmosphere within and without was an appeal to the emotions, to the senses; the very touch of the night wind a velvet-soft caress. A night, surely, when but to be alive was in itself a boon; when to be young and beautiful should mean joy. The appeal of it clamoured to Rosamond Gerardine's dormant soul, troubled this day to the core of its self-imposed slumber by the insistent voices of the past. She turned cold with a stony prescience of evil. If she might not sleep through life, then must she wish herself dead.

"I am very tired," she said to her husband, with a note of unconscious pleading in her voice. "I am going to bed; excuse me to all our guests."

"Oh, every one has gone!" said the Lieutenant-Governor.

He threw himself luxuriously upon the settee and stretched his arms over the piled cushions with the gesture of the man at home in his wife's room.

"Sit here, dear."

She took place beside him. He lifted a coil of her hair and played with it admiringly. The ayah drew back into the arched recess of the window and stood immobile, the silver brush gleaming in her dark hand.

"Bethune tells me, Rosamond," said Sir Arthur, rolling the soft hair round his finger, "that he wants you to help him with a life of poor English." Rosamond

looked at her husband, the light of pleading in her eyes died down into dull misery. "I understand, dear, that you have made some objection; but, as I have said to him, it is our duty, my dear Rosamond, our duty, to see that the memory of the poor fellow should get proper recognition. A very distinguished young soldier," said Sir Arthur, with benevolence, "it would certainly ill-become me to put any difficulty in the way. So I have promised——"

She started away from him with an involuntary movement; the twist of hair in Sir Arthur's fingers plucked her back. She gave a cry:

"Oh, you have hurt me!"

He was full of solicitous apology; kissed her hand, patted her head. But she, still drawing from him, gazed at him with the eyes of a woman in fever.

"You have hurt me," she repeated, in a whisper.

"Of course," proceeded her lord and master, with fresh gusto, "I can quite understand, dear, that you should shrink a little from the business. It would naturally be a slightly painful one. Your social duties occupy you a good deal, and——" he tenderly pulled her ear, "you have not much inclination for literary labour, have you? Therefore, my love, overworked as I am, I have resolved to take the matter into my own hands. In fact, I have actually promised Major Bethune that I will be responsible for the task."

"You!"

Her pale lips laughed silently.

"Yes, I myself." He rubbed his hands and nodded. "I shall make the time, my love."

"You?" she repeated, and rose stiffly to her feet. "No."

"My dear Rosamond!"

It had come upon her, after all. Here would no refusal serve her any more, no strength of determination, no piteousness of pleading. Before this smiling self-confidence of will what resistance could avail? It is the relentless trickle that wears the stone.

"No hands but mine, at least. No eyes but mine!"

"My dear child!"

"One would have thought that my wishes would be paramount in the matter; but you drive me, all of you. Have your way."

"You amaze me—this is childish, unreasonable!"

She stared vacantly before her.

"Kismet!" she said. "It is fate—I will do it."

"I have never heard such nonsense in my life."

"But at least," her eyes shot flame upon him, "let no one talk of laying a hand upon these things. Good God, they, at least, are mine!"

Sir Arthur rose also, too bewildered still to be able to grasp the full measure

of the offence.

"You are certainly very strange to-night, Rosamond," he exclaimed with testy anxiousness. "Not yourself at all. I feel convinced you have a touch of fever."

He stretched out his fingers for her pulse. Quickly she evaded his touch.

"Write to that man," she said, enunciating her words with painful distinctness, "tell him that he has gained his point."

Ignoring the unbecoming and extraordinary situation of having a command issued to himself in such imperious tones from his wife's lips, Sir Arthur moved in high dudgeon towards the door.

"I insist upon your taking an effervescing draught at once. And to-morrow I shall certainly call in Saunders to see you. Jani, your mistress must go to bed."

The door fell back. Rosamond sank down once more on the settee and sat, with her elbows on her knees, her chin on her clasped hands, staring at the marble floor, long, long into the night, while Jani waited and never even moved a finger.

CHAPTER VII

If sleep came at all to Rosamond that night, it came with no refreshment of forgetfulness, but rather with an increase of inner struggle. Hour merged into hour until even the noisy Indian town fell into some kind of silence; but the voices in her troubled soul ceased not their clamour.

Why should she be made to do this thing, she who had asked so little of life; who had, indeed, deliberately fashioned life for herself so that it should give her but one boon—quietude? Her pulses throbbed as if with that fever which the solicitous husband had prognosticated. How dared they?

Then, reason took the cold grey eye, the cold reproachful tone of Major Bethune, to ask her, Had she the right to refuse? And fate seemed to assume the kindly handsome smiling countenance of Sir Arthur, to assure her that it must be. Who knew as well as she that it was vain to struggle against any fiat of his? And then, once more, every fibre of her being, every energy of her soul, started in revolt.

The tom-tom beat below in the town a mocking refrain to her anguish. And, without the walls, the pariah dogs howled and fought, snarling, and wran-

gled, growling. She slid into snatches of horrid slumber, in which the contending elements in her soul seemed to take tangible form. But with the dawn a change came upon her. She awoke from one of these interludes in which she had after all glided to unconsciousness; the tension had become relaxed; there was one clear purpose in her mind:

She would not do it!

Reason now no longer appeared under an enemy's shape, but came like a friend to her pillow and whispered words of soothing. They had no right to ask it of her. No power on earth could force her to it. All that the world had the claim to know about Harry English, his comrades, his friend, those that had been beside him in his glorious fight against destiny, could give to it. What concerned the man, apart from the soldier; what concerned that inner life, had been hers alone. What sense of justice could there be in the demand that she should break through the deliberate seal of years, stultify the intention of a whole existence, at the bidding of an overbearing young man, of a pragmatic old one? Once, for a little while, life had held for her mysterious possibilities—sweet, but no more unfolded than the bud in the narrow sheath. Was she now to tear apart these reserves, close-folded, leaf upon leaf, dissect the "might-have-been" till her heart's blood ran? No, a hundred times! And then, upon the strength of this decision, the habitual long-cultivated calmness came floating back to her. She lay and gazed at the shafts of light as they filtered in through the blinds and fell in crosses and bars upon the marble floor. From their first inroad, when they had seemed but the laying of shadow upon shadow, to the awakening of colour in and under them, she watched them with wide-open yet dreamy eyes.

All the night she had battled with the nightmare horror. Now, with the dawn, came peace: not the peace of acceptance, but cessation of feeling. She mused and pleased her mind on the mere feast of sight, as, bit by bit, in the familiar places, the tints of her wonderful missal-page room returned to existence for her eye; here the turquoise-blue inlay, with its cool stripe of black and white, there a lance of rose-crimson on the tessellated wall, glowing like the dawn itself amid the surrounding gloom. Across the light shafts of the garden window, there was a dance of flickering leaf shadows. And this greenness set her mind wandering, not in the over-luxuriant, untranquil, full-blossomed Indian garden, but into cool dim English spaces—into some home wood where harebells grew sparsely and the dew glittered grey on bramble-brake and hollow; where last year's leaves lay thick and all the air was full of the scent of the honest, clean, wholesome soil of England.

And as she dreamed her placid waking dream, morning life in the Governor's palace began to stir about her. Already from the town below the too brief hour of stillness had been some time broken. But these outlandish sounds: the

cry of the water-carriers and camel-drivers, the jingle of cow-bells, the blast of the shepherd's horn, the brazen gong of the temple, had not really broken in upon her thoughts: they had formed rather a background, vague and distant, haunting the sweetness of her far wanderings.

Now, however, as the house itself became awake, creepingly, with slinking feet, she called upon sleep again for fear once more of what the day would bring her.

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One came and bent over her, holding his breath. And she feigned unconsciousness. And then she heard him withdraw on exaggerated tiptoe. And next entered the ayah with her tea—Jani, the ayah, who flung wide the windows on the garden side.

Early as it was the lilies were throwing up incense to the rising sun-god; it gushed into the room as upon the swing of a censer. And, turning her languid eyes, Rosamond saw how, in the fresh little breeze, the great green banana-leaves waved to and fro across her window against a sky of quivering silver.

When Jani returned to the bed, Rosamond handed her the empty cup with a smile. But as Jani took it she looked at her mistress keenly; and, after a second or two, stretched out a stealthy hand and touched the forehead under the masses of golden hair, still heavy, from the night-sweat. The fair brow was cool enough—there was no trace of the ever-dreaded fever in the encircled eyes or on the smooth white face; only the weariness of a long night-watch. But Jani shook her head to herself as she withdrew with her tray; and, meeting Miss Aspasia at the door, she was all for forbidding her entrance. But that young lady was not of those who are turned from their path.

"Don't be a goose, Jani!" cried she, briskly. "If you can see Aunt Rosamond, why should not I?" She ducked nimbly under the white-draped forbidding arm, as she spoke. "And she is not a bit asleep; her eyes are as wide awake as anything."

Too strainedly awake, one more versed in the reading of the human countenance might well have deemed. But the last thing Aspasia sought in life was its subtlety. Rosy and fresh from her bath, her crisp hair crinkled into tighter curls than ever and still beaded here and there with the spray of her energetic ablutions, as she stood in the square of green light, wrapping her pink cambric dressing-gown tightly round her pretty figure, she was as pleasant to look upon as an English daisy. Lady Gerardine smiled more brightly.

"It's a glorious morning, Aunt Rosamond. Are not you going to ride?"

"Not this morning."

"Aren't you well?" Aspasia sat down on the side of the bed and took her

aunt's hands into her firm grasp. There was a conscience-stricken anxiety in the girl's eyes.

"Quite well; but I slept badly."

Baby felt the beat of a slow pulse under her fingers. Relieved but still weighted with a sense of guilt, she bent to kiss the face on the pillow. Lady Gerardine turned her cheek with that tolerant submission to caress that she was wont to display. Then she drew her hands away and gently pushed Aspasia from her.

"Go and dress, you will be late. And tell your uncle that I am trying to sleep."

Still Aspasia hesitated. She would have liked to confess her last night's treachery and be forgiven. But Lady Gerardine, who was never a very approachable person, seemed this morning more distant than ever. And catching sight of the dancing leaves outside, the girl felt the joy of the young day suddenly seize her spirit. She shuffled gaily across the room in her heel-less slippers.

"I'll tell Runkle you're sound asleep and he must not disturb you," she announced with cheerful mendacity, "otherwise you'll have him prowling in and thrusting that thermometer down your throat."

Lady Gerardine laughed a little, but made no protest.—That thermometer!

Then she turned her head and fell to watching the garden window again, glad when across the open spaces she heard at last the crisp repeated rhythm of the horses' feet draw close and ring sharp, as the cavalcade moved up the road by the garden walls, and drop away in the distance.

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When Aspasia returned from her ride she found her aunt seemingly in the same attitude; the long white hands folded, she could have sworn, exactly as she had last seen them; the deep-dreaming eyes still gazing out of the window.

"I declare," cried the girl, "you lazy thing!" but there was still a shade of uneasiness in her voice and in her glance. "Are not you ashamed of yourself?"

"Not at all," said Rosamond, "I've had a very happy time. And you?"

"Hot, hot," said Aspasia, flinging her Panama hat across the room and rubbing her forehead. Her cheeks had grown pale and there were moist dark rings round her eyes.

"I have had the better part, I think," said Lady Gerardine.

"Not you," said Baby, as she dumped her solid weight on her favourite corner of the bed. "It's been delightful, delicious. I've never enjoyed a ride so much." Her bright hazel gaze misted over in remembrance. "Oh dear," said she, "how can you lie there! You're quite young, Aunt Rosamond, but I think your idea of hap-

piness is like a cat's. You just like to sit still and blink and think. And even the cats romp about—at night," she added, parenthetically.

"Oh, I don't even think, or care to think much," said the other in that indulgent half-playful manner which she reserved for her niece, to whom she talked more as if she were five years old than eighteen. "While you were out I let my soul swing on that great green leaf over there by the window. Do you see it, Baby? It is beginning to catch a ray of sunlight now and shines like a golden emerald."

"Gracious!" cried the girl.

"I think it is partly," said Rosamond, pursuing her own thoughts, "because of this vivid passionate land, where every one lives so intensely. No wonder, poor things, their ideal of complete happiness over here is Nirwana! I am glad, Baby, that we shall soon be in our placid England again, where people go from the cradle to the grave, quietly as along a grey road green-hedged, from a cottage gate to a sleeping churchyard."

"I am glad, too, we are going to England," cried Aspasia, catching up one phrase of her aunt's speech and neglecting the main idea. "I met Major Bethune, this morning," she said, half-bashful, half-defiant, "and he's going home on leave, too."

Lady Gerardine's eyelids drooped, just enough to veil her glance. She lay quite still, without even a contraction of the fingers that rested upon the sheet. Baby peeped at her in a sidelong, bird-like way, and felt inexplicably uncomfortable. She babbled on, stumbling over her words:

"He was riding such a brute of a horse, and sat it like a centaur—or whatever you call the thing. You never saw such an eye as the creature had; one of those raw chestnuts, you know, with a neck that goes up in the air and seems to hang loose. And he sat, just with the grip of his knees, you know. He is as thin as—as—" Simile was not Aspasia's strong point; she broke off. "You are not listening to a word I am saying." She swung her legs pettishly, in the short linen habit.

"I heard," said Rosamond, without lifting her eyes. "I heard very well."

"I'll go and take a bath," said Aspasia, sliding off the bed, and pausing for the expected protest. Aspasia's habit of plunging into water four or five times a day was a matter of perpetual household objurgation.

"Yes—I'm simply made of dust!" She moved towards the door. Still her aunt lay, fair and white and still. It seemed to the girl, scarcely even breathing.

"Do you know, Runkle's new secretary has come. The famous new Indian secretary—the pure native spring, you know," she cried, with a childish effort at dispelling that uncanny supineness. "He gave me an awful fright."

The long drooped lids flickered with a swift upward look of unseeing pupils.

"Fright! Why?"

"Oh! I don't know. It was fearfully silly of me. As I was coming along your passage, just now, I saw a hand hold back the curtain for me. I thought it was that Simpson. And as I bounced through I nearly fell into his arms—and found it was a black man—ugh! The famous new secretary, in fact. He stood like a stock, and I squeaked in my usual way. And then he smiled. I don't like Indians much, but that's a fine handsome fellow. Looks like a Sikh—I'm boring you. I'm off. Lord, here's Runkle! Runkle, I'm going to have a bath."

She turned with gusto to fling her little glove of defiance afresh in the newcomer's face—and this time was not disappointed of the effect.

"My dear Aspasia!"

"Only number two!"

"It's not that you've not been warned..."

The wrangle of words rose in the air, to end in the inevitable mutual iterations: "Don't say you've not been warned, my dear Aspasia," and "Don't care, Runkle, I'm going to have a bath."

"I am afraid Aunt Rosamond's not well," was Aspasia's somewhat spiteful parting shot, as she slipped out behind the door hangings.

"Not well!"

With his short quick step Sir Arthur came to the bedside.

"Would you mind," said his wife, "getting Jani to pull the blinds again; the light is growing too strong!"

She wanted the shadows about her, for the struggle was coming, and she felt in her heart that she was doomed to lose. Sir Arthur attended to the detail himself, then hurried back.

"Fever? No." Even he could scarcely insist upon this with his stubby finger upon that pulse, the pulse of a life that found itself just now an infinite fatigue. "Below par! I wish, dear, you would for once pay some attention to what I say. It is not that I have any desire to find fault with you, my love, but how many times must I represent to you that it is important to get the early freshness of the day in this climate, and take your rest later?"

"Yes," said Rosamond.

She lay waiting for the dreaded blow to fall. It was not long delayed.

"It is high time, indeed, that we should all have a change," pursued the Lieutenant-Governor.

He still held her hand in his and looked down complacently to see how white it lay, in the shaded room, upon his broad palm: how slight a thing, how delicately shaped, with taper fingers and filbert nails. The great man had chosen her in the zenith of his life and success because of her beauty. She had little birth to boast of, and no fortune. But it pleased him at every turn to trace in her those points which are popularly supposed to belong only to the patrician.

"It is high time," said Sir Arthur, turning the passive hand to gaze at a palm no deeper tinted than is the pale blush of mother-of-pearl, "that we should get back to England for a while. And, by the way, that young man, Bethune of the Guides, poor English's friend—you know, my love—has dear Aspasia told you? We met him this morning; he is also going to travel home very shortly."

"So Aspasia told me."

"I have advised him to wait for our boat. A good plan, don't you think? We could be talking over that biography together—*pour passer le temps*—eh, my dear?"

"*Pour passer le temps.*"

"Yes. I informed Major—ah—Bethune, that you had some idea about preferring to do this little matter yourself. As I said to Bethune: 'I am willing to undertake it for her; but in this, she must be free—quite free.'" He paused upon the generous concession. Her lips moved.

"What did you say?" he asked.

She had but repeated, in the former mechanical manner: "Quite free." Now, however, she altered her phrase. Through all the clamour of the inner storm there had pierced the consciousness of his irritable self-esteem on the verge of offence.

"Thank you," said she.

"I am particularly anxious," resumed Sir Arthur, squaring his fine shoulders and inflating his deep chest, "that there should be no hitch in this affair. It would ill become me, as I said to Bethune, me of all men, to place any difficulty in the way of a memorial to poor English. I am sure you understand me in this, my love!"

He bent his handsome grey head and kissed her hand with a conscious old-world grace. The sentiment he was delicately endeavouring to convey was truly a little difficult to put into definite language; and Sir Arthur had too much tact to attempt it. It might be transcribed thus: "If that excellent young man, your first husband, had not so obligingly left the world, I should not be standing in this present satisfactory position with regard to yourself." And if he were grateful to Captain English, how much more so ought she—Lady Gerardine—to be on the same account? He was a little shocked that she should not have shown more alacrity to do justice to the worthy fellow's memory.

"Well, my dear," said Sir Arthur, jocosely, after a pause, "I must not waste much more time in this flirtation. I have a busy morning before me. A very busy morning." He drew a long breath, to end up with a satisfied sigh. "And, by the way, my new secretary has come. A capable fellow he seems! Quite extraordinarily well educated. Speaks English perfectly. Caste business will be a bit of a nuisance, of course. Will have to feed apart, and all that nonsense. Strange

creatures, are not they? But he's worth it. Well, we shall see you at tiffin."

The observation was an order, and Rosamond assented to it as such. Short of actual illness, when the precautions surrounding her would have been of the most minute, not to say wearisome nature, the wife of the Lieutenant-Governor was expected to fulfil the duties of her state of life to the last detail.

"And it's quite settled," added Sir Arthur, lightly, "that you intend to supply the material Bethune requires yourself."

She sat up in bed, with a sudden fierce movement. And, catching her head in her hands, turned a white desperate face upon him.

"Yes, yes," she cried, "Oh God, yes!"

Sir Arthur was amazed. So much so, indeed, that even as last night, amazement superseded his very natural vexation.

"Why, Rosamond! Really, my love. I am afraid, my love, that Aspasia is right, that you are not well. This is the second time in twenty-four hours that you have answered me in this—in really, what I may call—quite with temper, in fact. I'm afraid, dear, that you cannot be well. I shall certainly request Saunders to look in this evening."

Lady Gerardine fell back upon her pillow, and then, lifting the heavy mass of her hair, swept it across her face like a sheltering wing, as if, even in the dim room, she could not endure the gaze of human eyes upon her. Sir Arthur, for all his science of life, could not but own to himself that he was nonplussed. He shrugged his shoulders. Fortunately, sensible men were not expected to understand the whims of the charming but irresponsible sex. Rosamond was evidently not the thing, and therefore was to be indulgently excused. In spite of which philosophic conclusion his attitude towards his secretaries and other subordinates that morning was marked with unwonted asperity.

"Something's turned our seraphic old ass a trifle sour," Mr. George Murray remarked to his junior, with a grin.

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Under the veil of her hair Rosamond would have called, if she could, on all the shades of the world to come and cover her; would have gladly sunk under them, away from the light of life and the pain of living, somewhere where all would be

dark and all quiet, where she might be forgotten—and allowed to forget.

CHAPTER VIII

"Jani," said her mistress, "bring me Captain English's box!"

The ayah stared as if she could not have heard aright. There followed a strange oppressive silence, in which the lapping of the waters in the inner marble spaces seemed to take whispering voices of amazement. Then Lady Gerardine, standing straight and impassive by her dressing-table, her head just turned aside from the reflection of her own beauty, repeated her order in the same hard, uninflected tone.

"Captain English's box; bring it to me."

Jani looked sharply up at the speaker's face and clapped her hands together with the wail of the children of her race when sudden trouble comes upon them.

"Ai, ai!"

"Go," said Lady Gerardine.

Grudgingly Jani turned to obey. She went, muttering to herself, groping in her soul for the reason of this strange and most unexpected order—an order so out of keeping with the whole tenor of her mistress's life, that it rang in her ears like a menace of calamity.

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It was a small thing enough, a common battered tin box, to rank with such importance. But it held tragedy: more than tragedy, a woman's murdered youth. Well did Jani remember the day it had come back to the little home, up in the hills—all that was left to them of their handsome young lord. They could not carry Rosamond back her dead; what soldier's widow can hope for that last tragic comfort? But the few tangible traces he had left behind him; these were hers by right, and to her they were brought, with scarcely less reverence than if they had been his honoured remains—the journal he had kept for her during yonder endless months of siege; the letters he had written her, never to post; his notes; sundry trifling belongings, marked with that poignant personal touch which seems to inflict the hardest pain of all.

One can kneel in uplifted resignation beside the awful grandeur of the soul-

abandoned clay. But the old pipe, burned down on one side, the worn glove ... over these trivial relics the heart breaks. Rosamond English, in her nausea of misery, her rebellion against the unaccepted unrealisable sorrow, could not look at them, could not touch the poor memorials. She thrust them back into the battered box away from her sight, and with them all the garnered treasures of her brief girlhood and of her briefer wifhood: the simple keepsake, the dried flowers—sprig from her wedding bouquet, bridal wreath—the letters to the betrothed, the first letters to the wife. Things of no worth, yet full of hideous potentialities of grief: symbols of what had been, what might have been. "Away, away with them!" cried her sick heart, "out of my sight for ever!"

And now she was to break open the coffin to look upon the horror of the murdered thing that was her youth; she who had nailed it down so fast, buried it so deep!

Jani laid the box at her mistress's feet and loosened the cords slowly and with protest.

"Go, leave me now," said Rosamond, "and let no one disturb me. Leave me!" she ordered sharply, as once more the ayah hesitated. And Jani slunk away, dragging noiseless feet, her dim mind filled with inarticulate foreboding.

Rosamond drew a long breath as the hangings fell. Surely, surely, if there be anything to which one has a right, in this grinding world, it is to be alone with one's dead!

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She took the key from where she had herself placed it ready to her hand on the table: a black rusty thing amid all the jewels and costly trinkets which it was Sir Arthur Gerardine's pleasure to provide for the adornment of the most beautiful of all his attributes—his wife. She knelt down and inserted it in the lock; and then she paused, passing her hand across her damp forehead.

Inexorable fate! She for years had walked in the company of some creature of horror, the face of which had been mercifully veiled; she had carried a mortal anguish cunningly lulled to sleep. Now her hand must lift the veil.... Now no opiate would further serve her: she must face the pain.

For a moment yet she hesitated: the last recoil of the flesh. Then the courage which despair or resignation lends—that rise of the spirit to meet the inevitable which seldom fails even the lowest human being at the end—brought back strength sufficient. She turned the key, drew out the rusty hasp, and opened the casket of her dead past.

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The breath that rushed at her from the gaping box seized her by the throat. The unfading scent of the faded orange blossom; the very atmosphere of the lost presence, of the tobacco he had been wont to use, of the Russian-leather pocket-books she had given him; a faint, faint whisper of the English lavender her hands had been so careful to set for him, since he loved it. And, over all, through all, some odour of the siege: of strife, fever, bloodshed, and death—eastern, indescribable, terrible! Her soul sickened away.

No, the past was not dead! It had but lain in wait for her all these years. It had but gathered force to spring upon her in the fated hour. None can escape destiny. Here was the cup she had refused to drain; here were the tears of which she had cheated her heart; here, even, was the intensity of her lost youth, that she might mourn the husband of her girlhood as it had been written she must mourn.

She rose to her feet. A cry rang in her ears like the cry of an animal hurt; and she never knew that it had come from her own lips. Through gathering mists she saw Jani reappear and run towards her; and, summoning all her failing energies in one supreme effort, she called out in distinct tones:

”Close the box and let no one touch it.”

Then she fell like a mown lily, straight and long, beside it.

CHAPTER IX

For thirty-six hours the unconsciousness for which she had longed cradled Rosamond, and when she came to herself it was slowly and with dimness. Three times, indeed, did day and night slip by her in her darkened and silent room before she even began to wonder how it was she should be left in such peace. But upon the fourth dawn, as the sun set to work to paint once more the jewel glories of her walls, memory came back upon her like a torrent.

She sat up, wildly crying:

”Jani, the box! What have they done with the box?”

The ayah’s arms were round her in a second. Jani whispered and soothed her mistress as, long ago, she had soothed her nursling. Safe was the mem sahib’s box; no one should lay finger on it but herself. But the mem sahib must be good and sleep, for Jani was by her. And Rosamond let her head rest gratefully upon the wasted bosom that once had held such loving bounties for her, and from

thence slid back upon her pillows into forgetfulness again. She was weary still, with a great and blessed weariness.

* * * * *

Dr. Saunders paid brief daily visits. In Sir Arthur's opinion he was inclined to make culpably light of the whole affair—to allow those unimportant fever cases in the compound to weigh against the indisposition of the Lieutenant-Governor's wife.

It is a notable fact that the medical man treats the feminine syncope as not calling for much notice. And though the excellent Scot conceded that there might be some shock caused by the fall, to account for the prolonged unconsciousness, he declined to admit to Sir Arthur there was ground for anxiety or to recommend any treatment but quiet—absolute quiet. The preliminary symptom of irritability towards himself which Sir Arthur commented upon as extraordinary and alarming, Dr. Saunders in so many words declined, as a waste of time, even to discuss.

Nevertheless, as days succeeded each other and the patient's languor, not to say apathy, continued unabated, Dr. Saunders abruptly changed his tactics and informed his Excellency that he had better lose no time in sending his wife home.

"Pack her off," he said brusquely.

"Pack her off!" The choice of words was as unfitting as the idea they embodied was distasteful.

"I thought," said Sir Arthur, loftily, "that you were aware, Dr. Saunders, of my intention of progressing homewards next month."

"Well, I should pack off Lady Gerardine by the next boat," said the doctor, no whit abashed. "There's a good deal of sickness about, and I should not like to take the responsibility of keeping her on here in this condition. She's in a queer low state—damn queer low state, Sir Arthur."

Sir Arthur puffed an angry breath down his nostrils and fixed a withering gaze on the other's dry, impassive countenance.

What sort of a physician was this who, having charge of the precious health of such a distinguished household, could allow one of its most important members to get into a damn queer low state and then brazenly announce the fact? Sir Arthur, a spot of red anger burning upon each cheekbone, gave Dr. Saunders clearly to understand how grossly he had failed in his post of trust, and announced his own intention of procuring higher opinion without delay. Whereat the doctor shrugged his shoulders and drove off in his little trap at break-neck speed, as philosophically as ever.

The higher medical opinion was procured. And though it was enveloped

in phraseology better suited to the patient's distinguished station, it was substantially the same as the first—with the single difference that it seemed to take a more serious view of the case. Lady Gerardine was once more ordered home with the least possible delay, this time under penalties so obscurely hinted at as to seem far more alarming than the most explicit statement.

Sir Arthur's irritable anxiety caught fire again. He hastened the departure with as much energy as he had hitherto displayed in repudiating the idea. Truth to tell, no prescription could have well been less pleasing to him. Precluded himself by public business from leaving before his allotted time, not only would his stately "progress" home be sorely shorn of its chief adornment, but the visit of his distinguished relative, Lady Aspasia Melbury, would have to be unceremoniously postponed. Moreover, it was never part of his views of the marital state to allow his beautiful wife to remove herself more than a day's journey from his personal influence. Scornfully as he would have repudiated any suggestion of jealousy (and indeed, as Aspasia had asserted, he was perhaps too vain a man to entertain so unflattering a guest in the complacency of his thoughts), he had, whether from long residence in the East or natural disposition, an almost oriental manner of regarding the wife as an appanage to the man's estate—a satellite, pleasing and brilliant enough, but yet a mere satellite in the greater luminary's orbit of glory. And therefore, while feverishly speeding the necessary preparations, he could not but let it be seen that he was disappointed, not to say hurt, that there should be any necessity for them.

Lady Gerardine showed herself as gently indifferent to reproach as she had been to solicitude. But the physician's wisdom was so far justified that, from the moment she was told of his decision, she roused herself and began to take some interest in life again.

"Home," she said, "England! Oh, I am glad!"

And, by-and-by, when she was alone with Aspasia, she began, to the girl's delight, to discuss plans with quite an eagerness in her weak voice.

They were in a long cool room, one of the bygone zenana apartments preserved practically untouched, which opened upon the one side into the garden through the arches of a colonnade, and was secluded even from that quiet spot by marvellous stone lacework screens, each different down to the smallest detail of design, yet all in harmony. However the small dusky Eastern beauties may have rebelled in their day against these exquisite prison walls; the present Northern mistress of the whilom palace found pleasure in their very seclusion, their apartness; and, according to her wont, she feasted her soul lazily on their artistic perfections.

She was stretched on a highly painted Indian couch which had been converted into a sofa, and let her eyes wander from the carving of the window

screens themselves to their even lovelier reflections, cut in grey shadow on the white marble of the pavement. From the inner rooms the waters of the baths played murmurous accompaniment to her thought and her interrupted speech. Aspasia, squatting on the rug at the foot of the couch, listened, commented, and suggested.

The latter had not yet quite overcome her horrified sense of guilt in connection with Lady Gerardine's singular breakdown. Without being able to piece together any reasonable explanation of late events, she felt instinctively that there was more than met the eye; that there was in the web of her aunt's life, so to speak, an under-warp of unknown colour and unexpected strength; that behind the placid surface there lay secret depths; and that her own trifling treachery had unwittingly set forces in motion with incalculable possibilities. She had gone about, these days, with a solemn look—a living presentment of childish anxiety. The scared shadow was still on her pretty face as she now sat in attendance.

"Home in six weeks..." said Rosamond, dreamily. "We shall still find violets amid the dark-green leaves, Baby, and brown and yellow chrysanthemums on the top of their frost-bitten stalks."

"And is it not jolly," said Aspasia, hugging her knees, "to think that we can go and paddle about in the wet as much as ever we like, without any one after us! And isn't it delightful to be going off just our two selves. Oh! Aunt Rosamond, you gave me an awful fright, you know; but really it was rather well done of you, to faint off like that. You see, the doctor says, whatever they do, now, they're not to contradict you. If ever I get an illness I hope it will be that sort. It is worth anything to be leaving Runkle behind."

Rosamond did not answer, unless a small secret smile in her pillows could be called an answer.

"I don't suppose," proceeded Baby, emboldened, "that you have ever been free from the dear Runkle for more than three days at a time since you married him."

The phrase being a mere statement of fact, it was again left without response.

"And really," pursued Aspasia, warming to her subject, "the way he pounced upon us last summer up in the hills was enough to ruin the nerves of a camel. No sooner gone than he was back. Positively one would rather have had him at home the whole time!"

Force of comparison evidently could no further go. Lady Gerardine gave one of her rare laughs. Baby's face was all wrathful gravity.

Poor Sir Arthur! Disciplinarian as he was, he failed to inspire his immediate circle with anything like average respect. It was a study in morals to watch the rapidity with which the first awe of some newly joined member of his English

staff, the flattered reverential fascination produced by early intercourse with the great man, gave way to the snigger, the jeer, the grudging submission. But, serene in his own consciousness of power and his own heaven-born gift of applying it, Sir Arthur laid down the law smilingly and inflexibly; and the native world about him, at least, bowed to his rule with impassive face and supple back. And, if there were any symptoms of that mutiny which his niece declared a long continuance of his rule must inevitably foster, it is quite certain that he would have refused to believe in it until the rebel's knife was actually at his throat.

"Ah," cried he, coming in upon them at the sound of his wife's laugh, "that's better! I thought we should soon have you on the right road when Sir James took you in hand."

Sir James's harmless ammonia mixture, orange-scented, differed as little from Dr. Saunders' sedative drops as the pith of his flowery advice from the latter's blunt statement. But Dr. Saunders was in deep disgrace, and would probably remain so until the Governor's next colic.

Lady Gerardine's face had instantly fallen back to its usual expression of indifference.

"I hope you weren't listening," cried Aspasia, pertly, "we were just saying what a bore you are."

Sir Arthur laughed again, very guilelessly, and stooped to pinch her little pink ear.

"I have wired to Sir James to have his opinion upon the best resort for you in England, until my arrival, dear. His answer has just come."

He spread out the flimsy sheet and ran his short trim finger along the lines: "'Decidedly Brighton, Margate, or Eastbourne.' It is evident he thinks you require bracing."

"I have quite decided where I am going," answered Lady Gerardine, turning her head on her cushion to look at him.

"Eh?" cried Sir Arthur, scarce able to believe his ears.

"I have been unable to talk business, hitherto," proceeded his wife, gently. "But I wanted to tell you I have decided: I go to Saltwoods."

"To Saltwoods?" His eyes were fixed, protruding, in displeased amazement.

To Saltwoods, that paltry little Dorsetshire manor-house which, by the recent demise of Captain English's mother, had devolved upon his young widow! The Old Ancient House, as it was invariably called throughout the countryside, set in such preposterous isolation that the letting of it on any terms had ever remained an impossibility—the legacy was by no means acceptable to Sir Arthur. The various sums that he had already had to disburse for its upkeep and repairs had been a very just grievance with him; and one of the many matters of business he had resolved to accomplish on his return to England was the sale, at any loss,

of this inconvenient estate.

"I mean to go there," said Lady Gerardine in the same tone of delicate deliberation, but sitting up among her cushions and pushing the hair from her forehead with the gesture that he had already learned to regard with some dismay as indicative of "her nervous moments." "Old Mary, the housekeeper, can easily get in a couple of country girls, and that will do for me and Aspasia very well."

"Preposterous! Now that's what I call perfectly idiotic! I don't want to find fault with you, my dear girl, and of course you've been ill and all that. But it's quite evident you are not yet in a state to see things in their right light. 'A case of sudden neurasthenia upon a highly sensitive organisation,' as Sir James says."

This was certainly a more suitable definition of her ladyship's malady than the "damn queer low state" of Dr. Saunders; and Sir Arthur rolled it with some complacency upon his tongue.

"There, there, we won't discuss the matter any more just now. Rely upon me to arrange all that is necessary in the most suitable and satisfactory manner." He drew a carved stool to the head of the couch, and possessed himself of her hand in his affectionate way. "There, there, she must not be worried!"

Across the fatigue of Lady Gerardine's countenance came an expression that was almost a faint amusement, tempered with pity. Aspasia watching, very demure, mouse-still, from her lowly post, found the situation one of interest.

"You are always kind," said Rosamond then; "but I shall be better at Saltwoods than anywhere. You forget that I have work to do."

"Work?" echoed Sir Arthur. He drew back to contemplate her uneasily; positively this sounded like wandering.

"It was your wish," she continued (could there lurk in that soft voice an undertone of resentment?), "that I should ... look over"—she hesitated as if she could not pronounce her dead husband's name and remodelled her phrase—"that I should assist Major Bethune with his book."

"Ah!"

Sir Arthur remembered. But the proposition was none the less absurd. That Lady Gerardine, too delicate to be able to remain with him—with him, Sir Arthur, the Lieutenant-Governor, at a moment when a hostess was eminently needed at Government House—should be taking into her calculations the claims of so unimportant a personality as that of poor dead and gone English, was, for all his consciously punctilious chivalry towards his predecessor's shade, a piece of irritating feminine perversity that positively stank in Sir Arthur's nostrils. He snorted. For a moment, indeed, he was really angry. And the sharpness of his first exclamation brought the blood racing to Aspasia's cheeks. She hesitated on the point of interference. But the invalid's unruffled demeanour made no demand upon assistance. Suddenly realising himself the unfitness of his tone towards a

neurasthenic patient of highly sensitive organisation, Sir Arthur dropped from loud indignation to his usual indulgent pitch:

"See, my love, how perverse you are. First, when it seemed a mere matter of justice to poor English's memory and could have been accomplished with a very trifling expenditure of trouble, you were opposed to the matter. And now, when, as Sir James says, it is so important for you to have absolute rest, to put even your ordinary correspondence on one side, you tell me, childishly, that it is my wish you should *work!* I hope, I hope," said Sir Arthur, appealing to space, "that I am not an unreasonable man."

"I was wrong," said Lady Gerardine; "I do not intend to do it because it was your wish, but because it is now mine."

Once again Sir Arthur paused for want of the phrase that would lit his sense of the extraordinary attitude of his wife and yet not induce any recurrence of the dreaded symptoms. Then a brilliant solution of the difficulty flashed across his mind.

"I will write and inform Major Bethune of the necessary postponement of the whole affair. And now, not a word more."

Lady Gerardine smiled, but it was with lips that were growing pale.

"I have myself written to Major Bethune," said she. "It is all settled. He will be travelling by our boat and will come to me at Saltwoods as soon as I am ready for him."

She sank a fraction deeper among her cushions as she spoke, and a blue shade gathered about her mouth and nostrils. Aspasia scrambled to her feet in time to arrest the storm that was threatening in clouds upon her uncle's brow.

"For Heaven's sake," she cried, "hold your tongue and go away, Runkle. You'll kill her!" She dived for the smelling-salts and shrieked for Jani. "Good gracious," she rated him, holding the bottle with pink, shaky fingers to the waxen nostrils, "after all the doctors said, and everything!"

Sir Arthur retired, remarkably crestfallen, to his study. How was a man to exercise the proper marital control upon the marble-white obstinacy of a fainting woman?

Neurasthenic shock was a very fine diagnosis. But it was a question, after all—he lit his cheroot—whether a "damn queer state" did not more aptly picture the actual condition of affairs.

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The receipt of a letter from Lady Aspasia Melbury was the first drop of balm in his Excellency's unwontedly distasteful cup. She pooh-poohed his old-fashioned suggestion that the hostess's enforced absence necessitated a postponement of

her visit—announced her arrival at the prescribed time, and her conviction that she and her cousin would get on "like a house on fire." Such being the great lady's opinion, the great man was delighted; and, before many further hours had gone by, the younger and less important Aspasia, with hardly suppressed giggles, heard him hold forth at the dinner table to the following effect:

"What my wife requires really is absolute country quiet. I have arranged that she should pass her first weeks in England at her own little place in Dorsetshire, a charming old manor-house. She naturally does not wish to see much society till my return; and, anyhow, there is a small piece of work which she is undertaking at my suggestion." Here he whispered audibly to the General—his guest of the evening: "Poor English, you know—a little biography we are getting up about him. He was killed, you remember, in that Baroghil expedition."

"Umph, yes; I remember, Inziri Pass—seven years ago, nasty business," grumbled the General, as he guzzled his soup; and Aspasia's eyes danced and her cheeks grew pink with suppressed laughter. Young Simpson thought she was laughing at him, and became abjectly wretched for the evening.

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Having re-established his supremacy to his own satisfaction, Sir Arthur took an enormous interest in the protocol of his wife's departure. As he himself intended to accompany her to Bombay—he was to meet Lady Aspasia at an intermediate town on her May north—all the pomp and circumstance in which his soul delighted was to grace the occasion: the escorts, the salutes, the special trains, and so forth. Finding that Major Bethune was bound by the same boat, he annexed him to his "progress," with a condescension peculiarly his own. "He is engaged in some literary work, at my request. A very good kind of fellow; very intelligent, too," he explained.

And so Raymond Bethune found himself one of the Lieutenant-Governor's brilliant retinue that autumn evening of the departure. "A silent, unemotional man," Sir Arthur might have added to his description, had he, in his own sublime content, ever thought of examining the impressions of others.

Yet, under his impassive exterior, Raymond Bethune was conscious of a keener interest than he had felt these many years. But it was not in the smartness of the Lieutenant-Governor's escort, in the gorgeousness of his equipages or the general splendour of the magnate himself that he found food for speculation; it was in the personality of Sir Arthur's wife—a repellent yet fascinating enigma. His thoughts perpetually worked round it without being able to solve it.

In another manner, a sweet, vague stirring of his being—totally new experience this!—the girlish presence of Aspasia filled his mind also to an unac-

knowledgeed degree. He felt as if his life had been caught up out of its own vastly different course and suddenly intertwined with that of these two women; the one whose every action, every word, was mysterious to him; and the other, clear to the eye as running water, child-heart, child-soul, impulse elemental, nature itself from her spontaneous laugh to her frank impertinence.

"Do you know," whispered Aspasia to him, as they stood side by side under the great colonnade waiting for their turn to descend to the carriage, "I have been hating myself ever since I was such a beast about poor Aunt Rosamond. I think it has half killed her, this business. Even the Runkle wants her to give it up while she's so ill."

The man's eyes had been lost in a musing contemplation of the rosy pointed face surrounded by diaphanous folds of grey gauze. A dainty figure was Aspasia in her soft greys—the sort of travelling companion a man might gladly take with him through the arid and dusty journey of life. But at these words his singular light gaze kindled.

"Surely," said he, "you do not connect Lady Gerardine's illness with anything that you or I have done? That would be absurd, in the circumstances"—he threw a scornful glance about him—"too absurd a proposition to be entertained for a moment." ("This sensibility in a woman who has consoled herself so quickly and to such good purpose!" he added to himself.)

"Oh," said Aspasia back, in a brisk angry whisper, "you don't understand, and neither do I. But I feel, and you don't ... and I think you are perfectly hateful!" She had caught his look, followed his thought, and was indignant.

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And now out into the divine Indian evening they set. The travellers, with their crowd of attendants, moved of necessity slowly, for Lady Gerardine went upon her husband's arm, in the languor of the semi-invalid. Through the frowning gateway, down the stairway they passed, to halt again before the last flight of steps, Rosamond drew herself away from Sir Arthur's support, leaned up against the rough stone slabs of the wall, and laid a slender gloved hand absently in one of five prints that mark it.

"Do you see those?" cried Baby turning, all her ill-humour forgotten in her desire to impart a thrilling piece of information to Major Bethune as he walked behind her. "Do you see those funny marks? Those are supposed to be made by the hands of the queens, when they came down to be burned. Ugh! I say, Aunt Rosamond, are not you rather glad you are not an ancient Indian princess, and that Runkle is not an old rajah, and that you've not got to look forward to frizzle on his pyre?"

"You forget," came Rosamond's dreamy voice in reply, "I should not have been alive to grace Sir Arthur's pyre. My ashes would have mingled with other ashes long, long before.... Oh, I'm not so sure," she went on, again fitting a delicate hand into the sinister prints, "I am not sure that it was not a kind law in the end."

"Gracious!" cried the irrepressible Aspasia, with a shriek and a laugh. And then she whispered, all bubbling mischief, into Bethune's ear: "The poor Runkle, he is not as bad as all that, after all!"

Then, at sight of his face, she suddenly fell grave; and the two stood looking at each other. Bethune had first been startled by Lady Gerardine's look and accents even more than by the words themselves. The next moment, however, he mentally shrugged the shoulder of contempt.

Whom did she think to take in by her affectation of sensibility, this languid, self-centred creature in the midst of her chosen luxury?

Thus, when his eyes met Aspasia's, they were sad with the scorn of things, sad for the sordid trickeries of the soul of her on whom the love of his dead friend had been lavished.

Sir Arthur, with touching unconsciousness of the interlude, was once again affectionately sustaining his wife. Then, as the procession moved on once more, Baby, troubled and discomfited—she could have hardly explained why—moved childishly close to Raymond Bethune, and shivered a little.

"I am glad to be getting away from this haunted place and this uncanny country," she whispered again. "I feel sure I should have ended by making one of these dreadful natives stick a knife into me. I am always plunging in upon their feelings and offending their castes, and all the rest of it. Just look at Saif-u-din's face—Runkle's new secretary—I never saw such a glare as he threw upon us all just now. I suppose he thought we were making fun of their precious suttee!" Aspasia's idea of native distinctions was still of the vaguest.

Bethune turned the keen gaze of the conscious dominator upon the man that Aspasia had indicated with her little indiscreet finger. The red-turbaned, artistically draped figure, with the noble dusky head and the fan-shaped raven beard, was striding in their wake with a serene dignity that looked as if nothing could ever ruffle it. Had he been ruffled? Had the glare existed merely in Aspasia's imagination? While recognising a Pathan (whose contempt for the Hindoo probably exceeded Baby's own), Bethune knew that it was quite possible the irritable pride of the mountain man had taken fire at some real or fancied slight; but the betrayal could have been no more than a flash.

The Major of Guides smiled to himself. He knew his native: the man who will never give you more than an accidental peep of the bared blade in the velvet sheath—no, not till he means to strike! About this fellow, a splendid specimen of the noblest race, a creature cut out of steel and bronze, there was, he thought,

a more than usual sinister hint of the wild nature under all the exquisite manner and the perfect self-restraint; and he found himself regarding him with the complacent eye of the connoisseur. The artistic lion-tamer likes his lions savage.

As he looked he wondered once and again how one so evidently a son of the warlike Pathans could have sought the pacific calling of secretary.

Sir Arthur was taking his new toy down to Bombay with him, where there were, he had been informed, certain documents which might be of value to the "monumental work." And so it came to pass that Bethune and Muhammed Saif-ud-din, destined to share one of the subordinate vehicles, found themselves presently standing side by side at the foot of the steps.

Whether because of the interest he must have seen he had inspired in the officer, or whether he was simply drawn towards him by his racial military instincts, Raymond could not determine, but, as they halted, well-nigh shoulder to shoulder, the Pathan suddenly wheeled round, looked him full in the face in his turn, then smiled. It was a frank smile, showing a flash of splendid teeth; and it lit up the fierce, proud features in a way that was at once bright and sad.

"It would be curious," reflected Bethune, "to know what sort of a soul dwells in that envelope, which might become the greatest gentleman on earth. I'll warrant the fellow has many a bloody page in his story that a man might scarce look upon, and yet he has got a smile to stir you like a woman's."

The first horses of the escort began to move with much crisp action, for Sir Arthur was at last installed in his state chariot. Through the great glass windows he might be seen and admired of all beholders, feeling his wife's pulse with an air of profound concern; while she, submissive, her patient smile upon her lips, was gazing up into his face with gentle abstracted eyes.

"A model couple!" sneered Bethune to himself. And, turning impatiently aside to devote his attention to the more pleasing subject of the oriental, he found the latter just in the act of dropping his glance from the same spectacle, and thought to notice a flicker as of kindred scorn pass across the statuesque composure of the dark face.

"For ever will the East and the West be as poles apart," cogitated the soldier, even as M. Châtelard had done; "upon no point do they in their heart more despise us than in our subserviency to our women. I am not sure," he pursued to himself, cynically, as the splendid presence of Saif-ud-din settled itself with dignity upon the seat beside him; "I am not sure but that the orientals knew what they were about when they made their laws concerning the false and mischievous sex."

Loud and deep rang the great guns of the salute: their Excellencies had started. Rosamond Gerardine was bound for England. In a waggon, at the tail of all the other equipages, sat Jani, withered and sad-faced, wrapt in her thoughts as closely as in her dusky chuddah. She would not talk with the bearers or even

lament her coming exile. She held on tightly with one thin brown hand to a much-battered military tin case, which she herself had laid on the seat beside her. No one else would she permit to touch it. The other servants mocked her about it, vowing it was full of her hoardings and that they would rob her of it. At that she would menace them fiercely with her monkey paw. Strange, sad, inscrutable little Parca keeping guard on the fate of lives!

CHAPTER X

Bombay, a very dream-city, was fading—ever more dreamlike, enwrapped in pale-tinted sunset mists—into the distance.

The salt breeze was in their faces; in their ears was the rushing of the waters from the sides of the ship as she cut her way through. Already the something of England that the sea must always bring her children, the surroundings of an English ship especially, was about them! They seemed to have come from the land of languor and secret doings into open life, into simple action, into a busy, wholesome stir.

Beneath them pulsed the great heart of the ship, white foam pointing her way as she forged ahead. Behind her stretched the furrow of her course, two long lines, ever wider divergent till they lost themselves to the eye. And now, by some fantastic mirage effect, the great oriental port, with its glimmering minarets and cupolas, showed as if caught up into the sky itself. Let but this iron heart labour on a little while longer, let but this eager prow cut its way a little deeper towards the sunset, and the East would have vanished altogether.... The travellers would not even see the first glimmer of her evening lights hung a jewel necklace on the horizon, so swiftly had the sea laid hold of them.

Homeward bound! The step from pier to steamer had already severed the link of their strange affinity with the East. Its mystery had fallen from them. Already this was England. Rosamond Gerardine and Aspasia, side by side, watched the shores retreat, fade, sink, and vanish.

"Good-bye, India!" said Aspasia, her head sentimentally inclined, dropping at last the little handkerchief with which she had been frantically signalling long after there was any possibility of the vessel being descried from the land otherwise than as a black spot; "Good-bye, India, and hey for home!"

Lady Gerardine fixed the fading vision with wide, abstracted eyes.

"God grant," she said, under her breath, more to herself than to the girl beside her, "that I may never see those shores again!"

"Amen!" said Aspasia, cheerfully.

Rosamond laid her hand upon Aspasia's wrist as they leaned against the railings and pressed it with a grasp that almost hurt.

"An accursed land!" she went on, this time in a low, intense voice. It was as if she flung anathema to the retreating shores. "Cruel, cruel, treacherous! Oh, God, what has it not already cost us English! Is there a home among us that has not paid its blood tribute to that relentless monster? Listen, child. I was as young as you when I last beheld its shores—thus—from the sea. It was in the dawn (it is fit it should now be dusk), and we stood together as I stand beside you to-day. And I saw it grow out of the sky, even with the dawn, a city of rose, of pearl, beyond words beautiful—unimaginable, it seemed to me, in promise! He said to me: 'Look, there is the first love of my life; is she not fair? And I am bringing to her my other love ... and you two are all that I will have of life.' And then he laughed and said: 'It would be strange if I wanted more, with two such loves.' And, again: 'Not even for you could I be false to her.'"

Aspasia, mystified, turned her bright gaze full upon her aunt's face. In the pupils of Rosamond's eyes there was enkindled a sullen fire.

"He came back to her," she went on; "and she—that land—lay smiling in the sunrise to receive him. Oh, how she can smile and look beautiful, and smell fragrant, and caress, with the dagger hidden under the velvet, the snake in the rose, and the sudden grave yawning! I've never been home since," she said, with a sudden change of tone, bringing her glance back from the misty horizon, to fix it upon Aspasia with so piteous and haggard a look that the girl lost her composure. "And now I am coming home alone, and he remains there." She made an outward sweep with her left hand towards the north. "I am coming home alone. The other has kept him. She has kept him. I am alone: he is left behind."

"Who?" cried the bewildered Baby, who had utterly failed to seize the thread of her aunt's strange discourse. And, upon her usual impulsiveness springing to a conclusion of mingled amazement and derision: "Who—Runkle?" she exclaimed.

No sooner had the foolish cry escaped her lips than she could have bitten out her tongue for vexation.

A change came over Lady Gerardine's face, colder and greyer than even the rapid tropic evening that was closing upon the scene. The light went out in her eyes, to be replaced by a distant contempt. The features that had quivered with passion became set into their wonted mask of repose; it was as if a veil had dropped between them, as if a cold wind drove them apart.

"I was not speaking of your uncle," said Rosamond, at length, very gently.

Then she suggested that as it was growing late they should take possession of their cabin.

And Aspasia, as she meekly acquiesced, trembled upon tears at the thought of her blundering. For one moment this jealously centred heart had been about to open itself to her; for one moment this distant enfolded being had turned to her as woman to woman; impelled by God knows what sudden necessity of complaint, of another's sympathy, of another's understanding, the lonely soul had called upon hers. And she, Aspasia—Baby, well did they name her so—had not been able to seize the precious moment! The sound of her own foolish laugh still rang in her ears, while the unconscious contempt in Rosamond's gaze scorched her cheeks.

* * * * *

From the very first day, fate, in the shape of an imperiously intimate Aspasia, drew Raymond Bethune, the saturnine lonely man, into the narrow circle of Lady Gerardine's 'board-ship existence. In her double quality of great lady and semi-invalid, the Lieutenant-Governor's wife was to be withdrawn from the familiar intercourse which life on a liner imposes on most travellers. It had been Sir Arthur's care to see that she was provided with an almost royal accommodation, which, as everything in this world is comparative, chiefly consisted in the possession of a small sitting-room over and above the usual sleeping-cabin.

Into these sacred precincts Miss Cuninghame hustled Bethune unceremoniously, as the first dusk closed round their travelling home on the waste of waters.

"Steward! ... Oh, isn't it too bad, Major Bethune! I've been ringing like mad, and poor old Jani's bewildered out of her wits; and Gibbons—that's our English fool of a maid—she's taken to groaning already. There's not a creature to do anything for us, and that idiot there says he's nothing to say to the cabins!"

Her arms full of flowers, she stood close to him; and the fragrance of the roses and carnations came to him in little gushes with her panting breath. Her rosy face, in the uncertain light, had taken to itself an ethereal charm very different from its usual clear and positive outline. Hardly had this realisation of her personality come to him than, under the hands of the ship's servant she had so contemptuously indicated, the flood of the electric light leaped upon them. And behold, she appeared to him yet fairer—youth triumphant, defying even that cruel glare to find a blemish in bloom or contour.

"What do you want?" he asked, with the softening of his hard face which so few were ever privileged to see.

"A vase for our flowers—a big bowl. I hate messy little dabs; and I don't want them to die an hour before they can help it. Oh, a really big bowl, at once!"

Her residence in an Indian governor's palace had been short, but sufficient to give Miss Aspasia the habit of command.

Raymond Bethune gave his dry chuckle as he set to work to fulfil her behest.

"I've captured a salad bowl," cried he, almost jovially, when he returned; "and the head steward is in despair!"

"Tell him to steal the cook's pudding-basins," said Aspasia, and swept him back with her to the minute sitting-room.

Here sat Lady Gerardine, still wrapped in her cloak but bareheaded, under the shaded light. Leaning back among her cushions, her feet crossed on a footstool, she seemed to have taken full possession of her quarters. The narrow commonplace surroundings had already received her special personal imprint. The flowers, the cushions, a few books, a great cut-glass scent bottle—the very disorder even of a litter of rich trifles that had not yet found their place, removed the trivial impression of steamer upholstery. She received him without surprise, if without any mark of welcome; and Aspasia chattered, ordered, laughed, kept him employed and amused. Now and again Lady Gerardine smiled vaguely at her niece's outbursts. Bethune could not feel himself an intruder. And certainly it was better than his fourth share of a bachelor's cabin, better than the crowded saloon and smoking-rooms, with their pervading glare and odour of high polish.

Through the open port-hole came the sound of the rushing, swirling waters, punctuated by the slap of some sudden wave against the flank of the ship. A wind had arisen, and now and again gusts, cold and briny, rushed in upon the warm inner atmosphere of flowers.

Lady Gerardine held a large bouquet of Niphetos roses, and her pale long fingers were busy unrolling the bonds that braced them in artificial deportment. Their petals, thought the man, were no whiter than her cheeks.

Presently Aspasia plunged her healthy pink hands down among the languid blossoms and began pulling out the wires.

"I shouldn't, if I were you," said Rosamond; and then she held up a spray. "See, the poor flower, all stained, all fallen apart, all broken. Never draw away the secret supports, Baby. It is better to hold one's head up, even with the iron in one's heart, and pretend it is not there."

Bethune looked at her, a little startled. In some scarcely tangible way the words seemed aimed at him; but he saw that for her, at that moment, he did not exist.

For the first time a pang of real misgiving shot through him. He seemed to behold her with new eyes. She struck him as very frail. Could it be true, or did he but imagine it, that that lovely head, once so defiantly uplifted against him, now drooped?

Feeling the fixity of his gaze upon her, she glanced up and then smiled.

Strange being! Was he, then, so easily forgiven? His heart gave a sudden leap.

The memory of this first evening was one which haunted him all his life with a curious intimate sweetness.

* * * * *

Time passed as time will pass on board ship; vague hours resembling each other, dropping to dreamy length of days; days that yet lapse quickly and moreover work a sure but subtle change. No traveller that lands after a long sea journey is the same as he who started. Sometimes, indeed, he will look back upon his former self as upon another, with surprise.

So it was with Raymond Bethune; and if he came to view himself with surprise, still more inexplicable to him was the new Lady Gerardine as he learned to regard her. According to his presentiment, these two women—she to whose puzzling personality he had vowed antipathy, and she whose fresh young presence made dangerously strong demands upon his sympathy—soon began to absorb all the energies of his thoughts. To a man who had hitherto known no other emotion, outside a very ordinary type of home affection, than friendship for another man; whose life, with the exception of one brief period of glamorous hero-worship, had been devoted to duty in its sternest, most virile form, this mental pre-occupation over two women, both comparative strangers, was at first a matter for self-mockery. It was afterwards one of self-conflict. Whoso, however, has reached the point of actually combating an idea is already and obviously its victim, and the final stage of abandonment to the obsession cannot be very distant.

Looking back upon his memories, in later days, it was singular to him how completely the girl and the woman divided his most vivid impressions of that journey. If the vision of Aspasia, fresh as the spray, rosy as the dawn, coming to meet him of a morning, brisk and free, across the deck, her young figure outlined against sparkling sea and translucent sky, was a memory all pleasant and all sweet, the picture of that other, slow moving and pallid, so enwrapped in inexplicable mourning, so immeasurably indifferent to himself, was bitten into the tablets of his mind as with burning acid, fixed in lines of pain.

It is never flattering for a man to realise that he is of no consequence to a woman with whom he is brought into daily intercourse. And to feel that, though his acts have had a distinct influence upon her life, his personality has failed to make the smallest impression, is a situation certain to pique the most unassuming. In the end Bethune began to wish that Lady Gerardine had retained even her original attitude of resentment. Now and again, indeed, he would find her eye fixed upon him, but at the same time would know unmistakably that her thought was not with him. Sometimes her attitude of inexplicable sorrow seemed harder

to bear than her first evidences of heartlessness.

One day Aspasia had suddenly attacked her aunt upon the subject of her black garb, crying, with her noted heedlessness:

"I declare, any one would think you were in mourning."

Lady Gerardine shifted her distant gaze from the far horizon to Aspasia's countenance, and her lips moved but made no sound. In her heart she was saying:

"How else should I clothe myself, when I am travelling with my dead?"

Almost as if he read her thought, Bethune sneered as he looked at her, and with difficulty restrained the taunt that rose to his tongue. "Lady Gerardine wears belated weeds!"

Her attitude of hopeless melancholy, her raiment of mourning, irritated him bitterly. Yet, while he looked at her in harshness, he marked the admirable white throat, rising like a flower stem from the dense black of her dress, and found himself wondering whether any shimmer of colour would have become her half so well.

Towards the end of their journey together he was once summoned to speak with her alone. It was about the forthcoming book. Nothing could be more brief, more businesslike than her words, more unemotional than her manner. She asked for his instructions; she discussed, criticised, concurred. It was obvious that, when she chose, her brain could act with quite remarkable clearness. It was also obvious that she had completely capitulated to his wishes; and yet never was victory more savourless.

At the conclusion of this conversation she settled with him that, when she had accomplished her part of the task, she would send for him. And as he withdrew, he felt himself dismissed from her thoughts, except as a mere instrument in what now seemed more her undertaking than his own. At heart he found it increasingly difficult to accept the position with good grace.

After this, during the few days of ship life together left to them, Lady Gerardine seldom admitted him to her company; and thus Raymond was the more thrown with Aspasia. The girl, unconventional by temperament and somewhat set apart by her position of "Governor's niece," unhesitatingly profited by a situation which afforded her unmixed amusement. She was not in love as yet with the Major of Guides. Indeed, she had other and higher ambitions. Aspasia's dream-pictures of herself were ever of a wonderful artist of world-wide celebrity, surrounded by a sea of clapping hands, graciously curtseying her thanks from the side of a Steinway grand.... But Bethune interested her, and there was something piquantly pleasant in being able to awaken that gleam in his cold, light eye, in noticing that the lines of his impassive face relaxed into softness for her alone.

One afternoon, as they sat on deck—the great ship cutting the blue waters of the Adriatic, between the fading of a glorious red and orange sunset and the

rising of a thin sickle moon, Aspasia wrapped against the chilly salt airs in some of her aunt's sables, out of which richness the hardy, wild-flower prettiness of her face rose in emphatic contrast—she told him the story of her short life.

She spoke of her musical career, of the bright student days at Vienna; the hard work of them, the anguish, the struggle, the joy. Then of the death of her mother, and the falling of all her high hopes under the crushing will of Sir Arthur, her appointed guardian.

"When mother went," said Aspasia, "everything went." As she spoke two tears leaped out of her eyes, and hung poised on the short, thick eyelashes. "The Runkle thinks it's a disgrace for a lady to do anything in life. 'And, besides,' he says, 'she can't, and she'd better not attempt it.' But wait till I'm twenty-one," cried the girl, vindictively, "and I'll show him what his 'dear Raspasia's' got in her!"

She smiled in her young consciousness of power, and the big tears, detaching themselves, ran into her dimples. Raymond, looking at her with all the experience of his hard life behind him, and all the disillusion of his five-and-thirty years, felt so sudden a movement at once of pity and tenderness that he had to stiffen himself in his seat not to catch her in his arms and kiss her on those wet dimples as he would have kissed a child.

"Oh, you'll do great things," said he, in the tone in which one praises the little one's sand castle on the beach, or tin soldier strategy. "And may I come with a great big laurel crown, tied with gold ribbons, when you give your first concert in the Albert Hall?"

"Albert Hall," mocked she, "the very place for a piano recital!" Then she let her eyes roam out across the heaving space. Once more she saw herself the centre of an applauding multitude; but, in the foremost rank, there was the lean, brown face, and it was moved to enthusiasm, too. And, somehow, from that evening forth, the dream-visions of her future glory were never to be quite complete without it.

* * * * *

A mist-enwrapped, rain-swept shore, parting the dim grey sea and sky in twain, was their first glimpse of England after years of exile.

"Ugh," said Aspasia, shivering, "isn't it just like England to go and be damp and horrid for us!"

Lady Gerardine, looking out with eager straining gaze towards the weeping land, turned with one of her sudden, unexpected movements of passion upon the girl.

"I'm glad it's raining," she said. "I'm glad it's cold, and bleak, and grey.

I'm glad to feel the raindrops beating on my face. I'm sick of hard blue skies and fierce sunshine.... And the trees at Saltwoods will be all bent one way by the blowing of the wet sea wind. It's England, it's home; and, oh, I'm glad to be home!"

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

Rosamond Gerardine and Aspasia Cuninghame lay back, silent, each in her corner of the railway carriage, while the English landscape flew by them, wet and green and autumn brown, gleaming in a fugitive yellow sunlight.

Aspasia still felt the pressure of Bethune's unconsciously hard hand-grip. His image, as he had stood bareheaded looking after the moving train, was still vivid before her eyes. His last words: "It is not good-bye," were ringing in her ears. His face had looked wistful, she thought; his cold glance had taken that warm good look she claimed as her own. She was glad it was not good-bye. And yet, as they steamed away, she, watching him as long as she could, saw, and could not hide it from herself, that it was upon Lady Gerardine his eyes were fixed at the last—fixed with an expression which had already become familiar to her. "One would think he hated her—sometimes," said shrewd Baby to herself, "and yet, when she's there, he forgets me. I might as well be dead, or a fright."

This puzzled her and troubled her, too, a little. She glanced across now at her aunt's abstracted countenance. "I am sure," she thought, in loyal admiration, "if he were madly in love with her, it would be only natural. But it's not love—it's more like hate and a sort of pain." With all her sageness, Baby was only eighteen.

How completely had Raymond Bethune passed from Lady Gerardine's mind—even before he had passed from her sight!

She had nearly reached the end of her journey. The burning land she had left behind her—once the land of her desire—seemed now but a place visited in long evil dreams, where she had undergone unimaginable sufferings during the bondage of sleep. The humid air of England beat upon her face through the open

window with a comforting assurance as of waking reality.

She had told herself she was travelling with her dead. Never for one hour of her long journey had she forgotten the meaning of that box under Jani's care. But, with every sunrise that marked a wider distance between her and India, she drew a freer breath. With every stage she felt herself less Lady Gerardine, wife; and more Mrs. English, widow. There was beginning to be an extraordinary restfulness in the sensation.

They sped through the New Forest glades, sodden after the rain, now flashing gold-brown with that shaft of sun; now black-green, cavernous, mysterious, where the pines grow close. And then came the moorland stretches, reaching up to a pale-blue cleft in the storm-weighted clouds. How cool it all was! How soft the colours! How benign the wet sky, how different from the metal glare of the land that had betrayed her!

And, by-and-by, white gleams of sunshine began to deepen into primroses and ambers; towards the west the sky grew ever clearer, and the leaden wrack, parting, showed an horizon like to a honey sea against the rising mists of evening. How beautiful was England!

When they got out at the little country station, in the rural heart of Dorset, the day was closing in. The vault of the heavens brooded over the earth with a cup-like closeness. November though it was, the air struck upon their cheeks as gently as a caress, all impregnated with the fragrance of wet green indefinitely touched with the tart accent of decay.

Rosamond drew a long deep breath; it had a poignant pleasure in it; tears sprang to her eyes, but, for the first time in God knew how many years, there was a sweetness in them. Jani at her elbow shivered with an aguish chatter of teeth. With one hand she clutched her shawls across her little lean figure; with the other she held on fiercely to a battered tin box.

"Oh, Aunt Rosamond," cried Aspasia, ecstatically, as they got into the vehicle awaiting them, "it's a fly, it's a fly! Aren't you glad? Do you smell the musty straw? Oh! doesn't it bring back good old times? Don't you wish you may never sit in a state carriage again?"

It was a long drive, through winding lanes. Sometimes they strained uphill, sometimes they skirted the flat down; sometimes the branches of the overhanging trees beat against the roof of the carriage or in at the open window. At first the whole land was wonderfully still. They could hear the moisture drip from the leaves when the horses were at the walk. And, by-and-by, there grew out of the distance the faint yet mighty rumour of the sea. Within such short measure, then, this small, great England was meeting her salt limits! Across the upland down, presently, even on this silent evening, there rose a wind to sing of the surf. The trees by the roadside, in the copses amid fields, on the crest, etched against the

glimmer of the sky, had all that regular inland bent that tells of salt winds.

At last the rickety fly began to jingle and jolt along a road that was hardly more than a track. The way dipped down an abrupt slope and then branched off unexpectedly into a side lane. Rosamond leaned out of the window; she felt they were drawing near her unknown home.

"Are we there?" cried Aspasia, entering into a violent state of excitement as they came to a halt before a swing gate.

Rosamond did not answer. She was looking with all her eyes, with all her heart. Sudden memories awoke within her—words, never even noted to be forgotten, began to whisper in her ears: "You never saw such a place, love. It isn't a place, it's a queer old house dumped down in a hollow of the downs. And the avenue—there isn't an avenue, it's a road through the orchard, and the orchard comes right up to the house—and you never saw such a bunch of chimney-stacks in your life. But such as it is, I love it. And some day we'll go and live there, you and I..." Here, then, were the orchard trees, twisted shapes, stretching out unpruned branches to them as they passed!

"I almost plucked an apple," cried Aspasia, from her side, with a childish scream.

The sky was rift just about the horizon—the afterglow primrose against the sullen gloom of the cloud banks. Cut into sharp silhouette against this pallid translucence, rose the black outline of the house and right across it the fantastic old-time chimney-stack, at sight of which Rosamond laughed low to herself as one who recognises the face of a friend. "You never saw such a bunch of chimney-stacks in your life!..."

A faint column of smoke ascended pale against the gloom where the chimneys lost themselves in the skies. As Rosamond noted it, her heart stirred; all was not dead then—the old house, his house, was alive and waiting for her!

They drew up close to the stone porch, open to the night, flush with the level of the out-jutting gables, and the driver, plunging into the black recess, sent the jangle of a bell ringing through inner spaces. In the waiting pause all was very silent, save the stealthy patter from the overgrown ivy clumps that hung across the entrance. There was a rustle, the hop of an awakened bird, quite close to Rosamond's ear, as she leaned out with the eagerness that had been growing upon her ever since her landing.

Then came steps within: the door was opened first but a little space, with the habitual precaution of the lowly caretaker, then suddenly drawn wide. A square of light that seemed golden was cut out of the darkness, and:

"You're welcome, ma'am," cried old Mary, tremulously smoothing her apron.

Lady Gerardine passed with fixed eyes and straight steps into the hall, but

she turned quickly as the words struck her ear. Aspasia, following, saw her face illumined by a smile that was almost joy. And the girl became secretly a little alarmed; her aunt's ways had been all inexplicable to her of late.

Rosamond's heart was crying out within her, and it was with actual joy. "Welcome, ma'am," had said his servant—to old Mary the mistress of Saltwoods was Captain English's widow—even to herself might she not now cease to be Lady Gerardine for a brief respite? Oh, then would the manor-house be home indeed!

A great sense of peace, accompanied by a sudden lassitude, fell upon her; she sank into an armchair, flinging her arms wide with a gesture of relief. Opposite to her was a sturdy oaken table, upon which the housekeeper had just placed a hand-lamp. The light fell full upon a rack displaying a hunting-crop, a couple of rough walking-sticks; above, there was the sketch of a boy's face. Her gaze wandered, without at first taking in the meaning of what it saw.

Noise resounded from the porch; it was Jani, struggling with the coachman for the possession of the old regimental case.

Rosamond looked quickly up again at the bright living presentment on the wall; then she rose to her feet and staggered blindly through the nearest door. There, in sheltering darkness, Aspasia promptly overtook her, and was terrified, as she clasped her warm young arms round her aunt's figure, to find it torn by sobs.

"Let me be, let me be!" exclaimed Lady Gerardine, pushing the girl from her, "it is good to give way at last."

And Aspasia, pressing her face in wordless attempt at consolation against her aunt's cheek, found it streaming with a very torrent of tears.

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"Ah," said old Mary, shaking her head, as Miss Cuningham presently besought her for the feminine panacea of tea, "poor lady, it's no wonder: he was a grand young gentleman!"

It was, indeed, evident that here Lady Gerardine could never be anything but Captain English's widow.

CHAPTER II

The manor-house was very old and very solid. It held nothing of any high value, perhaps, but it held nothing cheap or weak. It was complete before the days of machine-made furniture and of so-called æsthetic art, and those that had ruled over it since had been withheld by innate taste or a happy lack of means from adding to it either within or without. Thus it had remained at a standstill through an extraordinary lapse of years, and all was now beautifully, frankly old; it stood in its simplicity, perfect in antique shabbiness. Only without, the creepers flung ever new shoots about the sturdy strength of the stones. Only within, it was haunted by a memory, by a presence; and this presence was young even to boyhood. And the young ghost harmonised with the aged house, seemed to belong to it as surely as—year by year—the spirit of spring to the ancient garden.

Rosamond, whose life purpose had so long been to avoid the haunting of the past, awoke in the dawn of her first day at Saltwoods to find herself in a very habitation of memories; nay, more, to feel, in some inexplicable manner, that the dead were more alive in this house than the quick, and yet—strange mystery of the heart—that she was glad of it. She watched the dawn wax as on one memorable morning in her far-off Indian palace; not here on beetle's-wing green and eastern glow of carmine and purple, but upon brown of wainscot oak and dim rosebud of faded chintz. And, as the lights spread between the gaps of the shutters, there grew upon her from the panelled wall a strong young face with bold wide-open eyes—eyes very young, set under brows already thoughtful. A very English face, despite the olive of the cheek, the darkness of the hair, close-cut, that still had a crisp wave under the cock of the Sandhurst cap.

"I felt I was not alone," said Rosamond, half in dream, supporting herself on her elbow to look more nearly, "and so it was you!"

But the eyes were gazing past her, out on life, full of eagerness. And the close lips were set with a noble determination. What great things this boy soldier was going to make of his future!

Rosamond let herself fall back upon her pillows, something like a sob in her throat. Then, opposite to her, between the windows, she met full the glance of the same eyes that had but now avoided hers. They were child's eyes this time, gazing, full of soft wonder, out of a serious child's face, framed by an aureole of copper curls—the wonderful tint that is destined to turn to densest black.

Rosamond stretched at ease, resting her eyes on those of the lovely child's—childless woman, who had never desired children, began to picture to herself how proud a mother would be of such a little son as this. And then her mind wandered to the mother, who, lying where she now lay, had feasted her waking heart and gratified her maternal pride, so many mornings with this vision.

Then something began to stir in her that had not yet stirred before; an inchoate desire, an ache, a jealousy; yes, a jealousy of the dead woman who had

borne such a child! She turned restlessly from the sight of the two pictures, flung herself to the far side of the bed, and sent her glance and thought determinedly wandering into the recess of an alcove where night still kept the growing light at bay.

A drowsiness fell over her mind again; with vague interest she found herself speculating what might the different objects be that the darkness still enwreath partly from her sight.

Here was a high chair of unusual shape—a *Prie-Dieu*? Here was a gothic bracket, jutting from the wall above; thereon something glimmered palely forth; a statuette perchance, or alabaster vase of special slender art? Nay, not so, for now she could distinguish the wide-stretched arms, the pendant form; it was the carven ivory of a crucifix. The late Mrs. English's shrine, her altar? Rosamond's interest quickened—she had heard of this unknown relative's goodness from the son's lips, but had never heard this goodness specified as regarded religion. His mother, then, had been High Church ... Roman Catholic perhaps? Rosamond was almost amused, with the detached amusement of one to whom religion means little personal.

Under this impulse of curiosity she rose from her bed, pulled the window shutters aside to let in the day, and then went back to examine the alcove.

It held a shrine indeed, an altar to inevitable sacrifice, to the most sacred relics. Beneath the pallid symbol, figure of the Great Renunciation, was placed a closed frame. And all around and about, in ordered array, the records of a boy's life: medals for prowess in different sports; a cup or two; a framed certificate of merit; in front of the frame, a case bulging with letters. Upon each side of the altar hung shelves filled with books, some in the handsome livery of school prizes, some in the battered covers of the much-perused playroom favourite.

Rosamond stood and looked. A moment or two she hesitated, then she began to tremble. There was within her the old desire of flight, the old sick longing to hide away, to bury, to ignore. But something stronger than herself held her. The day was past when she could deny herself to sorrow. The cup was at her lips and she knew that she must drink.

She would open that letter-case, she would gaze at the face in the closed frame; her coward heart was to be spared no longer.

She took up a volume. As it fell apart she saw the full-page book-plate engraved with the arms of Winchester School and the fine copperplate inscription:

Anno Sæculari 1884

Præmium in re Mathematica

Meritus et consecutus est *Henricus English*.

(Hæc olim meminisse juvabit).

The life of Christopher Columbus.... It was bound in crimson calf, and the

gilt edges of its unopened pages clung crisply together.

She replaced it on the shelf and, with the same dreary mechanical determination, drew forth another. The "Boy's own Book"; a veteran, this; from too much loving usage, dogs'-eared, scored with small grimy finger-prints; its quaint woodcuts highly coloured here and there by a very juvenile artist.

"To Henry English, on his ninth birthday, from his affectionate mother," ran the dedication, in a flowing Italian hand. A gift that had made a little lad very happy, some twenty-five years ago.

And now Rosamond's fingers hovered over the case of letters. Well did her heart forebode whose missives lay treasured there. Nevertheless, the sight of the handwriting struck her like a stab. Not yet could she summon strength to read those close-marked pages. Nay—were they even hers to read?

"Darling old Mammy—" this was not for her.

Yet she turned the sheets over and over, lingering upon them. Here was an envelope, endorsed in the same fair running hand as the book: "My beloved son's last letter." And here, on a card, was gummed a piece of white heather—memorial of God knows what pretty coquetry between the stalwart soldier and his "darling old Mammy."

What things must people live through—people who dare to love!

Rosamond had never loved. Had she not done well? When love offered itself to her she had been too young to know its face. And now.... She dropped the case from her hands as if it burnt her, and stood, poised for flight; then, as if driven by an invincible force, seized upon the closed frame, almost with anger. Fate held her, she could not escape.

Harry English, looking at her! Not the child, not the adolescent, but Harry the man as she, his wife, had known him. Even through the incomplete medium of a photograph, the strong black and white of his colouring, the bold line of his features, the concentrated purposeful expression, was reproduced with an effect of extraordinary vitality.

It seemed almost impossible to think of him as dead who could look at her so livingly from this little portrait.

* * * * *

Old Mary came in hurriedly.

"Here I am, ma'am, here I am! I heard you call."

Rosamond lifted dazed eyes. It took a perceptible space of time for the meaning of the words to filter to her brain. Then she said with vague impatience:

"I did not call."

"But you wanted me, surely," said the woman. Her glance wandered from

the portrait in her new mistress's hand to the disorder on her old mistress's altar. "Surely you wanted me, ma'am."

She took a warm wrapper from the bed and folded it round Lady Gerardine. She supported her to an armchair and placed a cushion to her feet. The ministering hands were warm and strong; and Rosamond felt suddenly that in truth she was cold and weak, and that these attentions were grateful to her. She looked up again at the withered face, ethereally aged, at the blue eyes that seemed illumined from some source not of this world.

"Perhaps I did want you," she said.

A thin, self-absorbed, silent woman was old Mary. She regarded the world as with the gaze of the seer and moved within the small circlet of her duty wrapped in a mystic dignity of her own. Some held her in contempt, as mad-woman; others in awe, as having "seen things."

If the manor-house had the reputation of being haunted, it was doubtless due to Mary's ways. No one from the neighbourhood would have consented to inhabit the ancient place with her. But fortunately Mary had a stout niece of her own, who averred that ghosts were indigestion, and who slept the sleep of the scrubber and the just, no matter what else might walk.

The housekeeper's strange eyes softened as she looked down into the fair pale face of her young master's widow.

"My dear lady that's gone," she said, "must be glad to know that there is another heart keeping watch here."

Her voice was soft and had a muffled sound as of one used to long silence. The tone seemed to harmonise with the singularity of the words. A small cold shiver ran over Rosamond; she stared without replying.

"The day the news came," proceeded the housekeeper, dreamily, "she set up that altar to him. And there she found peace."

As old Mary spoke, the habit of the trained servant was still strong upon her. She stooped to tuck in the fold of Rosamond's dressing-gown closer round her feet.

"There she prayed," she went on, as she straightened herself again, "and then, he came back to her in peace."

Rosamond closed the frame in her hands with a snap. She felt every impulse within her strike out against the mystic atmosphere that seemed to be closing round her.

"What are you saying?" she cried sharply. "In Heaven's name what do you mean? Who came back—the dead?"

Old Mary smiled again. She bent over the chair.

"Why, ma'am," she said, as if speaking to a frightened child, "you don't need to be told, a good lady like you: to those that have faith, there is no death."

"No death!" echoed Rosamond. "All life is death. Everything is full of death."

There was a strangling bitterness in her throat that broke forth in a harsh laugh. The placid room seemed to swim round with her; when she came to herself the servant was holding her hands once more. Her voice was falling into her ears with a measured soothing cadence:

"Not here. There is no death in this house. Don't you feel it, ma'am? It's not death that is here. Why, her that is gone, she passed from me there, in that bed, as the night passes into day. That is not death. Not an hour before the summons came for her she was wandering—as the doctor called it. I knew better. She saw him and was speaking to him. 'Ah, Harry,' she says, joyful, 'I knew you were not dead.' And then she turns to me. 'He is not dead, Mary,' she says, 'it was all a mistake.'"

Rosamond listened, her pale lips apart, her gaze dark and wondering.

"Why, ma'am," went on old Mary. "Haven't you felt it yourself, this night; didn't you feel his sweet company the minute you set foot in the house? I think it was my lady's great love that brought him back here. And now that she is gone, he's still here. And it's strange, he's here more than she is. She does not come as he does."

Her eyes became fixed on far-off things. Still clasping Rosamond's hand she seemed to transmit a glow, a warmth that reached to the heart. Rosamond's sick and cowering soul felt at rest as upon a strength greater than her own.

His company! Was that not what she had felt? Was it not that to which she had awakened? Ay, the old woman was right: it was sweet!

"There is no death," asserted old Mary, once again, "no death unless we make it. It's our fault if our dead do not live for us; it's our earthly bodies that won't acknowledge the spirit. It's we who make our dead dead, who bury them, who make corpses of them and coffins for them, to hide them away in the cold earth."

Rosamond wrenched her hands from the wrinkled grasp. She sprang to her feet, seized by a sudden anguish that was actual physical pain.

"Go, go!" she cried wildly. She was caught up as in a whirlwind of unimaginable terror. What had she done? Had she laid Harry English in the grave? Was he dead to her through her own deed, he that had lived on for his mother? Had she in her cowardice hammered him into his coffin, and would he always be a corpse to her because she had made him dead?

Through the inarticulate voices of her torment, she heard the door close and felt she was alone. And then she found herself upon her knees before the shrine, the photograph case still clenched between her fingers, praying blindly, madly, inarticulately—to what? she knew not. To the white Christ on the cross,

who had risen from the dead? Or to the strong soldier whose image she held, and for whom there could be no rising again?

When the storm passed at length she was broken, chilled, and unconsolated. Old Mary's words came back to her: "She prayed there and she got peace." Well, the mother may have found peace in prayer. But for the wife, there was none! "He came back in peace"; he had not come back to her—to Rosamond, his wife!

A wave of revolt broke over her; against the God who had invented death for his creatures, or against stupid blind fate disposing of those human lives that have no God.

She rose slowly to her feet; her glance swept the homely room—the bed where the mother had died—to end once again upon the altar. What right had she, the old woman, to lay claim to Rosamond English's husband? The babe, the boy, may have been hers, let her have him! But the man—the man belonged to the wife. "And ye shall leave father and mother and cleave to one." "There is authority for it in your very scriptures," cried Rosamond, aloud. And, with fingers trembling with passionate eagerness she set to work to rob the frame of its treasure, the shrine of its chief relic.

Soon it lay in her hand, the clipped photograph. She carried it away, from the altar to the window, and stood a long, long while, devouring it with her gaze. So had he looked. No man had ever bolder, truer eyes. Ah, and no woman but Rosamond had seen them flame into passion—passion that yet then had had no meaning for her who saw! And those lips, folded into sternness, had any one known them to break into lines of tenderness as they were used for her? None at least, not even his mother, had heard them whisper what they had whispered to the wife—to the wife whose ears had been deaf, then, as a child's, because of her uncomprehending heart!

What was it old Mary had said? "It is we who make our dead dead." And had he lived on in this house because of the love of a withered heart, and should he not live again for her, his wife who was young and strong—and still virgin to love?

What she had buried she would dig out of the earth again, were it with bleeding fingers. That voice should speak once more, were each accent to stab her with its poignancy of loss. He should live, were it to be her death.

With dilated nostrils, panting for breath, her hair floating behind her, beautiful in her thrall of passion like some Valkyrie rising over blood and death, she rushed to the door and summoned Jani with ringing call. There is an exaltation of spirit to which pain is highest joy, and Rosamond ran now to her sorrow as the mystic to his cross.

"Jani!" she called. "Bring me Captain English's box."

CHAPTER III

The days dropped into the cup of time; measures of light and shade, of waxing and waning, ushered in with pale winter dawns, huddled away in rapid gloomy twilights, according to the precise yearly formula.

But to Rosamond these hours in the forgotten old manor-house on the moorlands, where the winds were the only visitors, brought so great a change that it was as if a gate had been shut upon her former road.

A common prate is that Time works the changes in us. And when we look from the child to the man, it would seem absurd even to raise the question. Yet it is not time that works the mightiest changes. Nay, in the world of the soul time but emphasises. The great upheavals that obliterate in our lives all familiar landmarks—that do alter everything down to our most intimate capacity of feeling, are sometimes but the work of one instant. It is not time that ravages, it is not time that draws the wrinkle seared into the heart; not to time do we owe the spread of the grey, instead of the gold that used to colour the web of existence. A man may carry the singing soul of his April to the death-bed of his old body. Yet again the heart may wither in a span so short as scarce to be measured.

And sometimes a change, so complete that even within our own soul we find ourselves suddenly on foreign ground, will come without any striking external event, without any apparent outside reason. In the life of the soul a crisis has occurred—and lo! the very world of God is different. Nay, God himself is another to us.

During these short wind-swept November days in the green and brown manor-house, there, amid the solitary downs, did such a change come to Rosamond. Had she tried, she could scarce have found her old self again. But she did not try; for this new self was at peace, was wrapped in dreams of great sweetness, and yet awake to a life hitherto not even guessed at.

* * * * *

In the attic room that had been Harry's own, she sat alone. A furious shower was pattering on the tiles close over her head, a drenched ivy spray was beating

against the gable window like a frantic thing that wanted shelter, a pair of sparrows were answering each other with defiant chirrup. Far below in the house, Aspasia was lustily calling upon a recreant kitten. In the moorland silence these few trivial sounds became insistent, and yet seemed but to assert the silence itself.

She was seated at the wide battered old writing-table which schoolboy Harry English had scored with penknife and chisel, burned and inkstained. Before her a small writing-desk was spread open, and two or three letters lay loosely under her clasped hands. Her eyes were musingly fixed upon the rain-beaten pane with the knocking ivy branch; her lips were parted by a vaguely recurrent smile. And, as the smile came and went, a transient red glowed faintly upon her cheeks.... The world for her now was not upon the edge of winter: it was spring. She was not Rosamond Gerardine, out of touch with life, she was not Rosamond English, widow—she was Rosamond Tempest, maid once more, on the threshold of her life, at the April of the year. And Harry English was her lover. And yet she was a Rosamond Tempest such as he had never known—such a Rosamond Tempest as had never yet existed.

She took the letter that lay uppermost to her hand. It was dated Saltwoods. Written here—at this very desk, no doubt. Perhaps with this very ivory penholder, fluted, yellow, stained, while he sat in this same Windsor chair.... Unconsciously she caressed the worn wooden arms whereon his arms must have rested. Then again she set herself to read:—

”Saltwoods, 19th April.”

On that April 19, all those years ago, he was thinking of her, writing to her! And she—so many miles away, shut in by the dreariest prison walls fate had ever built round a young impatient soul—had then not the faintest hint of her deliverer’s approach.

DEAR MISS TEMPEST,—I dare say you have quite forgotten me. I was the youngest griffin, just before the old Colonel’s death. I hope you will not think it a great impertinence in me to write like this to you; but my leave is up in a week or so, and I don’t like to leave England without having seen your father’s daughter again. I can never forget how kind he was to me—and your mother too. It made all the difference to me; such a young fool as I was, and so new to India and everything. I find I know some of the fellows at Fort Monkton, and I’m going to stop there a few days. May I call—and if so, when? Yours sincerely, HARRY ENGLISH. P.S.—I’ve only just found out where you are.

To Rosamond—most unwilling inmate in a household where, if she was not actually a burden, the smallness of her pittance rendered her certainly no material gain—this letter had brought a sort of vision of the past, a gleam of bygone light which made the present even more intolerable by contrast. It had been something to her to think that she should meet some one at last belonging to her old life, some one who had known her in those glamorous years of her happiness, some one straight from the magic shores that had held her in her happy years.

From eight to sixteen had Rosamond Tempest spent her life between the little hill station, the refuge of their hot season, and the historic old northern town where her father's duty lay—a sort of little Princess Royal, with a hundred devoted slaves and a score of gallant young courtiers, the imperious favourite of the whole station, native and white alike.... Oh the rides in the dawn! oh the picnics by moonlight! the many-coloured, vivid days that went with such swing, where every man almost was a hero, where the very air seemed full of the romance of frontier fights, of raids, and big game hunts, of "Tiger, tiger, burning bright" in jungle haunts! ... It had been surely the cruellest stroke of fate that had thrust the little spoiled girl, the beloved only child, from this pinnacle of bliss and importance!

Between one day and another Rosamond had become the penniless orphan, whom nobody wanted ... whom it was so kind of Major and Mrs. Carter to escort back to England, whom it was almost superhumanly good of Uncle and Aunt Baynes to admit into their family.

"A self-centered child," said Mrs. "General Baynes." "A cold-blooded little wretch," opined her cousins. Well, it was a fact that, during the four years that elapsed between her departure from India and the receipt of Captain English's letter, Rosamond had not given a human being one word, one look in confidence....

Late April on the Hampshire coast, with the gorse breaking into gorgeous yellow flame, honey-sweet in the sunshine; with the white clouds scurrying across a blue sky, chased by the merriest madcap wind that ever scampered; with the waves breaking from afar off, dashing up a thousand diamonds falling over and over each other in their race for the beach, roaring on the shingle in clamorous good-fellowship, the foam creaming in ever wider circles. And, across the leaping belt of waters, green and amber and white, the island, flashing too: the windows and roofs of the happy-looking town throwing back the sun glances, set in smooth slopes, mildly radiating green, like chrysoprase and peridot....

* * * * *

Rosamond had dropped the letter from her hand; again she was dreaming. Not the plaint of the November wind round the gable roof of Saltwoods in her ears,

but the chant of this April chorus on Alverstoake beach. Not the monotonous ting of Aspasia's finger exercise from the room below, but the irregular boom and thud of gun practice far out at sea, brought in by the gust. And the voice that fell into silence so far away between the wild Indian hills was speaking to her again. And she heard, heard for the first time....

Rosamond Gerardine, virgin of heart through her two marriages, was being wooed! And the virgin in her was trembling and troubled, as womanhood awoke.... He held her hands and looked into her eyes. His cheeks were pale under their bronze, his lips trembled—"Could you trust me? Do you think me mad? I've only known you four days, but I've dreamt of you, all my life.... Rosamond!"

The sea wind was eddying round them, the grasses at Rosamond's feet were nodding like mad things in the gusts. Her hair was whipped against her face. So, on this English shore, with the taste of the salt in their mouths, with the wild salt moist winds all about them—this Englishman wooed this English girl, to come away and be his love in the burning East. Yes, she could trust him. Who could look into his true eyes and not trust him? But then it was the thought of the East, the East of her lost childhood's joy, that won her. Now, back in England's heart, from an East abhorred, to the loathing as of blood and cruelty, it was the lover, it was the love!

Again she felt the touch of his first kiss. He had sought her lips, but she had turned her cheek. Now—the blood rushed up into her face; her heart beat faster, almost a faintness crept over her. She dropped her head upon her outstretched arms, her burning cheek upon his letter ... again his strong arms held her.

* * * * *

Once more they parted at the gate of the house that was her prison. He was going back to India in ten days, and she would go with him, confidently, gladly!

She walked up the path between the stragglings wallflowers, the pungent marigolds, into the mean narrow hall. Then her only thought had been of sailing away from that sordid genteel abode, back to fair India, the land of her dreams. Now—now, as across these years she re-lived that great day of her youth, her heart was swooning over the memory of his kiss; her brain was filled with a vision of his tender trembling lips; of the light in his eyes as he looked back at her, of the swing of his broad shoulders as he rounded the crescent towards the fort.

* * * * *

Miss Aspasia Cuningham was in a decidedly bad temper. To be home again, in

England, to have unlimited opportunity of working out the Leschetizky method on a superfine Steinway piano, the most complete immunity from interfering uncles, from social duties, philistine secretaries and attaches, appeared a most delightful existence—in theory. But, in practice it was dull. Yes, dull was the word.

With four fingers pressing four consecutive notes while the remaining digit hammered away, vindictively, at the fifth; with pouting lip out-thrust, she had reached the point of telling herself that even India was better than this.

"Horrid place," ran Baby's angry cogitation, while the finger conscientiously drummed, "nothing but those stupid trees and that deadly moor, and the birds' chirp, chirp, and not a neighbour within miles; or if there were, with Aunt Rosamond not wanting to see a soul; not even the curate—and he's got eyes like marbles!"

Aspasia gave a little titter and changed the drumming finger from the third to the fourth. This was a less elastic member; and she grew pink with unconscious energy, while pursuing the inner monologue.

"I do think that disgusting Major Bethune might have given us some sign of life. People have no business to look into people's eyes like that, and press people's hands, and then go off and mean nothing at all. Not," said Baby, blowing out her nostrils with a fine breath of scorn, "that one ever thought of him in that way. But he—oh, he's just a horrid wretch like the rest! All the nice ones die, I think. At least, I've never met any."

She brought down the left hand in its turn, with a crash, on the five notes; and the fine discord seemed to have relieving effect. The reflections proceeded in a softer vein.

"Harry English—he must have been a dear." She turned her head to look for the inevitable portrait. There was scarce a room in Saltwoods that did not hold two or three presentments of him; sketches, most of them, by the faithful, forcible hand of the artist mother; photographs, too, in well-nigh every stage of the boy's development. Even Aspasia, positive, practical, unimaginative, could not but have fallen under the influence of the haunting presence. And in her actual mood of disillusion with Raymond Bethune, the ante-room of her girl's heart, that airy space open to all the winds, where so many come, pause, and go, was now, half in idleness, half in contradiction, consecrate to the image of gallant Harry English.

"How Aunt Rosamond could!" she thought, as she dreamily fixed her eyes upon that charcoal sketch which held one panel of the drawing-room, and which had been Mrs. English's last work. It was a much enlarged copy of the photograph on the shrine, and, whether by some unconscious transcription of her own sorrow, or whether her mother eyes had discovered in the little picture some

stern premonition of his own approaching fate, the artist had given the strong bold face an expression that was almost bitter in its melancholy.

"How Aunt Rosamond could—" thought the girl, "when she had been loved by such a man, ever, ever have looked at any one else? Fancy—the Runkle!" Ah, if Aspasia had been loved by English, how nobly she would have borne her widowhood! Her heart, of course, would have been absolutely, completely broken; she would have gone about in deep, deep widow's weeds. And strangers, looking after her, noticing the sweet pale face amid the crape, would ask who she was and would be told in whispers: the widow of the hero of the Baroghil expedition. "Ah, it would have been sweet to have been loved by you, Harry English!"

Her hands fell from the piano; her soul was away upon a dream as vague and innocent as it was absorbing. Too often did the Leschetizky method end in this manner. The while Rosamond, high in her attic, dreamed that she was a girl once more, and that she had just been told that Harry English loved her.

CHAPTER IV

There was sunshine enough without to have tempted the most obstinate recluse into the fields. But as little as she had heeded November rain did Rosamond now heed the brightness of this opening December. While the old attic room held her bodily presence, her soul was once again back in the past. The past ... where, after all, she had not lived, and which (strange poignant lesson of fate!) was now to become to her more living than the present.

Those letters, those early memorials, the very thought of which had once inspired dread, now drew her like a magnet. Scarcely could she give herself to the necessary facts of life, so impatiently did she long for those solitary hours in his room, with him!

Every trifling note of his was pored over, dreamt upon in its turn. She had it in her to have lingered days upon a single line. Yet there was the sweetness of a tender surprise in every fresh sheet she took into her hands. And now it was her first "love letter" that she held.

It had come to her in the morning after their meeting in the salt wind, amid the gorse; had been brought to her—in the ugly top bedroom—on a basket brimming over with flowers. She could see them again, breathe them again:

hot-house roses, languid-white and heavy-headed yellow, a huge clump of heliotrope, lily of the valley bound by its pale green sheaths, sharp-scented, waxen ... then the narcissus, the jonquil, the darling commoner herd of spring things that had pushed their way in the open gardens! All this to Rosamond, starved of beauty, Rosamond who was wont to fill her vases with the budding boughs that the hedges give the gardenless! She had buried her face in the velvet coolness, drawn in the perfume as if she was drawing in the loveliness to her soul. Through the waste of those ten years she could again feel the touch of the petals on her cheek—she was back again, back again in her maidenhood and held her first love letter between her hands. Was it possible that the faded nondescript leaf that fell from between its pages had once been part of that exquisite basketful that could still bloom for her?

DARLING (wrote Harry English)—these are all I can send you. I wanted to send you roses, love, worthy of my Rose, the only Rose, of Rosamond, Rose of the World! I half dreamed of them last night, red, red, glowing, deep-scented like my love for you. I can find nothing but these pale mawkish things, far though I have hunted this morning! ...

This morning—and it was now but nine o'clock. How early he must have risen! It was not the Rosamond, the hard young untouched Rosamond of those old days, who thought thus with a mist before the eyes; it was the new Rosamond whose heart was beginning to teach her so many things.

Early had the lover risen indeed!

I could not sleep (went on the letter) for sheer tumult of happiness. I saw the dawn break over the water out on the sea bastion of this old fort. The sea was quite wrapt in mist, and I and my heart seemed first alone high up in the air, with the wash of the invisible waters below and the restless tapping of the flag line on the staff over my head. And then the dawn came. It seemed to me the first dawn I had ever beheld, I, who have marched through many an Indian night and seen such fires as England never dreams of. But I look upon the world with new eyes. The meaning of things has become clear to me. I never saw beauty before I saw you; and through you, all other beauty is fulfilled to me. Grey and dove-coloured and pearl, faint roses and yellows and

opals—the mists first became impregnated with all lovely tints and then rolled away. Then there was a straight ray of sun across the sea at my feet, and the water was gold and green. Glorious! Why do I write all this to you? I have never even thought of such things before. Will you laugh at me? I, who have known you for such a little while? But I have waited for you all the years of my manhood—this much I know at least. And you, who are the meaning of everything to me now, you will know the meaning of my heart.

All the meaning of her lover to Rosamond Tempest, in the top room over the straggling back garden, had been that he was her deliverer from an existence of utter negation. She had read his words with the same pleasure with which she had gazed upon his flowers, inhaled their fragrance: it had represented a new atmosphere of colour and beauty!

But now, as she bent over that faded leaf and read those vivid words from a hand long dust, her whole being gave itself responsive to the love that still spoke.

* * * * *

In the garden below, under the nipped frost-bitten leaves, Aspasia poked about for hidden violets. From its bare brown stalks she had already culled the last dwindled chrysanthemum. When Rosamond and she, in the marshalled palace of Sir Arthur, had planned this homely occupation, it had seemed an almost deliriously joyful prospect of freedom. Now, such is the futility of the granted wish, Aspasia, as she flicked with impatient fingers among the wet foliage, was a prey to that abandonment of melancholy which is rarely known in its perfection after twenty. Indeed, poor Baby's outlook upon the world that December noon was a pitiable one. The only man she could have loved was dead before she had even known him! Another man, whom she was certain she could never have cared for, displayed the most reprehensible indifference as to whether he were as much as remembered. And those wonderful piano recitals of the gifted young genius, Miss Aspasia Cuningham, seemed hopelessly remote.

She could not even muster a smile for the kitten as it suddenly cantered across the path, every individual hair bristling, body contorted, and legs stiffened, to box a hanging leaf and fall prone on its back with four paws wildly beating the air. The very kitten was part of the general unsatisfactoriness of things. When she did have the heart to play with it, it was never to be found: but it had a Puck-like knowledge of the ripe moment when to mock her misery.

Indeed, the claims of the eager young life were somewhat neglected in this

old home of dreams.

Aspasia walked, in royal dignity of dolour, back to the house, set the violets in two shallow vases, and the chrysanthemum in a high narrow one. She placed the portable easel upon the open leaf of the grand piano; she detached from its panel the portrait of Captain English with the sad stern face, propped it on the easel, arranged her flowers round it, all with the solemn air of one going through a religious rite. Then she sat down, heaved a noisy sigh from the depth of her little round chest, and began to play those throbbing strains of passion, yearning disappointment, and sorrow that, the legend says, came to Chopin one day, through the beat of raindrops against his window panes, as he waited for her who failed him.

Baby had begun to find out that even in so serious an art as music those paltry things, the emotions, will insist on finding expression. She was in a very pretty state of artistic woe when, with a sudden discord, the love notes fell mute. From the shadowy window-seat a tall figure had risen and come forward: eyes, ablaze with anger, were fixed upon her from a white and threatening face.

"Aunt Rosamond! ..." stammered the girl, too much startled to do anything but sit and stare.

"How dare you?" said Lady Gerardine, in a low voice, hardly above a whisper indeed, but charged with intense anger. She walked up to the piano and stood looking a second at the altar-like arrangement; then her eyes returned to Aspasia, who now blushed violently, guiltily, in spite of an irrepressible childish desire to giggle.

"You shameless girl!" said Rosamond. "How dare you! What have you to do with him?" She took up the picture. "He is mine," she said, "mine only!" Then, holding it clasped to her breast, she swept from the room.

"Upon my word!" said Miss Aspasia. "Good gracious goodness me!" Resentment got the better of amusement; her cheeks were flaming scarlet, she struck a series of defiant chords, as a sort of war cry in pursuit of the retreating figure. "Shameless girl, indeed; I've as much right to him, by this time, as anybody else, I should think. In heaven there's no marriage or giving in marriage ... and, if it comes to that, what about Runkle then?"

She plunged into the noisiest, most dishevelled Wagner-Liszt piece of her repertory; crashed, banged, and pounded till the staid old manor-house seemed to ring with amazement, and the exasperated player, with flying hands, loosened hair, empurpled countenance, and panting breath, could hardly keep her seat in the midst of her own gymnastics.

Henceforth there was one room in the manor-house without its presiding picture. And, opposite Rosamond's bed, where the tender child's face had once watched the mother's slumbers, the soldier now looked down sternly and sadly

upon the wife.

CHAPTER V

"Will you answer this for me, Baby?—Tell Major Bethune that we shall be glad to see him here this week, and for as long as he cares to stay."

Aspasia took the letter between disdainful finger and thumb, and turned it over to peruse. Rosamond, leaning her chin on her hand, looked away from the breakfast-table through the small-paned windows into the wintry garden, and was lost in some dream again.

Miss Cuninghams' nostrils dilated with indignation as she read the brief dry lines in which Major Bethune informed Lady Gerardine that he would be glad if she could now furnish him with some of the promised material for his work, as he was at a stand-still. He could run down for the day, if it suited, and with kind regards to her niece—begged to remain, and so forth.

"Kind regards to her niece," repeated that young lady to herself with an ominous tightness of expression. "Yes, Aunt," she said aloud, with some alacrity. "Leave it to me; I shall write to Major Bethune."

She finished her tea with a gulp and hurried to the corner of the drawing-room, where she had established her Lares and Penates, to undertake the congenial task.

Her dimples pointed deep satisfaction as she wrote. "Kind regards," indeed! This Major of Guides should be taught his proper place in the estimation of Miss Aspasia Cuninghams.

DEAR MAJOR BETHUNE (she wrote)—My aunt bids me to say that she will be charmed if you can arrange your promised visit for next week. You did promise to come here, did not you? I positively forget. It seems such ages since that dreadful, dreary sea journey, that it was quite a surprise to hear from you this morning. We are having such a happy time here that India and all the rest of it seem never to have existed. We do enjoy being by ourselves. Kind regards from my Aunt,
Yours very truly,

concluded Miss Aspasia with a vindictive flourish.

Having despatched this epistle in triumph, it was astonishing how much brighter became Miss Cuninghams's outlook upon the world at large and the manor-house in particular. She developed a renewed interest in housekeeping details; not, as she was careful to explain, that it mattered really what they gave this gentleman to eat or to drink, only Aunt Rosamond was so fastidious.

She discovered that it was absolutely necessary for the entertainment of any visitor that a pony and cart should immediately be added to the establishment, and spent an exciting afternoon in scouring the countryside for the same.

It was, of course, the sense of duty well accomplished that gave such a sparkle to her eye and such an irrepressible tilt to the corners of her lips, as she sat waiting for the return of the above-mentioned vehicle from the station the day of Major Bethune's arrival. It had not been her intention to gratify him with a sight of her countenance so soon; but Lady Gerardine, after faithfully promising to be in attendance at the appointed time, had wandered off, in the vague way of which Aspasia was becoming resignedly tolerant, for one of her long solitary rambles; and the girl could not, for the credit of the house, but take on herself the neglected hospitable duty.

Alas for all the resolves of a noble pride! She had hardly been ten minutes in the company of the newly arrived guest before she had fallen into the old terms of confidential intimacy.

Afterwards she could not quite tell herself how it had happened; whether because of the good softening of his harsh face as he looked down at her, or of the warm close grasp of his hand which drove away at once the forlorn feeling which had possessed her poor little gregarious soul all these days; or whether it were the mollifying influence of old Mary's scones, the cosiness of the fragrant tea and the leaping fire in contrast to the dreary dusk gathering outside. Perhaps it was merely that her healthy nature could harbour no resentment, albeit the most justifiable. However it may have been, Major Bethune found his welcome at the manor-house sweet. Even the maidenly coldness of her first greeting pleased his fastidious old-fashioned notions; and the subsequent thawing of this delicate rime came upon him with something of the balm of sunshine on a frosty morning.

His face stiffened, however, at Aspasia's first confidence about her aunt, into which she plunged, after her usual manner, without the slightest preamble.

"She's awfully good to me, always; sweeter to me than ever, these last few days—when we meet! But I scarcely see her, except at meals. And then we don't seem to be living in the same world. It's like talking through the telephone," cried the girl. "Of course, I am quite aware," she went on, "that the poor darling is suffering from neu—neurasth—well, whatever they call it; that her nerves are all wrong. 'Tisn't anything so very new either," she giggled, "'tis just too much

Runkle—Runkleitis.... I know myself, even I, at times, have felt as if I could scream and tear out his hair by the roots. What must it have been for her! She kept up, you see; that's her way. And now that she's free of him for a bit, it's the reaction, I suppose."

He drank his tea in sips, listening to her, his head bent. The firelight leaped and cast changing lights upon his countenance. Baby thought he looked thinner, older, sterner; yet she could never be afraid of him. There was something extraordinarily pleasant in having him there. The very loneliness of the Old Ancient House added a zest. The unsubstantial image of Harry English faded like a ghost before the dawn in the strong man's presence. She edged her chair an inch closer.

"I am sorry Lady Gerardine is no better," said he, formally, into the silence.

"Oh, better!" answered Aspasia. "Will you have another cup?" ("That makes the third." She was pleased; here was a tribute to her capacity.) "Better?—that's what is so funny, she's as well as possible. She looks young, young, with a bloom on her cheeks, and sometimes she walks about smiling to herself. It makes me creep. I can't think what she's smiling at. She comes down, singing softly to herself. Why, there are times when she looks just like a girl. No one could ever believe she's had two husbands," cried terrible Baby.

Major Bethune put down his cup, untouched. ("He didn't want it after all," commented she.) "It is rather strange," she went on aloud; "she's simply bloomed since she came here, and the whole house is full of Harry English. And she's shut up half the time, in his old rooms under the roof, routing among those old letters, you know—those letters there was all the fuss about. I thought we'd killed her over them between us," said Baby, with her little nervous laugh. "And now, I don't know, but I almost think I would rather see her cry and look pale as before. It would seem more natural. Really, I'm frightened sometimes."

Her pretty face, with its wide open eyes, took a piteous look in the firelight.

"You don't think it means anything?" she resumed. And the tears suddenly welled, the corners of her mouth drooped: she seemed no more than a child. He stretched out his arm and took her hand.

"Mean?" he said. "Why, Miss Aspasia, what should it mean? Something perhaps that your kind heart would find hard to understand. But it means, after all, nothing so very unusual. Lady Gerardine, and it is all the better for her, is of those who are quickly consoled. The country air is doing her good, and the old letters——" he dropped her hand, his tones grew incisive. "It is only when the past is more satisfactory than the present that memories are disagreeable."

"Oh," cried Aspasia. She started to her feet. "What a funny way you have of saying that!" And as the meaning of his words forced itself upon her, "How unkind! I think you hate Aunt Rosamond."

"I?" said he, startled. He rose in his turn. "What an absurd idea!" He laughed, but his lips seemed stiff. "I?—I would not presume, how could I? to have any feeling for Lady Gerardine but that of distant respect."

The door opened and in came Rosamond.

"In the dark!" she said, looking upon them unseeingly after the light of the hall. "Is that Major Bethune?"

She came forward, while Aspasia, on her knees, violently poked the fire into a blaze.

"Rose of the World," thought Bethune, as the ruddy glow fell upon the figure of his friend's widow. It was true she looked like a girl. Her cheek was rose-red from the cold wind. Her shadowed eyes brilliant. The light tendrils of her hair floated back from her white forehead.

"You are welcome," she said, and mingled with her grace and sweetness there was a timidity which was as exquisite and as indescribable an addition to her beauty as the bloom to the purple of the grape or the mist to the line of the hills at dawn. He bowed over her hand. He felt angry with himself that he had no word to say.

"Tea?" said Aspasia. As he took the cup from her to pass it to Lady Gerardine, he heard the spoon clink against the saucer with the trembling of his own hand.

CHAPTER VI

"It is the post, Aunt," said Aspasia; "and a letter from Runkle."

She stood at the door of the attic, looking in upon them with something unfriendly in the expression of her eyes. The tone in which she announced Lady Gerardine's correspondent was not without a shade of malicious triumph.

Rosamond and Major Bethune were sitting one at each end of the old writing-table that had been Harry English's. Between them lay a pile of papers. From the landing, Baby had heard Bethune's voice uplifted in unwonted animation, and then the ring of her aunt's laugh.

As she entered, the man rose. But Lady Gerardine merely turned her head towards the intruder with an involuntary contraction of the eyebrows.

"Dear child," she said, and Aspasia felt the impatience of interruption under the gentleness of the tone, "we are at work."

"At work! It had sounded like it," thought the girl, ironically.

"Runkle writes from Brindisi," she said, turning over in her hand the thin envelope with the foreign stamp. "We shall have him home directly."

If she had hoped to create a sensation with her news, here was a failure. Bethune stood impassive. Lady Gerardine had all the air of one to whom Sir Arthur's movements were the least of concerns. She turned with a little impatient gesture to Major Bethune!

"Do sit down again," she said, "and go on. You have not told me whether Harry won the race. Oh, he must have won. I never saw any one ride as he did."

Aspasia's pretty, defiant countenance changed. Of late she had occasionally known an undefined lurking anxiety about her aunt—it now sprang out of ambush and seized her again. She put one hand over Rosamond's clasped fingers, and with the other held the letter before the abstracted eyes.

"But you must read it," she said, half tenderly, half authoritatively.

"Presently," said Lady Gerardine. And then, as if irritated by the disturbing document, seized it and laid it on one side. "Here, Baby," said she, "come and take your favourite place on the floor, and Major Bethune will begin his story again. You will like to hear how Harry took the conceit out of these Lancers who thought that nobody could ride a horse but themselves."

Baby flung a swift look at Bethune, half appeal, half fright. He was gnawing the corner of his moustache and staring under his heavy brows at Rosamond's lace—beautiful, unconscious, eager. He seemed perplexed.

"But, my goodness," cried Aspasia, and for very little more she would have burst into tears, "you know what the Runkle is, both of you. Don't you see this is perfectly idiotic? Some one will have to read his letter and see what he's got to say."

"Read it you, then," retorted Lady Gerardine, with sudden heat. Her eyes flashed, the blood rushed into her cheeks. She was as angry as the sleeper who is shaken from some fair dream that he would fain hold fast. Thereupon Baby's temper flamed likewise. She shrugged her shoulders, snapped the letter from the table, tore it open. Lady Gerardine began to sort the papers before her, once more determinedly abstracted from the situation. The girl flung herself down on the window-seat below the dormer, and, with pouting lips and scornfully uplifted eyebrows, set to work to peruse the marital document.

"Poor Runkle hopes," she cried sarcastically, "that you have not been making yourself ill again with anxiety about him because he missed the last mail. (Fancy, if we'd only known dear Runkle missed the last mail!) You must forgive him, Aunt. Lady Aspasia insisted on being taken to Agra, to see the Taj.... Runkle will be in England almost as soon as this letter. (Oh, joy!) Lady Aspasia has insisted on his going to stay at Melbury Towers first. She is having all sorts of

interesting people to meet him. (Aren't you jealous, Aunt?) When once she's got him, she doesn't mean to let him go—(Fancy, the Runkle!)—Oh—” She dropped her hands with the crinkling thin sheet and surveyed Lady Gerardine with some gravity: ”He wants us to join him there!”

”Who—where?”

”Us—you and me, Aunt Rosamond, at Melbury. We're to meet him there, he says, immediately, and stay over Christmas. Lady Aspasia will write.”

”I cannot go,” said Rosamond, quietly, as if that decided the question.

Once again Aspasia hesitated in distress between the advisability of discussion with any one so unreasonable, and the danger of exciting a highly nervous patient. With a despairing shake of her fluffy head, she finally returned to the letter and read on in a voice from which all the angry zest had departed.

”I shall spend a couple of days in Paris. Lady Aspasia has implored me to give her my opinion upon some old furniture. I propose, however, to send Muhammed Saif-u-din—my native secretary, you remember—straight to you at Saltwoods. He has some important work to finish for me, and Jani will know how to look after him. He will arrive about the evening of the tenth.' That's tomorrow,” said the girl, breaking off. ”Lord, I'm glad you're here, Major Bethune! Gracious! This old place is creepy enough without having a black man wandering about the passages and the orchards.... Fancy us, all alone in the middle of the downs! He might cut all our throats, and nobody know anything, till the baker came. I do think our Runkle might keep his own blackamoors to himself.”

Rosamond looked indifferent. She drummed the table softly with her fingers, as if in protest against the waste of time. Bethune still stood without speaking. His attitude had not changed a fraction, neither had his brooding face. Aspasia thought that she could have flung the inkpot at him with much satisfaction.

”That's all,” she concluded drily; ”Runkle is his dear wife's devoted husband.” She threw a hard emphasis on the words. Rosamond suddenly paled and set her lips close.

”Oh yes! there's a postscript; he wants an answer immediately to Claridge's—and who do you think was their fellow traveller? Dr. Châtelard—he's to be at Melbury, too. It's all fish that comes to Lady Aspasia's net—evidently. Well?”

Still there was silence.

It was a clear day. A shaft of wintry sunshine pierced in between the ivy sprays, and caught the girl as she sat; her crisp aureole of hair seemed palely afire; sparks of the same faint yellow flame enkindled her eyes, and even the ends of her long eyelashes. She sat stiff and stern, her face was somewhat pallid. Bethune glanced at her suddenly. The sky was blue through the little panes beyond: he thought she made a quaintly pretty picture.

"Well!" repeated Miss Cuningham, "you had better wire to Runkle, I think."

Lady Gerardine rose from her seat with so swift a movement that, startled, Baby jumped from her perch. The elder woman was passion white; her nostrils were dilated.

"Leave me, Aspasia," she said, pointing to the door with a gesture at once dignified and incensed. "You disturb me."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the ill-used girl. She checked herself suddenly and made a rush for the passage; if she spoke another word the tears would certainly come, and that (she thought) would be the last straw.

Quick as she was, Bethune was before her. He opened the door for her to pass. His air of detachment, the banality of the courtesy, seemed to her an insult; she flung a look of scathing reproach at him as she flounced by.

With Sir Arthur's letter clutched in her hand she sought refuge in her own room; and there on the small white bed shed some of the bitterest and angriest tears she had ever known. The thought of the two in the attic room galled her beyond endurance.

"Hasn't she had two husbands already?" sobbed she to herself, catching at the crudest conclusions with all the inconsequence of her years, "and couldn't she leave just this one man alone? ... 'You disturb me'—oh!"

Yet Bethune had remained in the attic scarcely a minute after Aspasia herself had left it. When he had returned to the table, Lady Gerardine had gazed at him a span or two with vague eyes—then she had passed her hand over her forehead, sighed wearily, and fallen into her seat.

"I can do no more to-day!" she had said. "Take those papers. You see I have copied out all in sequence, even the most trivial detail, till the Sandhurst examination. Make what use of them you like. I—forgive me, it is very stupid—but I feel troubled. And please—do not talk to me about this any more until I ask you to."

So she had dismissed him. And, dismissed, he returned to the study, which had been allotted for his use, and placed her voluminous notes with his own type-written manuscript, pending the task of collation. Then he fell into a long reverie, and his thoughts were neither of Harry English nor of Miss Aspasia Cuningham.

* * * * *

But even in anger Baby was loyal; some instinct, rather than any positive train of reasoning, told her that Sir Arthur's arrival at the present juncture would inevitably precipitate matters to a most undesirable climax. On the other hand: how keep him away if his wife persisted in her attitude of indifference and silence? ...

"Good gracious, we'll have Runkle turning up in a special train before the week's out!" How to prevent it?

With much labour she finally concocted and despatched a telegram of Machiavellian artfulness to await arrival at Claridge's, taking further upon herself to sign it in Lady Gerardine's name:

Just received letter. Overjoyed return, trust you can make arrangements to join me here at once; unfortunate presence of guest prevents my leaving. Otherwise would meet you London before Melbury.

"That will do it, I think," said the astute young lady. "If Runkle thinks that any one is trying to dictate to him or to interfere with his own sacred arrangements—the trick is done."

CHAPTER VII

Before the two women met again, it was evening—the debatable hour, between light and darkness, which falls so quickly upon the December day. Rosamond had come in, wet and weary, from a walk alone on the downs; caught by reverie, she sat before the fire in her dressing-gown, her change of garb unfinished, her hair still loosened, gazing through those unsubstantial misty recent years to the past, which had grown so vivid.

Aspasia peeped in, half drew back, hesitated; then, as Lady Gerardine held out her left hand, without a word, the girl flew to her side and nestled down on the hearthrug at her feet, seizing the white hand with the unexpressed joy of tacit reconciliation. For a little while there was silence between them. Baby's eyes roved about the room; within her sunny head a host of new thoughts were humming like a hive of bees. All at once something unfamiliar to her touch about the fingers she was fondling drew her gaze with surprise.

"Why, Aunt Rosamond?"

"Yes, Baby."

Lady Gerardine answered from the past, her voice far away and dreamy.

"Why." The girl turned the inert hand now to the faint grey light of the

waning day, now to the fireglow. "You have changed your rings. This is a new one I never saw before," and her plump fingertips felt the plain circle, so much rounder and narrower than that pompous gold band with which the great Sir Arthur had plighted his nuptial vow. The cry had almost escaped her lips: "You've never taken off Runkle's wedding-ring!" but she checked it with that new prudence circumstances were forcing upon her. She wished now she had not spoken at all. But Lady Gerardine was smiling.

"Yes," said she, tenderly, looking down at her hand where the leaping wood flame flashed back from the narrow gold circler and the tiny coloured gems of an antique ring that surmounted it. "I have changed my rings—this one was given me the night before my marriage. It all went so quickly, you see, Baby, that my engagement ring came only the day before the wedding-ring. It was hers," said Rosamond, looking over her shoulder at the bed where Mrs. English had died. "'Tis a very old trinket, you see. Red roses of rubies, green leaves of emerald, and a diamond heart. He said it was my heart—I said it was his."

She smiled again into space. Aspasia clasped her and kissed her. It was the first time since the voyage her aunt had spoken to her openly of her hidden thoughts. And now she spoke as if confidence had always existed between them, as if she were merely continuing the thread of an interrupted discourse.

Baby's heart began to sink with an uneasy sense of awe as before something unnatural, and of her own incapacity for meeting it. She wished her kiss could stop the lovely smiling lips from further speech. But Lady Gerardine went on:

"We were married quite early, in the little Alverstoke church. I used to hate it when I went there Sunday after Sunday; but it was a new place to me that morning, holy and beautiful, all in the dewy freshness, grey amid the green, with stripes of sunlight yellow upon it, and the dancing shadows of the trees. The whole church was full of the smell of white narcissus; it was like incense. When I came up the nave, he turned where he stood at the altar rail, and looked at me. I can see him now, just as he looked; his eyes dark, dark, and his face quite pale for all it was so bronzed. Baby, I can smell the narcissus now, as I stood beside him and he put this on my finger."

She raised her hand and kissed the ring.

"I shall never take it off," she said, as if to herself. And unhappy, practical Baby, could have laughed and cried together with the despairing ejaculation: "Poor Runkle!"

The night was pressing up against the windows; only the firelight now fought the darkness in the wainscoted room. Upon the panel opposite the bed, the life-size portrait of Captain English, in its strong relief of black and white, began to assume a ruddy tint; in the shifting of the shadows the expression of the face seemed to change. It assumed startling airs of life. Baby caught sight of

this and gave a faint scream.

"Oh, oh," she said, burrowing her face against Rosamond's neck, "he almost looks alive!"

Lady Gerardine had seen, too; but there was no terror in her soul.

"Why should he not look alive?" said she, in a soft confidential whisper, "he's not really dead, you know."

The astounding words had scarcely fallen upon Baby's alarmed consciousness, when there was a crunching of wheels below the window, as if the night without had suddenly engendered some ghostly visitor in state. A violent peal rang through the silent house; a new but very tangible fear was upon Aspasia. With a shriek she sprang to her feet.

"As sure as eggs is eggs, it's Runkle!"

She rushed helter-skelter to the door, while Rosamond sat still, clasping her ringed finger.

A minute later Aspasia burst into the room again. She was laughing violently in reaction, and brought a breath as of wet woods and winter winds into the warm room.

"It's all right," she gasped. "It isn't Runkle, aunt, it's only——" with a fresh irrepressible gust, "it's only the 'native spring,' you know, the black man—the secretary who's writing up Runkle's monument!"

She leaned against the bed-post, puffing and fanning herself with her handkerchief.

"What a turn he's given me—poor thing! I'm glad we've got Jani for him. He looked so forlorn, standing in the hall, staring about him with great sad eyes, like something pitchforked into a different world."

* * * * *

Jani carried a lamp into the small bare chamber allotted to Muhammed Saif-uddin, and set it on the table at which he was seated.

She turned up the wick, and was straightening herself from her task when her glance fell upon the man's hands and became riveted there. Even in their attitude of repose, folded one over the other in the oriental fashion, these dusky hands had a singular suggestion of strength and energy about them. They were larger, too, than might have been expected in a babu; but then was he not of the virile northern breed?

After a while, slowly, the woman's gaze travelled up to the broad breast, where it rested once more. Then, upon a sudden impulse, she tilted the green shade so as to throw the full light upon the bearded countenance. The secretary smiled and raised his eyes to look at her in return; but her action had cast her

face into profound shadow.

"So," said he, in her own tongue, "here we meet, children of the sun in the land of the mist. So far from home we should be friends."

"I make no friend of your blood-stained race," said Jani, harshly.

"Why, what harm have we done thee or thine, mother?" asked Muhammed, his easy good-humoured tone contradicted by the relentless keenness of the gaze that still strove to pierce the gloom in her direction.

"What harm, Pathan?" shrieked Jani, suddenly, trembling with a sort of monkey fury. She flung out her hands as if waving off some threatening vision. "What harm, do you ask, have you done, you and your brothers of the mountain? Harm enough. See that ye do no more. Cross not my mistress's path."

Muhammed put his hand over his mouth, as if to conceal a yawn. Then, with an air of weary curiosity:

"Your mistress?" he echoed. "Nay, mother, my business is with your noble lord. How should even my shadow ever come between your lady and the sun?"

"I will tell you," said Jani. She came closer to him, though still keeping in the darkness, and laid her fingers on his sleeve. "Your mountains once brought her great sorrow. She has forgotten, she is consoled. I would not that she remembered again. Why did you come here?" she cried, breaking into a wail. "My heart trembles. It is for no good!"

The man shrugged his shoulders, but she repeated in a sort of frenzy:

"Keep out of the Mem Sahib's way. Waï, that you should have come here to remind her! Her tears are dry."

Muhammed smiled again, a smile full of secret yet fierce irony.

"I am here," said he, "upon the bidding of my most noble lord and master, the Governor Sahib, of splendid fame."

"Great be his shadow!" ejaculated the woman, with Eastern gesture of reverence. "Oh, you speak the truth; that is a noble and magnificent lord!"

"Ay," quoth the secretary. Then, with a movement as sudden as her own had been, he lifted the shade altogether from the lamp. Jani again flung out both her hands.

"Stay," he commanded, as she huddled towards the door; and she stayed, glancing at him with furtive, furious eyes like a frightened wild thing. "You love your lady then so deeply?" he queried, studying her dark face in the revealing glare.

The ayah's lips moved. She looked askance at her questioner, dropped her gaze upon his hands again, hesitated, and at last spoke:

"I—I suckled her at this breast," she beat her withered bosom. "She is more beloved to me than the child of my flesh. When she weeps, it is as if my blood fell. She is happy, she is great, she is the lady of a high and magnificent lord. She

reigns as a queen, she has jewels—oh, jewels—all her heart can wish.”

”What then?” cried Muhammed, laughing loudly.

”The sons of the mountain have made her weep enough,” cried Jani, hoarsely. She was trembling as between a terror of pleading and an impotence of anger. ”Woe to you if your shadow come between her and the sunshine! The dead are dead, past and done with; but the living she shall keep—and her greatness.”

”You speak in riddles,” said the Pathan, coldly. ”But doubtless you are a faithful servant. Faithful, but also foolish. I will not harm your mistress!”

”Who harms my lord harms her,” retorted the woman, sullenly.

Muhammed’s eyes flashed.

”And who would harm so just, so great, so beloved a master? You weary me, mother; begone.”

He did not raise his voice, but there was that in it before which she shrank; creeping from the room thereafter stealthily, like a threatened dog.

Muhammed, his hands folded once more, remained seated long into the night, with the merciless light of the unshaded lamp upon his brooding countenance.

CHAPTER VIII

The law of change, of passage—the pressure of time, in fact—is so strong upon everything that comes under its law at all, that not even in memory can we remain stationary. Fain, fain, would Rosamond have lingered upon the first stage of that journey into the past she had so singularly engaged upon. But, in spite of herself, the wheels were turning, the moments dropping; from within as well as from without, she was forced on and on, and she knew that in a little while she must reach the parting of the ways.

It having been ruled for us that life is almost all change, and that change is mostly sorrow, it is a dispensation of mercy that we should be blind travellers along the road, and never know what lies beyond. But Rosamond, who had rebelled against the natural law, was now, with eyes unsealed, advancing fatally towards the way of sorrows she had already once traversed, refusing to mourn at her appointed hour.

Fain would she have walked in the sheltered valley, fain even called back

the old sleep of coldness. In vain. Time was marching, and she must march. And two there were that drove her forward, besides the relentless invisible power—Bethune, with his expectant close presence, and Sir Arthur, unbearable menace from the distance.

* * * * *

”And then, you know, the summons came,” said she.

”I know,” he answered. Then there was silence between them.

Lady Gerardine had come to Major Bethune in the little library where he spent some hours each morning over his work. These last days she had shown an unaccountable distaste to his presence in the attic room. And he, studying her now, thought that, in this short week of his visit, she had altered and wasted; that the bloom had faded on her cheek, and that cheek itself was faintly hollowed. He had been poring over some old maps of the Baroghil district, pipe in mouth, when she entered upon him. And at sight of her, he had risen to his feet, putting aside the briar with a muttered apology. But she, arrested in her advance, had stood inhaling the vapour of his tobacco, her lips parted with a quivering that was half smile, half pain.

”I like it,” she had said dreamily. ”It brings me back.”

Awkward he nearly always felt himself before her, never more so than at these moments of self-betrayal on her part, when every glimpse of her innermost feeling contradicted the hard facts of her life. He stood stiffly, not taking up his pipe at her bidding. Then, pulling herself together, she had advanced again, ceremoniously requesting him to be seated. She had only come to bring him another note, which she had omitted to join to those annals of Harry English’s life up to their marriage, already in his hands.

He had just glanced at it and flicked it on one side, and then at the expectancy of his silence, she had grown pale. There could be no turning back, she did not ask it, scarcely hoped for it. But, O God, if she might wait a little longer!

She sank into the worn leather armchair. It was a small room, lined with volumes, and the air was full of the smell of ancient bindings, ancient paper and print; that good smell of books, so grateful to the nostrils of one who loves them, mingled with the pungency of Bethune’s tobacco.

The wild orchard came quite close to the window and across the panes, under an impatient wind, the empty boughs went ceaselessly up and down like withered arms upon some perpetual useless signalling. To Rosamond they seemed spectres of past summers, waving her back from their own hopeless winter. The room was warm and rosy with firelight, but in her heart she felt cold. And Major Bethune sat waiting.

"I only had one or two letters from him," she faltered at last; "and then came the silence." Her lovely mouth twitched with pain; Raymond Bethune turned his eyes away from her face.

"He joined us at Gilgit," he said, staring out at the frantic boughs. "I remember how he looked, as he jogged in, towards evening, with his fellows—white with dust, his very hair powdered."

She clasped her hands; the tension slightly relaxed.

"You all loved him?" she said softly.

"Loved him!" he gave a short laugh. "Well, he was a sort of god to me, and to the men too. Some of the subs thought him hard on them—so he was, hard as nails."

Astonishment filled her gaze.

"Gad," said the man, "I remember poor little Fane—he went during the siege, fever—I remember the little fellow saying, half crying: 'I think English is made of stone.' But it was before he had seen him at the fighting. That was a leader of men!"

"Hard!" said Lady Gerardine. "Harry made of stone!" she gave a low laugh, half indignant.

"Don't you know," said Bethune, "that here"—he tapped the jagged lines of the mountain maps—"you can't do anything if you're not harder than the rocks? And with those devils of ours," his own face softened oddly as he spoke; "they're hard enough—they're devils, I tell you—to lead them right, you've got to be more than devil yourself—you've got to be—an archangel."

Some vision of a glorious fighting Michael, with a stern serene face of immutable justice, featured with the beauty of the dead, rose before Rosamond. She flushed and trembled; then she thought back again and with anger.

"Ah, but his heart," she said; "ah, you did not know him!"

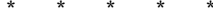
He wheeled round upon her and gazed at her, his cold eyes singularly enkindled.

"You forget," said he, and quoted "that every man 'boasts two soul sides, one to face the world with, one to show a woman when he loves her.'"

"Ah!" said Rosamond.—It was a tender cry, as if she had taken something very lovely to her heart and was holding it close. With an abrupt movement Bethune turned back to his table; his harsh face looked harsher and more unemotional than usual, and he began folding up his papers as if he thought the conversation had lasted long enough.

"Perhaps to-morrow," he said, "you will be able to give me the beginning of the siege papers."

"I will try," said Rosamond, catching her breath. And then, after a moment, she rose and left him without another word.



Rosamond felt restless; the walls of the house oppressed her; the sound of the piano in the drawing-room was maddening; she wanted to be out in the wide spaces with her overwhelming thoughts. She caught up a cape, drew the hood over her head, and went quickly forth to meet the December wind.

Down the grass-grown avenues, under the bereft and complaining orchard trees, she went, making for the downs. At the boundary gate she met the old one-armed postman toiling with his burden. He thrust a letter into her hand and passed on. She saw that it was addressed in Sir Arthur's writing, and bore the stamp of Melbury. She broke it open and read impatiently, eager to be back with her absorbing dream. Her husband was urgently summoning her to join him at once, under Lady Aspasia's roof. He expressed surprise, tinged with dissatisfaction, that Lady Aspasia's kind letter of invitation to her should have remained unanswered.

"No doubt, dear," Sir Arthur wrote, "you are waiting until you can ascertain the date of your visitor's departure, but this must not be allowed to interfere." Here was a command. Rosamond gave a vague laugh.

"Who is the guest, by the way? I am expecting a letter from you, forwarded from London. Probably you have written to Claridge's. I would gladly accede to your request and come at once to the manor-house..." She stared, as the phrase caught her eyes, then laughed again: "Poor man—what was he thinking of?"

She crumpled the sheet in her hand and walked on. The wind blew fiercely across the downs, every leaf and spray, every dry gorse-bush, every blade of rank grass was writhen and bent in the same direction. She struggled to the shelter of a hazel copse and sat her down.

Before her stretched the moorland, dun-grey and yellow, dipping to the horizon; above her head the sky was leaden grey, charged with cloud wrack—a huge bowl of storm. She thought of that glowing Indian morning, when he had told her he must leave her, and of the twenty-four hours that had elapsed between that moment and their parting. What tenderness, gentler than a woman's, had he not revealed to her then—Harry English, the hard man, fierce angel-leader of devils! And the words of Browning rushed back upon her, once again as a message of balm—

... two soul sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her.

Ah, nothing could rob her of that! She had been the woman he had loved, and

the soul side he had shown to her, most generous, most sacred, most beautiful, was what no other being in the Universe could have from him, not even his God!

They had parted in the dawn, the Indian dawn, all shot with flame. Not once had he faltered in his resolute cheerfulness. He had kissed her and blessed her as she lay in bed. But at the door he had halted to look upon her a last time; and she was weeping. Then he had flung himself back beside her ... and now she closed her eyes and shuddered on the memory of his last kisses.

With the chill barren earth beneath her, the lowering winter sky above, the sun-warmth of his love again enfolded her. It was as if his presence brooded upon her. Oh, could she but die and be with him! "Harry, I am yours," she called to him in the passion of her soul, "yours only—love, take me!"

So strong seemed the atmosphere of his spirit about her, that she looked round wildly, almost feeling as if her soul-cry must have called back the dead. There stretched the iron earth, there hung the relentless skies—the world was empty.

The copse where she had chosen to rest was on the higher downs, and before her the land fell away gently yet so surely that the high chimney-stack of the Old Ancient House would scarcely have caught the eye against the opposite slope, save for its rising smoke columns, which the wind seized and tore to flakes.

As she gazed, unseeing, upon the desolate spectacle, a gleam of something unwonted, something like a huge crimson bird, moved vaguely tropical in all the duns and greys. She wondered awhile, and then realised: realised with a sudden sick spasm.

It was the red turban of Muhammed Saif-u-din. How sinister it looked, how unnatural a bloodstain under this pale English sky! Yonder son of the treacherous race that she could not banish from her life, even in this peaceful abode of her widowhood—Sir Arthur's secretary.... Sir Arthur! Her husband! The man to whom she had given the claim of what was left of her life! ... Thought followed on thought up to this culminating point. And then it was to Lady Gerardine as if some veil was rent before her mental vision, and she saw—saw at last—with that agony to the sight of sudden glare in the darkness, what she had done.

These last weeks she had lived in a dream, and every aspiration of her soul, every tendency of her life, had drifted always further away from the existence she and fate had chosen for herself. Now there was a gulf between Rosamond English and Rosamond Gerardine; and by the hot recoil of her blood she knew that it was unsurmountable. How could she ever go back; again be wife of the man she loved not, she who was widow of the man she loved!

She looked for the letter in her hand to cast it from her, and found that it had already escaped her careless hold. Upon the yellow grass at her feet the wind was chasing it; turning it mockingly over and over, a contemptible foolish thing,

meanly out of place among the withered leaves, the naturally dying things of the fields.

So little place had Sir Arthur Gerardine in the life of Rosamond—Rosamond, the widow of Harry English!

CHAPTER IX

Full winter seemed to have come in a night; everywhere rime lay white upon the land, every blade was a frosted silver spear. Not a leaf yet kept the summer green; shrunken, brown and yellow, they hung by their brittle stems; it was a still morning, and he who had ears to listen to nature sounds, all through the woods could have heard ever and anon the sigh of one, falling here and there. A dim blue winter sky held the world; the sunshine was serene and faintly warm, like the heart of a good old man. The air was like iced wine to drink, invigorating, tingling through the veins. It painted Aspasia's cheeks a splendid scarlet. It filled her with the spirits of all young things, foals and kittens and cubs; so that she could hardly keep from prancing down the iron path, from cutting steps on the stiff grass to hear it crackle beneath her feet.

As Bethune looked at her, he thought she was as pretty as a winter robin in her brown furs. Her eyes glistened as she flung quick glances at him; her dimples came and went; her teeth flashed as she chattered at headlong speed. They were going to Sunday service at the village church, a couple of miles away, and Baby was setting forth with a delightful sense of vigour and freedom.

Those whose fate binds them to cities can have no idea of the delicate joys of the country walk, with the beloved one—him or her—who fills the thoughts. Alas! for the poor wench that has no better pleasure than to tramp along the crowded street. What does she know of the loveliness of "solitude for two," of the dear sympathy of nature, perfect in every season with the heart that is of her clay?

Not, indeed, that Miss Cuninghame acknowledged even to herself that Raymond Bethune was the present lord of her mind, much less her beloved. Nevertheless, the glamour of that hour that strikes but once in a lifetime was upon her. Love, first love, the only love, comparable but to the most exquisite mystery of the dawn, of the spring; happiness so evanescent that a touch will destroy it, so delicate that the scent of it is obliterated by fulfilment; so utterly made of anti-

pation, of unrealised, unformed desire, that to shape it, to seize it, is to lose it—is it not strange that we, to whom such a gift is granted, receive it, nearly all of us, not as we should, on our knees, but grossly, greedily, impatiently, ungratefully, hurrying through the golden moments, tearing apart the gossamer veil, grasping the flower from the stem before its unfolding? No wonder that to most the day that follows on this dawn should be so full of heat and burden; the fruit of this blossom so sour to the parent that the children's teeth are set on edge; that, behind the veil, the vision should prove dull, flat, and unprofitable!

Now Aspasia, though a very creature of earth and one that knew no transcendental longings, had kept the pure heart of her childhood; and therefore this hour of her first love, all vague, all unacknowledged, was wholly sweet.

They knelt, Bethune and she, side by side, in the small bare church. She flung him a look of comical anguish over the grunting of the harmonium and the unmelodious chants of the village choir. She struck into a hymn herself, in a high clear pipe, as true as a robin's song. A pale young clergyman, with protruding eyeballs, led the service with a sort of anæmic piety; grand old Bible words were gabbled or droned; grand old Church prayers, with the dignity of an antique faith still resounding in them—who, that heard, seemed to care? It was the Sunday routine, and that was all.

Bethune saw the girl's fingers unconsciously practising musical exercises on the ledge of the pew; when their eyes met once, she made a childish grimace. She, for one, was frankly bored. As for him, had he any faith? He had hardly ever thought even of putting the question. He went to the Church service of his country as a matter of course, as his grandfathers had done before him. It was part of the etiquette of his military life. Now and again he had been moved to a solemn stir of the feelings during some brief soldier's ceremony: the hurried funeral perhaps of an English lad far away from homeland. But so had he been moved by the bugle-call, by the hurrah on the field. Life and death, love and religion, what did they mean? What are we, when all is said and done, but the toys of a blind fate?

There is but one thing sure in the uncertainty, he told himself, but one staff in the wilderness, one anchor in the turmoil—duty.

The damp-stained wall at his side was starred with memorials. He began to contemplate them, idly at first, then with an enkindling interest. Here was an old stone slab commemorating, in half-obliterated words, some son of a Dorset house who had died for the country in far Peninsular days. "In the twentieth year of his age." A young existence, to be thus cut short! Yet, had he lived, and given life, his own sons would now be well-nigh forgotten.

Under this was a black marble tablet. The blood rushed to his face as he read, and then ebbed, leaving him cold:

To THE MEMORY OF
CAPTAIN HENRY ENGLISH,
OF HER MAJESTY'S INDIAN STAFF CORPS,
KILLED ON SERVICE IN THE PAMIRS. AGED 28.

Thus ran the sober inscription; followed the text, more triumphant than sorrowful:

He that loseth his life shall find it.

And then the words:

THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED BY HIS MOTHER.

Behind him, by just turning his head, he could see another memorial. A plate of flaming brass, this one; large, for it had to hold many names, and very new. It was scored in vermilion tribute to those yeomen—gentlemen and peasant—who, at the first breath of disaster, had hurried overseas from the peaceful district to uphold the mother country in a point of honour and had found quick honour themselves. In a little while these blood-red letters, too, would fade, but not so quickly as the memory of grief in the hearts of those who had sent their lads off with such tears, such acclamations. Bethune thought to himself, with a bitter smile, that there was not one of the churches dotted all over the wide English land where some such brand-new memorial had not been nailed this last year, and how, Sunday after Sunday, the eyes of the congregation would sweep past it, with ever-growing dulness of custom, until the record came to mean no more than the grey stones of the walls themselves. No less quickly than England, the moment of peril past, forgets those who rose to her call and fell for her name, does the thought of the brother, the comrade, the son, pass from the home circle! Not that he pitied the forgotten; not that he wished it otherwise with his country. It was well for England that her sons should think it a matter of course to give their lives for her. And it was what he could wish for himself, to die where his duty was, and be obliterated. Who, indeed, should remember him who had no ties of kinship and had lost his only friend? ... Who should be remembered when Harry English was already forgotten?

His lips curled, as he flung a glance along the aisles and wondered if any heart, under these many-coloured Sunday garments, still beat true to the lost lover; nay, how many comfortable widows had already brought a second mate to worship under the tablet that commemorated the first? Hold! yet the mothers remember—this was the church where Harry English had worshipped, beside his mother, the grand tender silent woman whom Bethune, too, had loved: the

mother who had been alone, with himself, to mourn!

When he had set out on his way this morning he had been moved by the thought that to kneel where his friend had knelt was the last and only tribute he could pay that memory. The mountain torrent had robbed them of his grave; but in the shrine which sheltered his tablet, in this church of a communion that had rigidly severed the old fond ties between the living and the departed, no service could yet now be held that would not be in some sort a commemoration.

As the thoughts surged through his mind like wreckage on the waves of his feelings, he seemed to go back, with a passion that almost had something of remorse, to his old sorrow for English and to his old bitterness against the woman who had put another in his comrade's place.

In vision he placed the two men before him: Harry, stern, eager, true, with his rare beautiful smile—eagle of glance, clear of mind, unerring of judgment, swift of action; Harry English, the unrecognised hero of the deep strong heart; he whose courage at the crucial moment had maintained the honour of England; who, in saving the frontier stronghold, had, as Bethune knew, saved India from gathering disaster! And Sir Arthur Gerardine, the great man, with his fatuous smile, his fatal self-complacency, his ignorant policy. Sir Arthur Gerardine, in his high place, working untold future mischief to the Empire with inane diligence. Bethune almost laughed, as he pictured the Lieutenant-Governor to himself, one of the many of his order, busy in picking out stone by stone the great foundations planned by the brains of Lawrences, cemented by the blood of Nicholsons.

And yet, this Rosamond Gerardine, who had borne the name of English, could not be dismissed merely as one who, light-natured, had found it easy and profitable to forget. Sphinx, she had haunted his thoughts that Indian night as he had walked back from her palace, carrying with him her image, white and stately in the flash of her diamonds and the green fires of her emeralds ... the great lady, who knew the value of her smiles and gave the largess but with condescension. Sphinx she was even more to him now, whether hurrying from her walk to receive him, wide-eyed in the firelight, with the bloom of a girl on her cheek and an exquisite gracious timidity; or wan in her black robes—widow, indeed, it seemed—drinking in with speechless tenderness of sorrow every memory of the lost friend, as if no Sir Arthur Gerardine had ever stepped between her and her beloved.

Was this attitude but a phase of a sick woman's fancy, to be dropped when the mood had passed? Was not, in truth, Lady Gerardine in this freakish humour as false to Sir Arthur, who had given her affluence and position, as she had been to him who had given her his love and faith? Deep down under his consciousness there was a little angry grudge against her that she should not have accompanied them this morning. Were she now sincere, she would have felt the same desire as

he himself to pray where the walls heralded Harry English's name. Bethune did not know, so little do even the most straightforward know themselves, that had she knelt by his side to-day it would have been perilously sweet to him: that had her footsteps gone with his along the frosted roads between the brown hedges, that way, to him, would have remained in fragrance as with a memory of flowers.

"Didn't you think," asked Baby, "that Mr. Smith—his name is Algernon Vandeleur Smith, he's the curate—didn't you think his eyes would drop out of his head? They make me feel quite ill!" They were walking down the flagged churchyard path, and Baby was stamping her small cold feet. She was talking in a high irate voice, regardless of hearers. "Did you ever listen to such a sermon?"

She opened her bright eyes very wide and made a fish-like mouth in imitation of the Reverend Algernon: "And now, brethren, shortly, briefly, and in a few words, not wishing to detain you longer, I will endeavour to set before you with conciseness and brevity."—She was a born mimic, and had caught the dreary young divine's very intonation.

Bethune had no laugh for her: his heart was sore. For once the girl's mood jarred on him.

She was quick to feel the shadow of his thoughts. The dimple went out of her cheek, the spring from her step. The icy brilliancy of the day seemed suddenly dim to her. The walk before them, towards which she had been yearning with delicious anticipation, became instantly a grey project, a weariness.

This gossamer of early love—it needs but a breath of adverse wind to tear it apart and set it afloat in forlorn shreds, mere flecks to the caprice of the airs; it that has been a fairy bridge for the dance of the sunbeams! For a long while they trudged together in silence. But all at once, Bethune looking down upon her was smitten, not by any hint of her dawning sentiments towards him, but by the consciousness that he must have seemed surly towards a mirthful child.

"God knows," he thought heavily, "the world gets sad enough, soon enough, to make it shame to cloud even one moment for the children." Himself, he felt old and sad, and miles away from her happy youth.

"So silent?" said he, turning upon her that softened look she loved.

She glanced up at him, forcing a smile, but over her frank eyes there was a wet shimmer which she winked away indignantly. Once again, as on that Indian evening when he had seen Lady Gerardine fit her slender hand into the death-prints of the burnt queens, it struck him that here, in this open-hearted, sweet-natured, gay-spirited girl, a man might find a companion for life to help and comfort—a piece of charming, wholesome prose, but ...

Raymond Bethune, in his lonely isolated life, had had dreams—dreams that his temper had been too narrow, too severely matter-of-fact, to bring into any connection with his actions. He had dreamed his dream as he had read his book

of poetry, to lay it aside without a sigh and take up the moment's duty, as one lays aside a flower, a thing of fragrance, a passing pleasure, which has no further influence on life.

Now this woman, whom he despised, who had outraged the deepest feeling of his life, had become, in some inexplicable manner, the embodiment of these inconsequent dreams. Her deep eyes, shadowed with sorrow as the tarn by the mountain height; the trick of her sigh, the balm of her rare smile; the melody of her voice, those low tones that seemed as charged with mystery as the wind by the whispers of the forest depths, all were as

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faëry lands forlorn....

She was a vision of poetry that could be lived, that could become part of a man's very flesh and blood!

Of a sudden he realised it. His heart gave a great leap and then seemed to stand still; but the habit of years and the hard common sense of his nature asserted themselves in violent reaction. He coloured to the roots of his hair in shame at the monstrousness, the absurdity of the thought, to which his idle dissatisfied mood had led him.

The girl saw his emotion and innocently attributed it to quite another cause; connected it with the expression of his glance when it had rested upon her. The song awoke once more in her heart, circling higher and higher like a June lark. Renewed joy began to bubble from her lips in laughter and talk.

When they emerged from the copse to the top of the downs, where the road dipped into the hollow, she halted, with an exclamation.

"See," she cried, "the grass looks all gold and silver! And oh! did any one ever behold anything so pale, pale, so blue, blue as the sky! Oh! isn't this better than India; don't you love it; wouldn't you like to put your arm round England and kiss her?"

"England, the mother; India, the mistress," thought Bethune. Then, at a maddening tangent flight, his mind took wing. The words of Dr. Châtelard came back upon him. "Cold, that woman? Touch that coldness and be burnt to the bone!" He revolted from his own soul as it flamed within him. He would have liked to set off running across the frozen downs to that far violet line where washed the sea; to have plunged into the icy waves, into the bitter turmoil of the living waters, to wash the degrading madness from him.

Aspasia's fresh laugh brought his spirit back to her with a renewed revulsion.

"Look, look," she cried once more, "there's Muhammed's turban going up

and down, and up and down, the garden path! I wonder what he's thinking of? Not Runkle's monumental work, I'm sure. Ugh! I declare it's uncanny only to look at that absurd turban in this winter land. It's bad enough to have Jani chattering about the house like a human castanet, without having that creature tramping up and down outside the window, day after day. Major Bethune, I wish you'd speak to the creature—and find out what he is up to. I never saw anything so restless in my life."

"Oh, we've had several conversations," answered Bethune, following with his eyes the movement of the red head-dress in the distant hollow. "That is to say, I have done a lively bit of talking to him, and he has given me mighty polite answers and said nothing at all. Those fellows, Miss Aspasia, are queer cattle, proud as Lucifer, secret as the tiger in the jungle. That one down there, however, is of the modern school—a sort of animal I don't profess to understand, but one, at any rate, I should not care to trust, myself. Sir Arthur would have done just as well to have left him in India."

"Gracious!" cried Aspasia. "Lord!" Her mind sprang: "Perhaps he's after Runkle! Oh, Major Bethune, you know what a mess poor Runkle is making of things out there; I shouldn't like him to be thugged! I always told him he was laying the seed of mutiny," said Miss Aspasia, with tragic emphasis.

Bethune gave his rare laugh.

"Muhammed Saif-u-din would hardly have come over all the way to England to make his private mutiny when he could accomplish the matter with more kudos in India, and have a good chance of saving his own skin besides."

Aspasia shook her head, preferring to cling to her own dramatic inspiration.

"Well, I'll give Runkle a warning, anyhow," said she. "There's something fishy about Muhammed. You may laugh at me, if you like; but the man is eaten up with some secret thought, some sinister thought. There's a look in his eyes that makes me shiver. And when he smiles—ugh! I do hate Easterns."

He glanced at her reflectively, then he smiled. Such a sentiment from any one else would have aroused his indignation; but it was impossible to take Miss Aspasia Cuninghams' hatreds with seriousness. Only this morning he had seen her half strangle a protesting Jani in vehement embrace.

"And as for Aunt Rosamond," went on the girl, comfortably, "it upsets her even to see the wretched being. That's the reason we keep him to the orchard, you know; her windows look out on the front. I had to tell him—it was an awful moment; he was so hurt and so grand. Then I explained it was on account of poor Captain English, you know. Oh, you know...!"

"Do I?" asked the man, with a faint raising of the brows.

"Well, if it amuses you to pretend you don't," she snapped back. "Anyhow, Muhammed did. He may be a cut-throat, but there's something of a gentleman

about it. He put his hand on his heart and bowed. 'The Lady Sahib's wishes are sacred,' he said. And I've seen the poor thing hide behind a tree when she is coming. Rather touching, don't you think?" said the inconsequent Baby.

"Did Lady Gerardine ask you to speak to Muhammed?"

"No. Why do you want to know that?"

"Mere idle curiosity," he answered, striking at a gorse bush with his stick and watching the melted rime fly out in spray.

"If you knew Aunt Rosamond better, you'd understand she'd never say such a thing as that. She keeps everything close. But we all know she does not want to be reminded of things."

He threw back his head with his mirthless laugh.

"Even I know as much by this time, Miss Aspasia. It is perhaps a little difficult for a solitary man to understand you women; but one thing is quite evident: you never do anything heartless or selfish ... except from excess of feeling."

He could not keep the sneer from his tone, and Baby's quick temper was instantly aflame.

"You never have a good word for Aunt Rosamond," she cried; "but you need not include me in your judgment, I think!"

Bethune laughed again, harshly.

"I am very hard on Lady Gerardine, am I not?" Then fixing his eyes upon her, broodingly; "and, as for you, I hope—"

He did not finish the sentence. But to her reading, his glance needed no word. She grew rosily shy and ran on ahead to hide it.

"Well, I love the Eastern," said the man, abruptly going back to the origin of the dispute. "He's my trade. He will be the death of me one of these days, no doubt. But what of that? Does not the sailor love the sea that will swallow him. And besides, if they weren't always an uncertain quantity, where would be the spice of life out there? One might as well be in a broker's office. But I don't like your westernised Eastern," he said, with a change of tone, and took a first long step upon the downward way.

Aspasia skipped on before him.

"Well, we're a pretty queer lot down there, in the Old Ancient House," she cried, in her high merry pipe. "What with the Thug plotting—I know he's a Thug, whatever you may say, and I know he's plotting," she gave her companion a challenging blink of her bright eye; "and what with crazy old Mary, who's lived so long in this old hollow that she's positively part of the timber and plaster of the house, and can hear the very stones talk. By the way, she's more creepy than ever now, and swears that her pet ghosts are walking with extra vigour. And what with Jani, running about after Aunt, with her dog eyes and poor chattering teeth! Nothing will ever make me believe that Jani has got a soul. And then, my

poor aunt herself, with her hyper-what-you-call-'ems, and Runkle bombarding her with telegrams which she don't even notice, and which I have to answer as best I may. I say," said Aspasia, stopping reflectively, "there will be a fine row, I tell you, soon! For if I know Runkle, he'll pounce, one of these days. And Aunt Rosamond; well, you see for yourself what she is just now. Positively there's only you and I that are sane."

She sprang on again, to look back at him over her shoulder and laugh like a schoolgirl.

His eyes sank before hers. Could she but have guessed on the brink of what ignoble madness he—the sane man—was standing!

CHAPTER X

"How rosy you look!" said Lady Gerardine.

"I've been driving Major Bethune in the cart. And the pony went like an angel on four legs," said Aspasia. "I suppose the wind caught my face."

She pressed the back of her hands to her cheeks, as she spoke, and her eyes danced above them. It was the rose of happiness and no evanescent wind bloom that glowed in her innocent childish countenance.

Women's glances are cruelly quick to read the tender secrets of each other's souls. Lady Gerardine's look hardened as she still fixed the girl; her own wounded inconsequent heart was suddenly aflame with anger against her. Not a fortnight ago had Aspasia been setting flowers before the portrait of Harry English and offering, in passionate love, melodies to that mystic presence. And it had been sufficient that this Bethune's everyday substantiality should show itself, for the fickle creature to change allegiance. She had dared to think she loved Harry English, and now she dared to desecrate this love!

They were in the drawing-room waiting the summons for lunch. Bethune had not yet appeared. With an air of embarrassment very foreign to her, Baby tossed off her hat and coat and moved restlessly to the piano. She wished pettishly, to herself, that her aunt would stop staring. But nothing could drive the lustre from her own eyes and the upward tilt from her lips. She had had such a lovely drive over the wet downs; they had watched the scolding, stamping squirrel in the hazel copse. His dark face had brightened so often. His gaze had rested on her so gently now and again. When he got down to open the wicket gate

for her he had gathered a little pale belated monthly rose from the bush at the side, and had given it to her. She would always keep it, always.... Her fingers strayed unconsciously over the keys from one harmony to another. They fell into a familiar theme—the Chopin Prelude, with its sobbing rain-beat accompaniment. She forgot Lady Gerardine and her dry hostile tones, her cold violating look. Following the strong pinions of her art, her young emotions had begun to beat tentative wings, when she was brought down to earth, as once before, very suddenly and with no pleasant shock.

“Whom is your music addressed to now, Aspasia?” asked Lady Gerardine, leaning over towards her with folded arms on the piano.

The musician’s fingers dropped from the notes.

“To nobody that belongs to you!” she cried rudely, with a flare of schoolgirl anger. Her face crimsoned.

Lady Gerardine’s gaze was filled with a lightning contempt. She straightened herself and looked at the empty space on the wall, where Harry English’s portrait had hung.

“In truth,” she said, “my dear, you don’t take long to change.”

Her voice was scornful.

Quite taken aback and in a hot rage, Aspasia bounced up from the music-stool. But before a coherent word could relieve her, Major Bethune came in upon them.

When her anger had somewhat cooled down—never a lengthy process with Aspasia—she began to feel a sort of wonder at herself. What, indeed, had become of the pale, gallant ghost that she had set up to worship in the shrine of her heart? Gone, gone after the way of ghosts, before the first ray of real sunshine—Bethune’s hand-clasp, his softened glance, his rare smile. With the realisation of her own fickleness came another, so overwhelming in its suggestion, that all else was swept away by it. She was in love! ... In love for the first time, really, unmistakably, Aspasia Cuninghame, who had meant to devote her whole life to her art.

Bethune wondered, in his blundering masculine way, what blight had fallen in the little dining-room, to render their wontedly harmonious meeting of the three at meals so constrained that day.

But when, later, Lady Gerardine and her niece found themselves once more alone, the memory of her curious resentment seemed to have faded from the elder woman’s mind, to have been erased by a fresh tide of thought, as footprints on the sands are washed away by the waves.

Old Mary had been with her in the gloaming; old Mary, with her tender memories of the dead past, her mystic whispers of present hauntings.

“Eh, ma’am, he’s been very near to us, these days,” she said. “Last night,

now, I heard his step come down the passage, as plain, as plain as ever I heard anything. I always knew his step among a thousand, ma'am, from a child; a clean, clear step, with never a slur nor a slouch; not as most people walk."

"Oh, Mary," cried Lady Gerardine, a thrill, half exquisite, half terrible, running through her, "why does he come back now?"

"Why, ma'am, it's because of you, I'm thinking," said the old woman, simply. "You're just calling him back to you."

"Oh, Mary!"

"Does that frighten you, ma'am? Doesn't it make you glad? Why, the other evening, they had not lit the lamps yet in the hall, and I felt him pass me—his own presence, just as I feel yours there. Nothing of the grave, of the cold about it, but warm, comfort—Heaven's warmth. Oh, God is good, ma'am! He makes all easy."

"God is good," said Rosamond to herself, weighing the words, as she sat alone. "Is God good?"

And within her some voice of truth answered her: answered that God had been good, even to her; had meant well with her; very well, even in her bereavement, could she but have taken His ruling as these women of Harry's old home.

Thus, when she was found by Aspasia, there was no room in her heart for any lesser thought.

CHAPTER XI

With hands clasped behind his back, head bent, absorbed in thought, the black fan of his beard spreading over the black broadcloth on his breast, the cross-folds of the turban startlingly exotic on top of the fluttering sable garments—the latter pathetically European in intention—an incongruous figure under these bare placid English fruit-trees, Muhammed Saif-u-din came full upon Raymond Bethune.

The sodden grass of the long neglected road had swallowed the sound of their footsteps. For once the Pathan was shaken out of his oriental calm for a brief moment as, suddenly looking up, he found himself within a yard of the officer of Guides.

The guest of the Old Ancient House had strolled out by himself to smoke a solitary meditative pipe in the wild avenue. Seeing Muhammed's flaming head-gear, he had deliberately directed his steps towards him; for Bethune would not

have been that self that India had made him, had he not felt instinctively lured into the company of the Eastern, all degenerate as he chose to consider him. Moreover, the personality of Sir Arthur's secretary baffled him, and Bethune resented being baffled. He fixed his eye keenly upon the Pathan, turned babu.

"Your soul is in the East, Muhammed," said he, addressing him in his own tongue.

The dark face opposite relaxed into a smile, the white teeth flashed, Muhammed made the supple Indian salaam.

"Nay, your honour, my soul is in great England," he said, and would have passed on. But the other arrested him somewhat peremptorily. Muhammed wheeled back and brought his hand to the edge of his turban with a gesture that betrayed the soldier, then drew himself up rigidly.

Under Bethune's long scrutinising look the thin face fell into deep lines of gravity; the large dark eyes, somewhat restless as a rule in their brilliancy, gazed back straight and full. The Englishman's heart kindled as the unconquered spirit of the Pathan seemed to rear itself to meet the cold domination of the conquering race. There was nothing of revolt in the man's look, yet something untameable, he thought. And it pleased him hugely. His mind leaped back to his own "devils of boys" on the mountain sides—eagles and leopards of humanity, as compared with the domestic animals. He ran a loving glance over the Indian's muscular yet lithe proportions: built for strength—for endurance—for the strenuous side of life.

"How comes it, O son of the Mountain," cried he, "that you are not among the Emperor of India's warriors? How come you to bend those eyes over screed and parchment, to cramp that hand round the quill instead of the talwar?"

The florid oriental language came oddly enough in stiff, abrupt British accents from the officer's tongue. The flowing guttural which replied was in marked contrast:

"I have heard it said," answered the secretary, without moving a muscle of his countenance, "that the pen is mightier than the sword."

A sneer, aimed at the Lieutenant-Governor's literary production, trembled on Bethune's lips, but he prudently suppressed it.

"You cannot deceive me, friend," cried he, abruptly; then: "You have flown with the birds of battle and heard the cannon roar, and thought the smell of the powder sweet."

Again the Pathan smiled; and Bethune, watching him, was stirred, he knew not why, as by a glimpse of something at once immeasurably fierce and immeasurably sad.

"Sir," said Muhammed, in slow deliberate English, "I have seen many things; and no man knows where his fate leads him."

"Oh, no doubt!" said Bethune, laughing not very pleasantly. He was irritated with the fellow's impenetrability and his own inability to deal with it.

"And so fate has brought you to a wealthy master," said he, tauntingly; "and you think that this scribbling business will prove worth your while. 'Tis certainly an odd job for a Pathan! ... I trust well paid?"

"I sought the post, sir," said Muhammed. "My master, since he is to be called my master," a sudden fire leaped and died in his eyes, "will no doubt pay me what he owes me. When I come into my own country again, it may be I shall have found it worth my while."

To this the officer made no reply. After a second's pause, Muhammed lifted his hand to his brow once more and moved away on the noiseless turf. Bethune turned to watch the swing of the strange figure through the trees.

"Greed for money, and wily determination to get to lucrative posts in life—ambition to play the European—or—what?" No motive that his sober common sense could accept as a plausible alternative. Yes, his previous impression had been correct; nothing but a desire for self-advancement—nothing but greed and an Eastern cleverness to seek opportunities—animated that splendid bronze, after all! A disappointing specimen to one who loved the warrior race; a specimen of the westernised Eastern—degenerate leopard, with the spirit eliminated and the wiliness twice developed, according to the law of nature that so often strengthens one attribute by the elimination of another.

CHAPTER XII

The old tin box again and the breath of terrible India in this quiet English room. Siege, struggle, treachery, bloodshed, hunger, thirst, and fever, the extremes of heat and cold, the death agony of the young comrade—this was the story it held. The story of the difficult grave dug in the rock; of the inexorable exigency of the moment, the narrow strait for England's honour which could allow no lingering thought for him that was become useless; of the drawing together of the ranks to hide the gap and keep up the long fight. The story of every conceivable distress of the flesh, every sordid misery of the body, every anxiety of the mind; of hopeless outlook, lingering torture. But, above all, the record of the indomitable purpose; of the white and red crossed flag floating high—of the spirit unconquerable, even to death.

Rosamond sat down on the slanting floor, lifted and took into her lap—as a mother may lift her dead child from the cradle—the old leather case that contained in such small compass so great a story; Captain English's papers of the siege. The parcel had been delivered to her even as he had prepared it for her. To the elastic band that clasped it a scrap of paper was still pinned: "For my wife."

And she had never opened it!

All these years his voice had been waiting to speak to her; his own words for her had been there, the last cry of his soul to hers; nay—how did she know?—the message that should have shaped her future. Something of himself that could not die, he had left her, something of himself to go with her through the desolation! But she, the wife so tenderly loved and thought of to the last—she had, as it were, denied herself to his death-bed. She had closed her ears to his dying speech. She had thrust his dear ghost from her. How was it possible for any woman to have been so cruel, so cowardly? How was it possible ... yet it had been!

"It is we who make our dead dead," had said the mourning mother. Rosamond, the wife, had done worse: she had buried what was not yet dead. She had heaped earth upon the lips that still spoke, that she might not feel the sorrow of their last utterance!

When trouble comes it is woman's way, as a rule, to yield herself up to it, to gloat upon her grief, to feed upon tears. She has a fine scorn for man's mode of mourning, so different from hers; for the seeker of distraction, of forgetfulness; for his deliberate shunning of those emotions in which she sinks herself. And yet it may be that this divergence comes less from man's more selfish nature than from the fact that he is a creature of passion, where she is a creature of sentiment; that he knows within himself forces which are to her undreamed of; that her sorrow is as the chill rain that wraps the land and clears in lassitude at last over tender tints, while his sorrow is as the dry convulsion that defaces the earth and rends the foundations of life's whole edifice.

But there are women apart; women who unite with their own innate spirituality the virile capacity of feeling; who can love fiercely and suffer as fiercely. Of such was Rosamond. And she had been called to suffering before her undeveloped girl-nature had had time to lay hold on love. Love and sorrow, they had fallen upon her together, in her ignorant youth, like monstrous angels of destruction. What wonder then that she should have cried out against them and hidden her face! What wonder that she should have shrunk with a sickly terror from her own unplumbed deep capacity for pain!

But no one may deny himself to himself. And the passionate soul makes for passion, be it a Paul or an Augustine! The nemesis of her nature had come upon Rosamond; and she was to be fulfilled to herself, after so many years, at this moment of her woman's maturity, with a handful of relics and the dust and

the smell of the distant Indian fort upon them.

Out of the far far past her love and her sorrow were claiming her—at last.

* * * * *

The logs from the Dorset beech-woods flamed in the queer corner chimney-piece of Harry's attic room. The light flickered on the scattered papers in Rosamond's lap and threw illusive ruddy gleams on the pale hands, on the pale cheek that turned to the glow, yet felt it not.

When she had sat down to read, it was some time still before noon. The December sun crept out between two rain-storms, threw a yellow circle on the boards, marked the shadow of the ivy spray, then paled and passed. The merry logs grew red, grew grey; they fell together with sighs into white ash; and the last creeping flicker of life in the grate sparkled and went out. Below, the placid life of the Old Ancient House jogged its round. Baby's business-like morning music was ground out and caught into the silence. The tinkling bell, that from time immemorial had sounded the homely meal-time gatherings, rang its thin summons up the wooden stairs from the hall. Some one came to the attic door and rattled it against the drawn bolt; knocked and called. And later the stillness of the attic room was troubled again, and Aspasia cried out between petulance and anxiety. So insistent was she that within the room some one answered back at last in a strange hoarse voice of anger. And the steps pattered away, and silence reigned once more.

The rain dried on the window pane, shadows stole forth from the room corners. The air grew cold and colder; a grey dimness settled upon everywhere; the chilling bars of the grate clicked. But still the woman sat by the empty hearth ... reading, reading, reading.

CHAPTER XIII

As Rosamond read, that page of her womanhood which she had hitherto so deliberately kept blank was printed as with a tale of fire. Between those short winter hours, between the leaping of the wood flames and the fall of the cold chill twilight, all that she had cheated her heart of—the tears, the passion, the grief—came upon her like a storm. And fate worked its will.

* * * * *

It's no use mincing matters (wrote Harry English); we are besieged, and the worst of it is, our work's not done. For Cartwright and his good fellows have either fallen into the wily old chief's hands, or are as hotly pressed as we are ourselves. We have been able to get no tidings from him so far. It's rather a joke, isn't it—though a grim one? We started so cocksure of setting him free, and here we are in a trap ourselves. Well, I'm going to try and get this letter through to you, as the Major—we call him the Colonel now—is trying to run another despatch. It will probably be the last for some time, so don't be alarmed, love, if you are long without news. The old fort is sturdy and well placed, and we shan't have even the glory of danger. God keep you.

The letter—in its incredibly soiled and creased cover—was docketed with soldierly neatness: "Brought back by messenger unable to pass."

The rest of the papers in the case were all loose sheets. The earlier of these were carefully dated. But presently this methodic precision was dropped. Most of them seemed to be merely disconnected jottings, at times scarcely more than a phrase or two—as it were the fixing of a passing thought—others, again, a sort of outpouring that covered whole pages: thus, nearly to the end. But the last two sheets were once more inscribed with something of the formality of a document.

I shall write you a sort of journal, and, please God (had begun Harry English), we shall read it together some day. Our poor dusky Mercury came back to us quicker than he left, with a bullet in him. I am troubled at the thought of your suspense, but, from the last letter I got through, you will gather that this state of affairs was not unexpected: the old chief has been too much for us for the moment. But they are warned at headquarters and we may expect relief in our turn any day. We must not be impatient, though, as they'll have a stiff job getting across the snows. Meanwhile we are all for glory here, and are determined to out-guile or out-fight the Khan before anything so common and everyday as a relief takes place. We're a first-class set of fellows, doctor and all complete; the Major's a brick. Our own boys are rocks (as usual), and Leicester has forty Goorkhas that I'd back—well, against anything! Of course there are these Afridis we

can't trust; but they know who's master here. And we've got the old flag, Rosamond—floating grandly like a living thing. We keep up the good old ceremony when running it up at dawn. And you should see the grins flash out on those black faces, when Vane gives his last vicious little twist to the cord in the cleat to make fast for the day! By the way, this business is doing Vane a lot of good. He was a soft pink pulp of a boy, but the little fellow's got pluck, and it's coming out now.

Talking of the flag—last night I was up on the roof, counting the enemy's fires; everything was very still, and I heard the loose line beating fretfully against the staff in the wind: it brought me back—back! Do you remember Fort Monckton, at Stokes Bay, Rosamond, and the smell of the gorse that day of days to me? The night after, when I could not sleep, I walked the bastion at Monckton and heard the cords of the flagstaff flap. I was to meet you again in the morning—Oh, Rosamond!

* * * * *

Great news! Cartwright has fought his way to us with his little band. As fine a bit of mountain fighting as has ever been done. We made a sortie to his aid, and only lost four men and a sergeant. Bethune has a piece out of his shoulder, but no bones broken, and Whiteley thinks he'll be up again in a day or two. It's like having my right hand in a sling to have the old chap laid up.

We've got him tight in bed now; and all the fun he is allowed is to watch the bullets that come in through the window and break on the opposite wall. He's in the safe angle, but it's rather a job for us dodging in and out to get at him.

* * * * *

The poor Major's gone. We feel orphaned. His stout old body seemed to keep the soul of us all together. It was a bullet through the eye. He never even knew it. I was beside him, Rosamond—the laugh was still on his lips. He fell slowly, like a tower. Dear old fat jolly fellow! I won't grudge him his quick passage. Vane has done nothing but blubber. We buried him in the inner courtyard: they sniped from the crags like blazes, but we did it, and no casualties. Tomorrow ends the first week of the siege proper. We have ten men sick, four wounded,

and have lost our major, and all the responsibility devolves upon me now.

* * * * *

Rosamond, you never loved me. I have blinded myself to it. But here, alone in this fort, with death in every breath I draw, many things have become clear to me. This is the truth: you never loved me, but you are still a child. I could have had such patience, oh, my God!—but now I may have no time left for patience.

* * * * *

Rosamond, my rose, I took you before your hour—but I was as one who rides past and sees his flower bloom, and knows that he must pluck it in all haste, to wear on his heart, or leave it for another. I never kissed you but that you turned your cheek. Oh, I could have taken your lips had I wanted to, and I knew it. Now it breaks upon me like a wave, that if God only gave me ten minutes more with you, I could teach you how to love. But no, what is not given is not good to take: I would not rob you of your own gracious gift. Oh, my darling, you wept when I left you, the tears rained down your cheeks into my lips. I kissed your sweet eyes and drank the salt of them, and in that hour of grief you left me your lips at last—but they were open lips, like a child's; what could they give me—who wanted your woman's soul?

* * * * *

The words seemed to spring out of the page; to strike her as she read. She had not loved him. She herself had not known it, but it was true and he had known it. All the blood in her body seemed to rush back to her heart; she felt her cheeks grow cold and stiff in a sudden horror of the discovery. Then, with the reaction, the full tide seemed to turn upon itself and rush tingling through her frame. With a burning face she bent over the lines and read them avidly again—and again. How he had loved her! Ah, she felt what love meant, now! She understood! She was no longer the rigid, self-centered schoolgirl, looking forth on the narrow boundaries of her own ethics and deeming them the limits of life. She was a woman, a woman with a heart for him, for the man who had selected her; a woman with a passion leaping to his own. And he ... he was dead!

No, no; he was not dead, he must not be dead! If she only knew how to reach him.... "It is we who make our dead dead." He must be somewhere. By that very craving of her whole being for him he must exist to answer it. And wheresoever he was, the cry of her soul must surely reach him and call him back to her.

Outside, in the winter sunshine, a robin began to pipe. The exultant beating of her heart slowed down; the eddy that had seized her fell away from her. Her spirit, that had seemed about to be caught up into some realm of ecstasy where pain was inextricably blent with joy, sank back into the material bondage. She heaved a great sigh and languidly took up the next sheet.

After his love cry, Harry English, too, had relapsed into the everyday cares; this entry was dated March 23.

My first act as C.O. here has been to reduce the rations one third. The dear old Major could not bring himself to do it. "We'll have as good a time, boys, as can be expected in the circumstances, and then, by George, if they don't come to get us loose we'll make a rush for it. A man can die but once; but we won't die by inches, if I know it." It was a jolly soldier's doctrine in its way, and had a dash of fatalism in it that suited our lads here down to the ground. But now that I have the management of the business, I cannot see my duty in that light. This fort is but a little peg in England's machinery—but lose a peg and who can tell what may happen to the machine! So your husband holds the fort, Rosamond, and will hold it to the last minute of the last hour, to the last pinch of pea-flour and the last bag of gunpowder to blow the last of us up! And to-day we begin to draw in our belts.

* * * * *

Vane's got a touch of fever. He's never really looked up since the Major went. Poor little chap, he'll see plenty more. It has rained three nights, and the men are drenched. Our sick list is increasing. Old Bethune's getting quite fit again, however, and that's a comfort to me. Queer chap, he lies on his back and reads an odd volume of Browning and hasn't a word to throw to a dog; and, with all his poetry, if I know him, not an aspiration or a thought except his men and his work.

* * * * *

*April 1*st**.—The beginning of a new military year is not likely to add much to our store of anything, except appetite. Old Yufzul, the Khan, has been parleying with us, day after day, for the last week. He rigs up his blessed white rag, and up goes ours, and then comes the messenger—generally an aged woman, with one of the old devil’s interminable letters. These never vary. He’s ready to make the most favourable terms with us. First condition: surrender of the fort.... I send him back the same document with a polite note affixed—we keep all the decorum of civilised warfare! My conditions are simple: first, he is to lay down his arms unconditionally; then he is to send us in so many scores of sheep, so many measures of corn, and then I will see what I can do about making his peace with the Government of India. I end up with a delicate warning as to the flight of time. Down comes his rag, down comes ours, and the bullets begin to patter again!

The doctor has a bad opinion of Vane. He says he has no stamina. I never saw any one waste so quickly. Poor little chap, and I who used to think him too pink and too plump! Leicester, the fellow, you know, we found in the fort here with his forty Goorkhas, goes and nurses him like a woman, in the intervals of business. I went to see him to-day—Vane, I mean. He seemed very low, but quite conscious. I thought I worried him, so did not stop long. Leicester tells me he’s deadly ashamed of himself for being ill, and thinks I must despise him. Good Lord!

Bethune’s up.

* * * * *

*April 3*rd**.—My sleep has gone. That’s a weak thing for a soldier to have to confess. But I’m tough. I’ve got into the way of writing like this in the quiet hours. Not that night is always our quiet time, far from it. A black night is our worst enemy. We never know when the creatures will try and rush the fort. Last night we had a lively two hours of it, but I think they’ve had a lesson, and Rajab, my havildar, has suggested a plan for lighting the walls with pitch on little plat-forms hung out of the loopholes. If it works, we shan’t be taken by surprise again.

* * * * *

We buried poor little Vane this morning. Whiteley came to me at

eight o'clock last night and said he did not think he'd last out another twelve hours. I went to see him about eleven o'clock, but was no sooner in the room when they called the alarm from the tower—and we had a hot time of it. Our men were splendid, and I am thankful to say our casualties are comparatively few. Leicester made a sally with his Goorkhas, splendidly in the nick, and that settled the day, or rather the night, for us. There's been a good deal of wailing across the water this morning, at which you should see those little devils smile. In fact, the whole garrison would be in high spirits if it were not for Vane. Last night every one, even the orderly in charge, ran away from him in the scrimmage. I thought of this, I knew it would be so, but, of course, we can't waste time on the dying at such a time. The moment the pressure was over I clambered up to his room. The dawn was just breaking; there he was, lying on the boards under the window. Poor little beggar! flat on his back, in his pyjamas, his carbine by his side. He'd been potting at them out of his window, he was not gone, though. He opened his eyes and grinned at me.

"I'm done for, sir," he said. "But it's not the fever. I'm hit, thank God!"

I lifted him up. Poor little chappy, he had a scratch along his ribs, but it would not have killed a mouse! "You'll tell them," he said, "it was the wound, not the fever."

"I'll have you down: 'Killed in action,'" said I, loud into his ear. And he heard, though he was slipping away very fast. He grinned at me again, and then died without a sigh, his head on my breast, like a child.

This is the fifth week of siege.

* * * * *

I am haunted by your presence. We all dream a great deal when we sleep, these times. That's part of the game when one is half-starved. The fellows amuse themselves by telling their dreams at breakfast. It's almost like: "What's the news?" when one meets at the club.

Bethune makes every one laugh: he's so deadly matter-of-fact, "I dreamed I was sitting down to a Porterhouse steak!" You should hear the boys yell! Leicester, now, yarns away at a magnificent rate. Of course it's half invention; he's a real Irishman; but he keeps us alive. It's as good as a mutton chop to us to see him come dancing into mess—such a mess!—twanging his banjo and singing some absurd lilt

of his own making.

"You see, boys," he says, with a piece of horse on his fork; "to a fellow brought up on 'potatoes and point,' this is positively gorgeous!"

But I don't tell my dreams, Rosamond. They are yours and mine.

* * * * *

Once you looked at me with fear in your eyes. It was on board ship. I think if I had ever seen that shadow in your beautiful eyes again, I should have had it in me to throw myself into the sea. Oh! what could you fear in me, Rosamond?

* * * * *

It has been snowing again on the heights. I pity those who try to conquer the snow. You take it to your arms and try to warm it, and it goes from you in tears. Rosamond, you have been like the snow to me. How could I have ever aspired to you?—white child!

I think I am wandering—you are the rose-flower to me. My white rose—no! my red red rose—Rose of the World!

* * * * *

If they are coming over the snows to relieve us, it will go hard with them. Were it only not to disappoint the brave fellows, I'll hold on; but we are pulling the belt pretty tight. The worst of it is, I feel so terribly alive; I'll take as much killing as a wild cat. I have so much to live for: I have to come back to you! I can make such a fight for it yet. Rosamond, if I have to die, I'll die hard. Now Bethune will be like an old dog fox; he'll sit on his tail and show his teeth and let them have their will at the end without a sound—but I'll fight!

* * * * *

I dream, I dream. Rosamond, you came to me last night. First I saw the grey gnarled boughs of the old orchard trees at home grow, as it were, out of the darkness, naked as in the winter time. They broke into lovely leaf and blossom even as I looked ... and then, loveliest

flower of all, flowered your face among the rosy wreaths! You had a lace thing over your head, tied under the chin, and you were smiling and your cheeks were young and soft, your face was young and beautiful, but as I came close to you I saw that your hair—your golden hair—was white. I looked into your eyes, deep, deep, and they were wells of love. There was no fear of me in them, Rosamond, only love. And then we drew nearer and nearer to each other. And your lips met mine. Your lips—Rose of the World!

It was a dream of inexpressible sweetness to me and inexpressible comfort. When I woke up I had a perfume as of red roses in my mouth. I have riddled it all out for myself. I take it to mean that we shall, in spite of everything, meet again, and that I shall love you till you are old, and your hair is white, and that to me, because of our love, you will always be lovely in youth.

* * * * *

The want of you comes over me like fire, and I feel the marrow fail me in my bones.

* * * * *

Perhaps it is because you are the only woman I ever knew, that I love you so madly. Was it the influence of my dear old mother's high and simple theory of life, or was it by reason of my own energetic ambition of work and utility in this world, or is it merely some innate fastidiousness? ... However it may be, I have never played with love. I never kissed a woman in love before I kissed you. Ah no, love, it was not for any of those reasons—it was because I was keeping myself for you! And now this single passion of my life is devouring me. I dreamed you lay on my heart last night.

* * * * *

Rosamond raised her eyes, to look unseeingly at the plaster walls before her. The ignorant thing that had been Rosamond English, that once had had such treasure given her, and knew it not; she had but placed her hand in his as a lost child places her hand in that of the first kind stranger who will lead her out of the desolate wood. Hers had been a privilege so rare that, to the eyes of the world, it seems to be a thing impossible—a man's virgin love. Too often had Lady Gerardine seen a

meaning smile, under a white moustache, on lips that recalled complacently "the little indiscretions of my youth"; too much had she seen herself, unwillingly, of the lives of the young men about her in the Residency not to realise this now. But then—Harry had been right—she had feared him, feared this strong and chaste passion, feared these virgin ardours; feared the man who had brought her his whole heart, whose eyes had never even looked on sin.

* * * * *

There was a great silence about her. The fire was dead; the day was closing in; the robin had flown away. Extinct hearth, bleak falling twilight, empty room, silence itself seemed to cry to her with one great voice: "Too late ... too late!"

And the gloom and the desolation of the deserted old house, on the waste English downs, were fit accompaniments to the slow agony in that fort, clinging on the bare flank of Himalayan crags, far away, under the eternal snows; agony over now and world-forgotten, but re-enacted for her alone, who had refused herself at the right hour to her share in it.

CHAPTER XIV

Despondency was beginning to creep over even Harry English's dauntless spirit: in the next sheet Rosamond took up—she had to peer closer now in the gathering dusk—for the first time he expressed doubt of their reunion.

You will go back to England (he wrote). You will go to the old Mother. My poor girl, I feel as if I had broken your life. But you are young and she is very strong. She will take you to that deep heart of hers, where I have been so well all my life; and you will both always remember that it is for England. And if you forget me, oh Rosamond, my Rosamond, you are young, you will forget!—no, I will write no more in this strain.... I won't bind you; but there are things that a man in his living flesh cannot regard without rebellion, whatever his sense of justice may tell him. The dead will be quiet. Sometimes I think I am a little mad.

* * * * *

You will like to know how this old place looks that you have, all unconsciously, filled with your presence these days, these nights....

The valley is set in a sort of scoop between the mountains, and all round there are the peaks, snow-covered. The river runs brawling from east to west, where the plateau is narrowed between the two huge buttresses of rock which almost close the valley; the water falls there a pretty good height, and on quiet nights one can hear the churn of the rapids. The fort is built on the right bank, and on that side we are safe from attack, as the ledges are very precipitous. It is thus too we get our water, our salvation. But this is becoming increasingly difficult, in spite of our trenches, as the fellows over there are getting to know the range pretty closely.

The valley is beginning to grow beautifully green, but the rocks above and all about are grey and drab and arid all the year round, and the snows never pass. It is over the snows our help must come. In our courtyard we have an almond tree, in blossom. I think of you, of your face under the bridal veil.

* * * * *

The flag, Rosamond, the old flag! What creatures we are with our symbols! So long as the spirit is enclosed in the flesh, so long must we grope in our efforts of expression. You can't conceive what this rag means to us, riddled with bullets, bleached, dragged! ... We are all in high spirits to-day. I doubt if even a score of fat sheep could have so cheered the garrison as our half-hour tussle on the roof, and the triumphant fact that the flag was not lowered, even for an instant. They gave us a hot time between seven and eight this morning; two or three of our best were bowled over, and I saw that our fellows had lost heart a bit—there's just a bad moment, Rosamond, between the glory of the fight and the last desperation; and that's a dangerous moment! Well, as if the fates were against us, the flagstaff was struck, repeatedly, and all at once, in the thick of it, we heard it crack and saw it bend. There was not a man but turned his head. Rosamond, that flag's their fetish! It's astonishing how quickly one can take in a thing at an instant like that. I seemed to see all at once the change that swept over the dark faces. You know how the whole aspect of a field of corn can be changed in a moment by a puff of wind. I made

one spring for the breaking pole and caught it just in time. And then I held it high, as high as I could, crying out to them in such a flood of Hindustani as never fell from my lips before. God knows what I said, or didn't say! But they can do with a lot of talk, these boys of ours. I must have looked like a madman, I know I felt like one. One gets sort of light-headed in the fight, now and again. I felt as if I were growing taller, as if the old flag were lifting me up higher and higher. The bullets played about us like spray, and not one hit me. As for the boys—well, my madness got into them somehow—they fell to like devils; they shot like angels; it was as if magic wine had been poured into them. I don't suppose even the oldest soldier among us had seen anything like it before. We made a record score, I can tell you!

Now it's over, I look back and think that we were all possessed. But it's had a useful effect on the Khan and his tribes, for they had the worst of that hour, and the flag was not lowered, not an inch. I never let it out of my hands till a new pole had been spliced on—a stout one, you may be sure. And this is a happy garrison to-day. You should hear the Goorkhas jabbering and laughing over their half-ration of rice. We have served out extra rum. They've drunk the great white Empress's health, and are quite sure now that anything belonging to her must be safe.

As for me, the poor superstitious creatures have begun to regard me as a small god; they think I bear a charmed life. Rosamond, if that flag had fallen, there is no knowing if we could have held the men. And if we'd lost the fort, I should never have seen you again, for we four Englishmen could not let it go before our lives. The fellows are all kicking up an idiotic fuss about my share in the business—it makes a man feel such a fool to be made a hero of for nothing. Rosamond, did I even do my duty? Then, even then, upholding my country's flag, the fury of my thoughts was all with you: If the flag falls I shall never see her again—that was what I was saying to myself. God knows I am no hero.

* * * * *

No hero!

Rosamond's heart was beating high, her eye had kindled, her cheek was glowing. Was he not a hero? Her Harry. She could see him towering in his strength—the "archangel" of Bethune's description; the born leader, stimulating

his starving men to unheard-of valour!

* * * * *

But the end was drawing near. She must read on. The darkness had gathered so close that she had to light a candle and put it beside her on the floor. This she did mechanically, hardly aware of her own action—so bent upon her single thought. The handwriting had become irregular; it sprawled upon the page.

The hunger is nothing, it's the thirst! People who slowly starve can bear hunger, but thirst is an active devil. They've found an enfilading spot commanding our trench to the water. We lost three men in succession two days ago. Dug all day yesterday to strike a well, no success. To-day it's gone hard with us. Last night, I think I'd a touch of fever; you were so mixed up in my mind with my thirst that it seemed to me it was the want of you made me suffer so much. I found myself, found my dry tongue, calling for you, clamouring out loud in the silence. Ah, there are miles and miles of mountains between us!

This is worse than death.

* * * * *

They've heliographed from the hills; the relief is in sight. They've had an awful time in the snows, and half the fellows are blind. They will have to recoup a bit before they can strike. But they have guns and that ought to settle it. Meanwhile we can't wait—we're going to run up a fresh trench to the water, if we lose twenty men by it.

* * * * *

The job is done. Leicester managed it splendidly with less loss than we expected. But he's got a nasty wound in the hip. We've got water again—Rosamond, Rosamond, when will you hold the cup for me to drink?

The first gun went to-day. They haven't got to the right spot yet, but such as it was the shooting flustered the ant-hill down there, finely. For two days Yufzul has left us in peace, and meanwhile the guns on the hill get closer and pound away. But the enemy shows no

sign of packing yet. The Khan is a tough old boy; we'll have a tussle for it yet. They've flashed to say they are ready up there. We shall co-operate.

This last sheet but one was dated April 15, 8 A.M.

The next entry was marked 3 P.M. of the same day.

In measure as the relief approaches, I know not why, my hopes go down. Rosamond—oh, if I should never see you again! What will you do with your life? You will have my mother, though that may not be for long, and there is enough to keep you both from want, thank God, under the roof of the Old Ancient House. Go to her there; at least for the first. And then and then—I won't bind you.

If we had had a child you would be more mine!

I wish we had another night, even in this trap of death. I might perhaps dream of you once more. The dead won't dream. Perhaps that is best. What if we should never meet again!

Rosamond's breath came short, shudders ran through her. She laid down in its turn this record of the fever of a man's mind and took up the last sheet. The last sheet! This was, indeed, the end! It was dated, carefully written without any of the wildness or disjointedness of the previous entries. The strong man on the verge of action would do all things as became a soldier, even to his final letter to his beloved.

Rosamond, my wife, I have decided to lead the counter-attack myself to-night. Leicester is incapacitated. Bethune's head is stronger than mine, now, and should the suspense be longer delayed and the relief fail, he will make a better job of it than I should here. Yufzul shows no sign of budging, and we begin to suspect he is reckoning on fresh reinforcements. Do not think that I should throw away that life which belongs to you without just reason. When you get this letter (perhaps after all I shall come back to-night to tear it up) you will know that I went out with the full acceptance of the inevitable.

God keep you, Rosamond! My mother taught me to believe. I could not have remembered her all these years of manhood and

forgotten my God. And to-night I am strong. What is to be, will be right. I kneel before you and I kiss your sweet hands, and I bless you.—Your HARRY.

The woman read and dropped the letter on her lap. Was that all? The end, the end! It was impossible. He could not have left her like that. There must be more from him. One word, one last word. And she did not even know how he died. There was no God, or life could not be so cruel!

She was tearing, with maddened fingers, in the depths of the box.... Why will women hoard the orange blossom of their bridal hopes that it may torture them with its hideous relentless sweetness, when fate has fulfilled its mockery upon them!

Harry's pocket-book—the familiar old pocket-book! It fell apart in her hands. A portrait.... Her own face looked out on her with serious girl's eyes. She flung it from her: she had nothing in common with that creature. Then she caught it up again and kissed the worn leather with wild passion. Dear fingers had touched it. He had worn it, who knows, over his dear heart.... Plans, service notes—"range to the shoulder of the North Bluff works out at 1300." Lists of stores, calculations of stores and rations, gone over and over again. Oh, misery, there is sorrow beyond what human strength can bear! To think of him in these sordid straits of hunger, to stay on that thought is more than she can do and live. And she cannot die yet: she must know first.

Ah! a letter, still in its envelope inviolate, addressed to Mrs. Harry English. Not his the hand. Oh, then, it is that he is dead now indeed! Broken woman with her belated grief, what wonder that her brain should work confusedly!

It was Mrs. English in very truth—fresh widowed, her boding heart telling her, but too surely, what last bitter detail she would find in this stranger's letter—who broke the seal at last after so many years.

DEAR MRS. ENGLISH,—We have wired to your friends to break the bad news to you. You will want to hear all about it. I suppose you know by this time, broadly speaking, what happened to us. We were hard pressed. The relief force—worn out by the march across the snows—was not strong enough to take the hill, which was the key of the position, unassisted. It was agreed that we should co-operate. English insisted on taking charge of the party. We all knew it was a forlorn-hope business, and the men had a superstitious feeling about him; with any one else they would not have gone with the same spirit.

It was an hour before dawn, and the fight went on till sunrise. We—such of us as were left in the fort, hardly an able-bodied man except myself and Whiteley, the surgeon—did not know which way it was going with us till dawn, when we found the enemy in retreat. Then our men and the relief party came straggling in; none of us were up to pursuit, and we began to count our loss. English had saved us with his life. He had succeeded in capturing and holding the post on the hill, completely occupying the enemy's attention, until the guns of the relief force came down upon their flank. It was carried through by a stroke of genius, but it was absolute sacrifice. Only a third of his splendid fellows have come back to us—and English is gone.

His jemadar saw him fall (he swears it must have been instant death) amid the Ghasi swordsmen, and then in the rush they were swept apart. Mrs. English, you have the right to know the complete truth. We have been unable to recover any of our dead or wounded. The enemy carried them away; and, as we watched them in their retreat, we saw them strip the dead and roll them over the crags into the rapids. We shall not have Harry English's grave—but would he have desired a better one than the great cold mountain waters, in the desolate valley, utmost boundary of that Empire whose honour he died for? He will live in the hearts of his countrymen. To you I dare not offer any other words of consolation. What he was to us, these days of trial, I have no power to express. Without him we should have come badly through this business. What he was to me—forgive me, I can write no more. All his papers I have placed together. They will be brought to you with this letter. His last letter to his mother was mailed to England.—Yours truly,

RAYMOND BETHUNE.

Rosamond stared. Raymond Bethune.—So it was he who wrote. She had not recognised his hand.

Stupidly she sat, stunned. Then the wave gathered, reared itself and broke upon her, overwhelming, drenching her with waters of irremediable bitterness! Dead—he was dead—she had lost him. He had suffered hunger and thirst and fever, and longing for her and anguish of mind, and doubt; he had been hacked with swords, his beloved body had been dragged over the rocks, flung bleeding, perhaps still quick, into the swirling flood. But all this was nothing. All they had worked upon him was nothing compared with what she, his chosen one, had done! Faithless, betrayer of his love, what part could Lady Gerardine have with

anything of Harry English? Even Bethune, even that cold, hard man, had been one with the old stricken mother in loyalty of grief. "He will live in the hearts of his countrymen." It was his wife who had thrust him away among the dead, to be forgotten.

"It is we who make our dead dead." For her now he must always be dead. On earth and in heaven alike she had lost him. What meeting could there ever be for her and him again, since she had given herself to another man; since she had willed him dead, in her cowardice; in base self-indulgence refused her soul to the dear and holy sorrow of his living memory?

She flung herself face downwards among his papers. No tears came to her relief, no blessed unconsciousness. For her there was no God; for her there could be no heaven, naught was left her but the hell of her own making!

CHAPTER XV

Three times since that first fruitless summons to lunch had Aspasia come to the door of the attic. Twice, with the engaging practicality of her nature, she had carried up a little tray. She would fain minister to a mind diseased, with soup or with tea, knowing no better medicine. Each time, however, her gentle knocking, her coaxing representations through the keyhole, had produced not the least response. But the girl's ear had caught the rustling of papers within; and, satisfied that there was nothing worse than one of her aunt's moods to account for the persistently closed door and the silence, she had withdrawn with her offering, more irritated, perhaps, than anxious.

Now, however, as she knocked and rattled at the handle and implored admittance, there was a double pressure of anxiety upon her; the demands of unexpected events without, and a new, deathlike stillness within.

"Oh, dear," cried Baby, "what shall I do, what shall I do!"

She thought of summoning Major Bethune to her aid; but shrank, with the repugnance of some unformed womanly reticence.

"I must get in," she said to herself, desperately; and flung all her young vigour against the door. To her joy, the socket of the bolt yielded with unexpected ease. She fell almost headlong into the room, and then stood aghast. There lay Lady Gerardine, prone on the floor, among the strewn papers, the flickering candle by her side.

For a second the girl's heart stopped beating. The next moment she could have cried aloud with joy. Rosamond had not even fainted; but, as she raised herself and Baby saw the face that was turned to her, the girl realised that here was hardly an occasion for thanksgiving; and her own lips, trembling upon a tremendous announcement, were struck silent.

"Oh, my poor darling!" cried she, catching the stricken woman in her arms, "what is it?"

With a moan, as of physical pain, Rosamond's head dropped on her niece's shoulder.

"You're cold, you're worn out," said the girl. "Those dreadful letters, and this place like an ice-house! Aunt Rosamond, darling—" She chafed the cold hands vigorously as she spoke. "You must be starved, too. Oh, and I don't know how to tell you! Let me bring you down to your own room—there's tea waiting for you, and such a fire! Aunt Rosamond, you must rouse yourself. Here, I'll put these papers by."

The one thing that could stir Rosamond from her torpor of misery was this.

"Don't touch them," she said. Her toneless voice seemed to come from depths far distant. She laid her wasted hands over the scattered sheets, drawing them together to her bosom; and then, on her knees, fell again into the former state of oblivion of all but her absorbing pain.

Frenzied with impatience and the urgency for action, Baby now blurted out the news which the sight of Lady Gerardine's drawn countenance caused her to withhold:

"Runkle's come!"

The woman kneeling half turned her head. A change passed over her rigid countenance.

"Yes; Runkle's here," went on Baby, ruthlessly, raising her voice as if speaking to the deaf. "Uncle Arthur is here; he has come over in a motor—a party of them. Aunt Rosamond, your husband is here."

A long shudder shook the kneeling figure. It was as if life returned to its work; and, returning, trembled in nausea from the task before it. A deep sullen colour began to creep into Lady Gerardine's white cheek. She bent over the gaping box and dropped into it her armful of papers. Then she looked over her shoulder at Aspasia, and drew down the lid.

"My husband! ... My husband is dead," she said.

The girl's blood ran cold. Had the hidden terror taken shape at last? The words were mad enough; yet it was the fierce light in Rosamond's eyes that seemed most to signal danger.

But Aspasia was not timid, and she was not imaginative. And Lady Gerardine's next action, the cry which escaped her lips, at once pierced to every tender

helpful instinct of the girl's heart, and banished the paralyzing fear.

"Oh, Baby," cried she, springing to her feet and stretching out her arms in hopeless appeal, "what have I done? What is to become of me?"

Once more Baby's arms were about her. Baby, great in the emergency, was pouring forth consolation, expostulation, counsel.

"Look here, Aunt Rosamond; it's really only for a little while; you'll have to show, you know, but they can't stay. Their blessed motor broke down, or something, and they ought to have been here hours ago. Now they can only stop for a cup of tea, if they are to get back to-night. You must just pull yourself together for half an hour—just half an hour, Aunt Rosamond! Leave me to manage. All you've got to do is to smile a bit, and let Runkle do the talking. They want us all to go to Melbury Towers to-morrow, Major Bethune and everybody. That's what they've come over for."

Lady Gerardine put the girl from her roughly.

"I'm not going there," she said.

"Of course not," said wise Baby, soothing. "But we must put him off somehow. To-morrow you can be ill or something. Do, Aunt Rosamond, darling, be sensible. Don't make things harder. For Heaven's sake don't let us have a row—that would be worse than anything! I know you're not well enough to stand poor old Runkle just now; it's your dear nerves. But just for half an hour—for the sake of being free of him. Oh, Aunt, you used to be so patient! Come, they'll be in upon us in one minute. Luckily they've all been busy over that machine, pulling its inside to pieces. Come to your room, now, and have your tea and tidy a bit. And I'll keep them at bay, till you are ready."

She half dragged, half led Lady Gerardine to the warm shelter of her own room. She stood over her till the prescribed tea had been taken; then, hearing the Old Ancient House echo to the footsteps of its unexpected visitors, she announced her intention of running to look after them.

"I've told Runkle already that you've a beastly headache," she cried, with her cheerful mendacity. "I won't let him up here, never fear; but I'll come and fetch you down, when I've started them on Mary's scones. If you just do your hair a bit—Lord, there goes six o'clock, they can't stay long, that's one blessing!"

Left to herself, with the stimulating comfort of the tea doing its work upon her weary frame, Lady Gerardine viewed her position with some return to calmness. This odious burden that she had laid upon herself, she must lift it awhile once more; and it should be for the last time. She who for years had played the hypocrite placidly would play it now again though the tempest raged within her. For the future she must have time. Before she could act, she must think. For this present sordid moment—the child was right—there must be no scandal; above all not here, in this sacred house of his, where even she, unworthy, had recognised

the presence of the dead.

She sat down before the mirror and shook her long hair loose.

The sound of voices, of laughter, rose confusedly from the drawing-room below. She set her teeth as the well-known note of Sir Arthur's insistent bass distinguished itself from the others. How had she endured it for five years?

Doors were slammed, and then, the light thud of Baby's footsteps scurrying hither and thither like a rabbit; her calls in the passage brought a vague smile to Lady Gerardine's lips.

Up to a certain point only is the human organisation capable of pain. After that comes the respite of numbness. Rosamond was numbed now. Mind and heart alike refused to face the point of agony; only the most trivial thoughts could occupy her brain. Idly she pulled the comb through the warm gold of her hair; idly she weighed which would be the least effort to her weary limbs, that of twisting up those tresses herself or rising to ring the bell for Jani.

Presently her eyes wandered to the portrait that hung just over her dressing-table. She shifted both candlesticks to one side to throw their light full upon it.

Baby came in as upon the wings of a gust of wind.

"The most dreadful thing," she panted, in a flurried whisper; arrested herself in her canter across the room, and plunged back to shut the open door; "my poor, poor darling: they're going to stay the night!"

Lady Gerardine flung apart the girl's arms as if the embrace strangled her. Their eyes met in the mirror. Then the woman shot a glance round the room, a glance so desperate that the other, child as she was, could not but understand.

"Oh, you're safe—safe for the moment anyhow," she blurted out; "I've been lying like Old Nick. I said you'd just taken a phenacetin, and that if you were disturbed now you wouldn't be fit to lift your head all the evening. But you'll have to come down to dinner; you can get bad again afterwards, can't you? Runkle's quite injured already. He's been having such a jolly time lately; he thinks it harder than ever on him that you should still be ill. And Lady Aspasia—"

"Lady Aspasia," repeated the other, mechanically.

"Yes, that abominable woman with the ridiculous name, she's there! And Dr. Châtelard; you remember, the pudgy Frenchman? We've got to house them all somewhere, and to feed them. It's desperate—"

Aspasia checked her speech; for Lady Gerardine had risen from her chair with an abrupt movement and stood staring blankly into the mirror.

Poor Aspasia had had sufficient experience already of her aunt's moods, but this singular attitude affected the girl in so unpleasant a fashion that she felt as if she ought to shake the staring woman, pinch her, shout at her, do anything to call her out of this deadly torpor!

"Aunt Rosamond," she cried, raising her voice sharply in the hope of catching the wandering attention, "I've told Sarah about the rooms, and ordered fires to be lit; and I've seen Mary about the dinner. The poor Old Ancient House, Runkle's crabbing it already like anything! But we'll show them it can be hospitable, won't we?"

"Yes," said Rosamond, "yes." The hectic colour deepened on her cheek. The widened unseeing pupil contracted with a flash of answering light. "Baby, you're a good child. It shall give the right hospitality—his house."

Aspasia drew a deep sigh of relief.

"Mary thinks she can have dinner in an hour," she said. "Oh Lord, what a piece of business! And—and you'll come down, won't you?"

She rubbed her coaxing cheek against her aunt's shoulder.

"Yes. I'll come down."

"I'll dress you," said Baby, her light heart rising buoyantly under what seemed such clearing skies. She nodded. "Oh, dear, I've such a desperate lot of things to do! There's the wine." She slapped her forehead. "I'd forgotten the wine." And the door closed violently behind her tempestuous petticoat. As a companion to a neurasthenic patient Miss Cuninghame no doubt had her weak points.

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Rosamond sank slowly back in her chair; her hand fell inertly before her.

When the girl returned after an hour's exceeding activity the elder woman's attitude had not altered by a fraction. But the exigency of time and social requirements left Aspasia no leisure now to linger over doubts and fears. Her own cheeks were pink from rapid ablutions; her crisp hair stood out more vigorously than ever after determined manipulation. She pealed a bell for Jani, and fell herself upon the golden mass covering Lady Gerardine's shoulders, her chattering tongue in full swing:

"Of course, the poor wretches are in their motor garments. (You never saw anything like Runkle in a pony skin and goggles. He's more motist than the chauffeur.) So I've only just stuck on a blouse, you see. But I've determined you shall be beautiful in a tea-gown. Lord, I'd no idea Lady Aspasia was so tremendous! I want you simply to be beautiful!"

Deft hands twisted and coiled.

"It was Runkle, you know, who broke the motor: he insisted on driving and jammed them sideways in a gate. He's awfully pleased with himself. It's Lady Aspasia's motor. She calls Runkle, Arty: what do you think of that? Ah, here's Jani. Which shall it be—the white and gold? I love the white and gold, Aunt

Rosamond.”

”Black—black,” said Rosamond.

CHAPTER XVI

Sir Arthur came down the shallow oaken stairs, after his necessarily exiguous toilet, a prey to distinct dudgeon. He had been whirled away upon this expedition by the impetuosity of Lady Aspasia, somewhat against his will in the first place. That he, Sir Arthur Gerardine, should have to come in quest of his wife, instead of the latter obediently hieing her at his summons, was a breach of the world’s decorum as he understood it personally. That his wife should have a headache and have partaken of phenacetin coincidentally upon his arrival; that she should evidently (and by a thousand tokens the unwelcome fact was forced upon him) be still in her uncomfortable hyperæsthetic neurasthenic state of health was a want of consideration for his feelings of which no dutiful spouse should have been guilty; and, moreover, this condition of things was woefully destructive of all comfort in the connubial state. He positively dared not insist upon seeing her at once. Absurd as the situation was, he must await her pleasure; for, with Lady Aspasia present, the danger of fainting fits or hysterics could not be risked. Not that he wanted to blame Rosamond unduly, poor thing; but it really was not what he had a right to expect.

These natural feelings of displeasure were heightened by the trifling deprivations caused by his stranded condition. He could not feel his usual superb and superior self coming down to dinner in a serge suit, his feet in heavy outdoor shoes. Then, the poor surroundings, the very feeling of the noisy oak boards instead of a pile carpet under these same objectionable soles, offended him at every step. He was ashamed that Lady Aspasia should find such a ”pokey” place. It was by no means a fit habitation for the wife of Sir Arthur Gerardine.

He had hurried down before the others, impelled by his restless spirit. The hall was empty. He took a bustling survey. How faded was the strip of Turkey carpet! God bless his soul, how worm-eaten were those square oak chests, presses, and cupboards, and how clumsy—only fit for a cottage! And that portrait, just under the lamp—poor English, he supposed? A regular daub, anyhow; why, he could see the brush marks! He wondered Rosamond could have it up.

He opened a door on the right and peeped in. All was dark within. He was

assailed by an odour of tobacco smoke, and sniffed with increasing discontent. This visit of Bethune's, now, which had prevented Rosamond from hurrying to his side, was there not something irregular, not to say ... well, fishy about the situation? It was odd, now he came to think of it, that Rosamond should never have mentioned the identity of her guest in any of her numerous telegrams, in spite of his repeated questions. He himself, in the midst of his important social, he might almost say political engagements (since a member of the Cabinet had been included in the recent house-party at Melbury Towers), had not had leisure to examine into it more closely hitherto. But now he flushed to the roots of the silvering hair, that still curled luxuriantly round his handsome head, as he recalled Lady Aspasia Melbury's loud laugh and meaning cry when Baby had performed the necessary introduction upon their recent arrival: "So you're the excuse!" ... A mere Major of Guides! A fellow he had never really liked, after all!

Sir Arthur turned on his heel. In thought, he was already rapidly ascending the stairs, on a voyage of discovery to Rosamond's room. Nerves or no nerves, there are matters that require immediate attention. It was intolerable to think that Lady Gerardine, that his wife, should be guilty of the unpardonable lapse of placing herself—however unwittingly, of course—into a false position. It never even dawned upon him—to do him justice—to suspect her of any deeper offence.

As he paused, inflating his chest on the breath of his wrath, some one, with a quick, clean tread, came running along an outer passage, and flung open the swing door that led into the hall—flung it back with the shove of a broad shoulder.

Sir Arthur turned again, and had a moment of amazement before his flustered wits remembered the existence of his own particular secretary.

Muhammed Saif-u-din stood filling up the doorway. His red turban nearly touching the lintel, a crusty bottle in either hand, he was staring at Sir Arthur, to the full as intently as Sir Arthur stared at him.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" then cried, testily, the mighty historian of the Northern Provinces. "What the devil is the man doing with the wine," thought he, flaming inwardly, "when he ought to be busy on—on my book?" In his mind's eye Sir Arthur never beheld Muhammed but toiling with pen and ink upon the great work. "Well," he went on aloud, "I hope you've got a lot to show me!"

"Excuse, your Excellency," said Muhammed. He drew himself together with a little effort, stepped across to the open dining-room door, and laid down his burden. Sir Arthur followed him, hot on the scent of the new grievance. Upon his word, everybody was off his head! Mohammed's manner, his secretary's manner, was downright cool—cool!

"I don't think I engaged you for this sort of business, Muhammed," said he.

Muhammed, with the point of a corkscrew just applied to the first bottle, paused and looked reflectively at the speaker. Then the points of his upturned

moustaches quivered. He laid down bottle and corkscrew and made a profound salaam.

"Excuse, Excellency," he said again. His fine bronzed countenance was subtly afire with some spirit of mocking irony. "There was a fear that your Excellency should be ill served in this poor house!"

Well, well, this was laudable, of course! Yes, even the babu felt that here was no fit entertainment for a Lieutenant-Governor. But nevertheless, intangibly, Sir Arthur found something disquieting in that smile, in the dark eye that fixed him. Vaguely a sense as of something mysterious and relentless came upon him. "You never know where to have them," he thought to himself.

In the pomp of his own palace, surrounded by scores of servitors of his own magnificence, he had not given a thought, hitherto, to the possibility of treachery from the Indian subject. There he felt himself too great a man to be touched; but here, in this desolate house on the downs! ... A small cold trickle ran down his spine. It was queer that the creature should have been so eager to come to England! ... But the next instant the natural man asserted himself. Sir Arthur would certainly have been no coward even in actual danger; he was far too sure of himself to entertain idle fears.

"I shall see you to-morrow," he said imperiously, and left the room.

A whirlwind of silks upon the stairs heralded Aspasia. She caught her uncle by the arm and dragged him into the drawing-room.

"Pray, pray, my dear Aspasia; you are really too impetuous!" cried he, disengaging himself testily. The familiarity which in India had added a piquancy to his sense of importance was here a want of tact. "The country has not improved your manners, my dear," he went on, taking up his place on the hearthrug and sweeping the room with contemptuous gaze. "It's high time to get you out of this."

Miss Aspasia's ready lips had already parted upon a smart retort when the sound of Lady Aspasia's voice, uplifted from without, prevented the imminent skirmish. Her ladyship was evidently addressing Dr. Châtelard, for those strident tones were conveying, in highly British accents, words of what she supposed to be French:

"Drôle petit trou, pensez-vous pas?"

"Ah, but extremely interesting," responded the *globe trotteur*, in his precise English. He always obstinately answered in English Lady Aspasia's less perfect but equally obstinate French.

The two entered together, she towering over him, as might a frigate over a sloop.

Lady Aspasia Melbury was a handsome woman of the "horsey" type. A favourite, even in royal circles, her praise ran in men's mouths expressively as "a

real good sort." A woman kind to others, with the ease afforded her by splendid health, unlimited means, and an assured position. Modern to the very last minute, frank beyond the point of offence, she might be cited as one of those rare beings to whom life is almost an absolute success; the more safely, perhaps, because most of her ideals (if ideals they could be called) were of the most practical description. Yet life had failed Lady Aspasia upon one point—she had had one unsatisfied desire; her youth had held a brief romance, interrupted by a *mariage de raison*; and when her millionaire had left her free, she had looked, with the confidence of her nature, to the instant renewal of the broken idyll. But here it was that fate had played its single scurvy trick upon the woman.

Arthur Gerardine, the once handsome, penniless lad, the now still handsome, distinguished man, who had remained bachelor all these years (she had fondly hoped for her sake), had married—a year after her own widowhood—married, not the ready Lady Aspasia, but a poor unknown widow out in India. Lady Aspasia's solitary unrealised ideal, then, was Sir Arthur Gerardine. In what strange nests will not some ideals perch! And unattainable it seemed likely to remain.

As she now stood, her large, bold eyes roaming quizzically round the faded room—which seemed to hold her ultra-modern presence with amazement, to echo her loud laugh with a kind of protest, like a simple dame of olden times raising mittened hands of rebuke—no one would have guessed that she was inwardly eaten with impatience to behold her rival, to know at last the creature who had supplanted her.

"It is, indeed, a poor little place," said Sir Arthur, bustling forward to advance a chair. "I had no idea it was such a tumble-down old house. We must get rid of it as soon as possible."

"Ah, but pardon!" interposed Dr. Châtelard. "It is old if you will, Sir Gerardine, but thereby it is rich. Nowhere else have I so felt the unpurchasable riches of past time. I am charmed to have come here. After your gorgeous Melbury, the piquancy of this antique abode of gentility is to me delicious!"

"Ah, well," said Sir Arthur, magnificently, "I don't say it has not got a sort of picturesqueness and all that, but it's not what we are accustomed to in England, you know. Comfort, Châtelard, the land of comfort, we say. You don't know what it is in your country. But in the good old days—people did not understand it either, here, you see. Look at that chair, now. As hard as nails, eh, Lady Aspasia? I dare say a collector or somebody might like it. What do you say—Chippendale, eh? Elizabethan? Well, it's all the same thing. It's not my sort, anyhow. I shall sell it all, bag and baggage."

"Sell the Old Ancient House!" interrupted the younger Aspasia, hotly. The aggravation her uncle had ever the talent of awakening in her was now in full

force. "I think you'll find there will have to be two words to that, dear Runkle. Aunt Rosamond's devoted to it."

Sir Arthur inflated his chest.

"My dear Raspasia!" ...

There was concentrated acrimony in his accents. The elder lady scented storm, and storm was not the atmosphere she liked.

"I declare, Arty," she said, "you made me jump. I thought those stern tones were directed to me. There are two Aspasia's here—Docteur Châtelard—elle est ma—namesake—appellée après moi, ou comment vous dites! Come here, namesake, and let's have a look at you."

Aspasia fell on her knees beside the imposing tailor-made figure, and raised her pretty, pert face—pinker than usual, with a variety of emotions—for inspection. M. Châtelard put up his eyeglass to look down benevolently upon her. The English Miss had yet scarcely come under his microscope; but he quite saw that she would be a fascinating study. He now thought the contrast between the two Aspasia's somewhat cruel. "Fraîche comme une rose, la petite. Ronde comme une caille, mutine comine la fauvette—Mais l'autre—oh lala, quelle carcasse!"

The fine lines of Lady Aspasia's anatomy—not inharmonious, but over-prominent, it must be owned, from the hardening effects of a too great devotion to sport—appealed not at all to the temperament of the French critic.

"I don't know what *you* think of your godparents," Miss Aspasia was remarking, with the gusto of a well-established grievance, "but I know what I think ought to be done to mine for giving me such an i-di-o-tic name."

She rolled her eyes meaningly towards Sir Arthur. Lady Aspasia pinched the tilted chin not unkindly, while her loud laugh rang out.

"And you won't ever be able to change it, either, that's the worst of it," she cried. "Thank your stars, anyhow, it can't brand you all your life, as it does me, like an ugly handle to a fine jug—aha! By the way, Arty, you'll have to do something to help this poor child to change the Cuningham, anyhow. She won't do it down here."

"I don't want to change that at all," cried Baby. Her quick ear had caught the sound of Bethune's tread on the threshold. She jerked her chin from Lady Aspasia's fingers and jumped to her feet. "I've never seen any one whose name I thought better worth having than Cuningham yet."

In her young pride she unconsciously flung an angry glance upon the newcomer for appearing at just the wrong moment—a glance which Lady Aspasia caught, and from which she immediately drew conclusions.

These conclusions tallied to a nicety with some others that Lady Aspasia, not without a certain satisfaction, had been forming of late regarding the Gerardine *ménage*.

Lady Gerardine had shown an unmistakable disinclination to join her husband after a long absence; she had suddenly ceased corresponding with him except by telegram; and in these telegrams the name of the visitor whose presence was offered as excuse had been unaccountably omitted.

"Poor child," cried the woman of fashion, with her crow of laughter and the brutal outspokenness of her circle; "she's about tired of playing chaperon here! Never mind, my dear, your time will come by-and-by. 'Nous avons changé tout cela,' as M. Châtelard would say; and a jolly good thing, too. We are only proper in our teens, and after that we can have a high old time till we are eighty. C'est ce que nous appelons un score, M. Châtelard."

"I think, Lady Melbury," said M. Châtelard, suavely, "that I should prefer to watch the high young time."

But, as he spoke, his eye was on Sir Arthur; and from thence it went with eager curiosity to Bethune. He was rubbing mental hands of glee. What stroke of superlative fortune had landed him in the very middle, in the great act, he felt sure, of that drama, the beginning of which he had noted with such interest in far-off India? The poor, good, trusting Sir Gerardine, who had ordered his wife to fall in with her lover's scheme, with such touching—such imbecile—confidence! Ah, but he was beginning to suspect; he had winced even now at the words of yonder impossible female. And that other? Why, it was clear that the Major had encompassed his design—but up to what point? That relentless, impenetrable mask was as hard to decipher as ever. It could not be said that he looked like the fortunate lover, but neither did he look like one who would spare or give way. "It is a nature of granite," thought the Frenchman, as he watched Bethune's deliberate movements about the room. "Successful or still plotting, the advent of the husband at this moment—what a situation! And yet, behold the lover; immovable, implacable. It will be tragic!"

"She's tired of acting chaperon." Sir Arthur let the words pass because they were spoken by Lady Aspasia. But they had pierced right through his armour of self-satisfaction and self-security. The new grievance became again unpleasantly active.

Rosamond had indubitably been incredibly, reprehensibly foolish. No one had a right so to neglect the ordinary conventions. He would have to speak to her very seriously, by-and-by.

"What can your aunt be about, my dear Aspasia?" cried he, impatiently. "I think I must really go up and bring her down, if you will just direct me to her room."

That he should have to ask to be directed to his wife's room; that, having been a couple of hours in the same house, they should not yet have met—it was preposterous, intolerable, it was most inconsiderate of Rosamond! It was an

abuse of his chivalrous solicitude for her!

"Oh, I'll run up!" cried Baby, anxiously.

"Here is Lady Gerardine herself," said Major Bethune's calm voice. He stepped to the door and opened it.

CHAPTER XVII

Up went Lady Aspasia's eyeglasses. Often had she pictured to herself the woman who had "cut her out." She vowed she knew the type: "men are so silly!"—the Simla belle, ill-painted, ill-dyed, with the airs of importance of the Governor's wife badly grafted upon the second-rate manners of the Indian officer's widow.

As Rosamond came into the room, her long black draperies trailing, her radiant head held high, a geranium flush upon cheeks and lips, Lady Aspasia's glasses fell upon her knees with a click; then she lifted them quickly to stare afresh. She forgot to rise from her chair; she forgot even to criticise.

"I'm done for—I'm stumped!" cried the poor sporting lady, in her candid soul. "It's all u-p! Lord, what a fool I have been!"

Sir Arthur, filling his lungs with a breath of righteous reprehension, looked; and exhaled it in a puff of triumph. A beautiful creature. By George, the most beautiful creature he had ever seen! And she was his—his wife—Lady Gerardine. The old glorious self-satisfaction rushed back upon him. How well he had chosen, after all! A little neurasthenia might well be forgiven to one who so superlatively vindicated his taste. It was a glorious moment, this, of presenting the shining star of his selection to the poor old flame.

"Sac-à-papier! ... Quand une anglaise se mêle d'être belle, elle ne fait pas les choses à moitié."

Dr. Châtelard adjusted his spectacles. This was the woman whom the astute Bethune, under the purple Indian sky, had accused in his hearing of being cold. Cold? Just heavens—what a bloom, what a flower! Ah! the answer to that question he had been asking himself with devouring curiosity ever since his recognition of the manor-house guest, was here given him without a word. The poor—the poor Sir Gerardine! Here was what he, Châtelard, with his enormous experience, had securely predicted. *Voici la conflagration!*

Not a jewel did Rosamond wear; but her soft draperies were strung with long lines of jet, so that, with each movement, subdued fires seemed to flash

about her. The fever colour in her cheeks, the fever light in her eyes, lent her usually pale and pensive beauty an unnatural brilliancy. All in the room were unwittingly struck into immobility, that their every energy might be given to so rare a sight.

Raymond Bethune flung but one look, then dropped his eyes.

"He is afraid to betray himself," thought the shrewd Châtelard (his own inquisitive eye was everywhere); for once he was right in the midst of his wild surmises.

Even Baby stared, open-mouthed.

Rosamond advanced, looked round with unseeing glances. "I am here. What is wanted of me?" she seemed to ask, vaguely.

"Painted!" cried Lady Aspasia to herself, her gaze fixed hungrily. "No"—for here Sir Arthur bent to kiss his wife, and the scarlet cheek turned to him was suddenly blanched—"No. What's the matter with the creature? She looks as if she were going to faint."

But Lady Aspasia was in no mood to follow the fertile train of thought suggested by Lady Gerardine's evident emotion under her husband's caress; her own emotions were for the moment unwontedly acute and painful. Sir Arthur's fond and proud look at his beautiful consort struck the old love with a stab. She was not even regretted!

"My dear," said Sir Arthur, one of his wife's cold hands in his, "here is Lady Aspasia, of whom you have heard so much."

Then Lady Aspasia remembered her manners, and rose to greet her hostess. As she did so, she caught the reflection both of herself and of Lady Gerardine side by side in the mirror over the chimney-piece. Both tall women, their heads were nearly on a level; but between the two faces what a chasm! How could the old love be regretted? She was not even regrettable.

The elder woman gave a harsh laugh.

"Awfully glad," she muttered, for once at a loss for words. "She's got it all," she was saying to herself. "Youth and beauty—and Arty. Poor Arty; she does not care a snap of her finger for him, and Heaven knows what's on her conscience!"

"You remember Dr. Châtelard, my love," proceeded Sir Arthur. M. Châtelard made his preliminary French bow, and respectfully took possession of Rosamond's icy fingers. While his lips were forming an elegant little speech of greeting, while he was assuring her ladyship of his acute sense of privilege at being under her roof, his swift thoughts were busy on fresh conclusions. He looked down at the pale hand, the death-like touch of which lay inert in his palm, and up at the hectic loveliness of the face.

"C'est qu'elle est malade—tres malade même!" he said to himself, with sudden gravity. "Ah, she is not one to whom sin is easy! The young man may re-

member he was warned." And, as he gave his arm to his hostess to lead her into the dining-room, he was perhaps the only member of the company to realise that Lady Gerardine had not so far uttered a single word. "This will end in tragedy," he told himself again; and the ring of Sir Arthur's laugh, the jovial content of his voice behind him, struck the Frenchman's ear, mere student of psychology as he was, with an actual sensation of pain.

As they crossed the hall they passed the figure of the Indian secretary standing motionless, with folded arms, at the further end. The man salaamed as they went by, and M. Châtelard felt Lady Gerardine shudder.

"Does the Eastern inspire you with repugnance?" queried he, as they entered the dining-room.

"With horror," she answered, in a deep, vibrating voice; "with hatred."

The note of her passion was so incongruous to the occasion that the traveller found nothing to reply.

Once seated at the table, however, he set himself, with tactful assiduity, to cover a situation which tended to become awkward, not to say impossible. Fortunately, too, both the Aspasias kept up an almost violent conversation, and between them Sir Arthur was allowed very little time for reflection or observation.

Baby had purposely placed a large erection of ferns and flowers in the centre of the table. Sir Arthur had to peer round if he wanted to catch his wife's eyes. The four candles, in their red shades, gave but faint illumination. The dark oak panelling absorbed the side lights. It was only to Bethune on the one hand, to M. Châtelard on the other, that Rosamond's persistent mutism, her abstraction, became obtrusive.

"You have, I fear, small appetite, madam," said the Frenchman at last, with kindly anxiety, unable himself to enjoy the excellent plain fare provided by old Mary while this lovely dumb creature beside him shuddered from the food on her plate, much as she had shuddered from the sight of the Pathan in the hall.

She turned her eyes, unnaturally bright in their haggard setting, slowly upon him, as if aware that he had spoken, and yet unable to grasp his meaning.

"You do not eat," he repeated, with more explicitness. On the other side of him Lady Aspasia, wheeling round from her absorbing conversation with Sir Arthur, caught the words. She looked curiously at Lady Gerardine.

"We have taken away her appetite," she cried, in her literal French. "Too bad—and such a good dinner, too! I am ravenous still, in spite of the scones." And she fell with zest upon the chop before her.

Jealousy might beset her, and angry suspicion of the woman who had supplanted her, but the business of the moment for Lady Aspasia was dinner.

"Capital wine," said Sir Arthur. "I had no idea, my dear Rosamond, that you

could give us anything like this." He peered round the chrysanthemums at her, and received again the agreeable shock of her beauty in its new garb of colour. "I shall have to visit the cellar to-morrow. It's quite old wine, 'pon my soul. Châtelard," and he burst into his ultra-Parisian French, "you maintain a pretty fashion in your country, which we have given up in ours. Let us clink glasses."

There was a flutter of napkins, an exchange of salutations. M. Châtelard rose, bowed his close-cropped grey head, and reached over his brimming glass. When it had touched Sir Arthur's, he turned and held it out, for the same ceremony, towards Lady Gerardine. Again she merely lifted her eyes towards him. He sank back on his chair and drank hastily.

"*Saperlotte*—she looks at one like a suffering dog.... And that fellow opposite, with his face of marble! He drinks, that one, if he eats as little as she. And Sir Gerardine, the poor husband, so touching in his joy of family affection—and the little Miss, so innocent and gay—and the storm gathering—gathering! I could almost wish myself out of this, after all. The interest is undeniable, but the situation lacks comfort!"

"Look," said Aspasia, suddenly, in a low tone to Major Bethune, and laying her hand on his sleeve; "look, now that the door is open! Muhammed has been in the hall all the time of dinner. He's listening to us and watching."

"Muhammed?" echoed Major Bethune, starting slightly. His thoughts had been fixed so intently upon a painful and tangled speculation that he had some difficulty in bringing them back to Aspasia and her fears.

"Yes," urged the girl, "Muhammed. Don't you see? There he is." She dropped her voice still lower. "I do think he's got his eye on Runkle. Oh, dear, I don't believe I ever knew what it was to be frightened before I came to this dreadful Old Ancient House!"

Bethune glanced at her paling cheek, and then out through the half-open door into the hall, where the figure of the Pathan might indeed be perceived leaning against the staircase post in his former attitude of composed watchfulness.

"Don't be frightened," said the officer of Guides, smiling, "the Eastern are as curious as children, for all their grand impassive airs; and this very fine westernised specimen has come to stare at us, and despise us in the depths of his soul, which is as savage, no doubt, as that of his brethren, in spite of his veneer. Besides, Miss Aspasia, he's not looking at Sir Arthur; he's looking at Lady Gerardine."

"He knows she hates him, perhaps," said Baby, with a fresh chill of apprehension. "Oh, Major Bethune, you may laugh, but I don't believe the creature's safe; and I, who thought him quite human when he helped me with the wine to-night. Fancy, I was down in the dark cellars with him!"

"Capital pheasants," said Sir Arthur; "capital."

"Lord!" cried Lady Aspasia's shrill voice; "I wish my *chef* would only learn to make bread sauce like this."

"I hope there's another bottle up of that excellent wine," resumed the great man, genially.

"Excellent wine in very truth," echoed M. Châtelard.

Rosamond's soul sickened within her. How they ate and drank! How nauseating was the clatter of knives and forks, the clink of glasses, the fumes of wine and roast! Away, away, in the old grey fort, at the end of endless winding valleys under the snows, one was a-hungered and a-thirst.

"*We shall have to draw in our belts,*" he was saying, making mock, as strong men will, of his physical pain. "*Only four dozen boxes of pea-meal and twenty bags of rice left.*" ...

"*When men are slowly starved they can bear the hunger ... but thirst is an active devil.*"

Oh, God, the smell of the wine—his wine—to see them drink it, laughing, while his dear lips in vain were calling out for water!

* * * * *

She felt his anguish burn in her own throat, desiccate her own mouth. Some one was speaking to her; her dry tongue clicked and could form no sound. She groped for the glass of water and lifted it to her lips, but laid it down untouched in a spasm of horror. How could she drink when he was parched?

"*Rosamond, Rosamond, when will you hold the cup for me?*" She put her hand to her throat; the room went round with her.

"You are suffering," said Bethune, leaning over to her.

His nature was all unused to introspection. By character and breeding he was given to hold in scorn all troubles that were not concrete, all conflicts conducted in those nebulous regions known as the heart or the soul. His life had been mapped out on positive lines, where right and wrong were as white and black. But, since his first meeting with Lady Gerardine, his simple ethics no longer sufficed. Not only did others discover to him desires, motives, heights and depths undreamed of in his philosophy, but he had become aware of some such forces in his own being. Like a man who first suspects within himself the germs of mortal illness, he had tried to prove their non-existence by denial. But the pain-life is too strong for human will, and the time comes when the only fight the will can make against it is that of silent endurance.

As Bethune sat by his hostess to-night, he was feeling, inarticulately, according to his nature, but acutely, not only the pain of her own situation as he dimly guessed it, but the actual physical pain of her suffering, her sick recoil from

meat and bread, almost the spasm in her beautiful throat that would not let her swallow one drop of the water her fevered lips yearned for.

He spoke at last. Her dumb anguish was more than he could bear.

She inclined her head towards him. Vague at first, he saw understanding of his speech, consciousness of his presence gather into her glance; and then, something else—something, the name of which he could not formulate, even in his own mind, but which turned him cold. Suddenly she spoke, in so low a voice that the words, like some distilled poison, seemed, drop by drop, to fall straight from her lips into his heart only:

"You sit at his table, you drink his wine—you—you who took the sacrifice of his life for your own—you, who should have died, that dawn, that he might live!"

What things are these, our conventions of civilisation! There sat Bethune, in his high white collar, his stiff shirt-front, his trim black coat, listening to Lady Gerardine's mad words, one hand still on his fork, with that air of courteous attention which a man should pay to his hostess' conversation, be it on the subject of the weather or the last political conundrum.

Even had M. Châtelard adjusted his spectacles for a piercing look at the hero of his drama at that particular moment, he would have read nothing on the lean saturnine countenance. Yet had it not been for the conventions of society, how would not Raymond Bethune have answered Rosamond Gerardine? With what madness leaping to hers; with what passion, down on his knees! ... "Scorn me, for I deserve your scorn. I cast myself and my worthless life before you. Crush me into the dust if you will, only let me feel as I die the print of your foot upon me. Oh, you—most beautiful!"

"I think," said M. Châtelard, rising abruptly, "that Lady Gerardine is ill."

She was leaning back, deathly white, save for two hectic spots on each cheekbone which heightened the ghastliness of her look.

Poor Sir Arthur! It was too bad! Just as he was beginning to feel so comfortable, in spite of the pokey little place, so connubially satisfied.

"Tut, tut!" he cried, as he fussily made his way round the table. "I had hoped we had left all this in India."

Baby warded off his approach with a pointed elbow.

"Keep away, for goodness' sake, Runkle," she cried sharply. "She's faint; she wants air, that's all. Come with me, darling."

But, with unexpected strength, Lady Gerardine rose abruptly from her chair and pushed the faithful child on one side.

"I am not faint," she said. "I am not faint; I am sick. Oh ... to see you all eat and drink!" She swept the circle with her eyes; her last glance resting upon Bethune. Then, with a beating heart, he knew what it was, this new nameless

thing he had never seen before in her soft eyes—it was hatred.

Her light draperies, weighted with their embroideries, swung against the chairs and the panelling of the narrow room as she hurried out from among them, head erect—scorn, abhorrence, in the very wind of her swift passage.

With a sudden dilation of the eye, Muhammed Saif-u-din watched her come. He checked a forward movement towards her, and drew himself up sharply. But as she passed him he bent his supple frame and bowed deep—deep. Suddenly aware of him, she started fiercely from the proximity.

“Out of my sight,” she exclaimed, with a hoarse, deep cry, “son of treachery; his blood is still upon your hands!”

The tread of her foot, curiously heavy, resounded, measured, all up the oaken stairs.

Muhammed shot one eager glance after the retreating figure, then turned abruptly and plunged into the side passage.

In the dining-room a dead little silence had fallen. Even Aspasia dared not follow her aunt. Consternation sat upon every countenance; the eye of each guest was instinctively dropped, as if dreading to betray a thought. Dr. Châtelard drew his brow together with professional gravity.

“Insane—the poor, beautiful lady?” he asked himself. “Here is a solution, *par exemple*, that even I could not have foretold!”

“I’m afraid Lady Gerardine has found our surprise party a little overwhelming,” cried Lady Aspasia at last, with her harsh laugh.

Young Aspasia began to sidle towards the door. Sir Arthur, rousing himself from his painful astonishment, arrested her in the act.

“No, my dear Aspasia,” said he, not without dignity; “you remain here and entertain our guests. I will see to your aunt. You are right, Lady Aspasia, it was inconsiderate of me to take my wife by surprise in this way. The poor girl is quite overwrought. Never fear, my dear,” he went on, again addressing his niece, in answer to her last feeble objection, “I shall find my way, the house is not so large. Une neurasthénie, mon cher Châtelard, compliquée d’hypersthésie,” he added, with his seraphic smile. “I do not know if your experience has brought any such cases under your notice, but, of course, you know they require careful handling.”

Sir Arthur might have been a fool, and a pompous one, but long traditions leave their stamp, even on unworthy material. You may be a bad specimen of porcelain, but porcelain will remain refined clay. Grand seigneur in breeding, if in nothing more, he carried off the situation with due regard to his guests and due regard to English reserve, as well as a better man. Nevertheless, no situation could be imagined more galling, perhaps, to his particular temperament. His hand on the door knob, he made them a courtly little bow, and left the room.

"Overwrought!" commented Lady Aspasia, dilating her nostrils, with an expression that made her long-featured face look more equine than ever. "Some people would call it 'high strikes'; and, if you ask me, I think the 'high strikes' in this case are sheer temper."

Baby sat down, looking sick and faint herself.

"The fat's in the fire, now," said she, in a desperate whisper to Bethune.

The man made no response, but taking a nut from the dish before him, seemed exclusively interested in the task of cracking it between his fingers.

"Neurasthenia is, I fear, sadly on the increase," said M. Châtelard, in a non-committal manner to Lady Aspasia.

The latter laughed again.

"Neurasnonsense and hyperfiddlesticks! Poor Arty—with his careful handling! Careful handling. I should carefully handle the water-jug."

She flung an irate and contemptuous look at Bethune, who was absorbed in his nut-cracking. What sordid hole-and-corner business had this two-penny-halfpenny Indian officer been concocting with the Lieutenant-Governor's wife to account for these tantrums?

"So ill-bred," said the lady of birth to herself. "When people make these slips, at least they should have the decency not to parade them!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Sir Arthur had, as he foretold, little difficulty in finding his wife's room; indeed, her door had been left open, and she stood directly in his line of vision as he came upstairs. A lighted candle aloft in her hand, she seemed to be examining a picture that hung on the panel immediately above her dressing-table.

He came in quickly, with his short consequential step, and closed the door behind him. At the sound of the clicking lock she wheeled round, still holding the candle above her head. The light played upon the outstanding aureole of her hair, caught on one side the scarlet oval of her cheek, the gleam of her teeth between lips, open as upon amazement. Her rapid breathing shook her as she stood; and the darkling brilliancy of her jet-flecked robe ran all about, and up and down the long lines of her limbs, as if she had been clothed in black fires.

"You said you were sick," he exclaimed tartly, "and I find you looking at a picture."

She made no reply, but stood, still holding up her light, shimmering and quivering, a thing of such extraordinary vividness and beauty, out of the half-darkness of the room, that in admiration he felt his righteous wrath once more slip from him.

"Really, my dear Rosamond," he went on, in mollified tones, "you should try and have a little more self-control. I cannot imagine what Lady Aspasia must think of you. I declare any one might have thought—I don't know what they might not have thought," concluded Sir Arthur, somewhat lamely.

Rosamond put down the candlestick on the table beside her, then stood clasping her hands tightly together, her head bent in the attitude of a chidden child. She was making a strong effort after her vanishing sanity. It was, perhaps, the old instinctive dread of violent emotion, or the realisation that here was the crisis at last, hitherto so deliberately thrust from her thoughts, that braced her to meet the moment. It may have been, after all, the fact that it was Sir Arthur the taskmaster, not Sir Arthur the fond husband, that stood before her. However it might be, something of the sweet reasonableness that had made her so acceptable a consort to the Lieutenant-Governor all these years did, in truth, seem to come back to her. She answered, very gently:

"Indeed, I owe you all an apology. You will explain it to the others, will you not? I am really ill."

Ill; tut, tut! What was she feeling? Was she sick; had she a pain; had she a cough? He lit another candle to look at her. Had she taken her temperature. Where was the thermometer?

With an unutterable failing of the heart, the atmosphere of her whole life as Lady Gerardine seemed suddenly to close round her once more; the intolerable solicitude, the tyrannic fondness, the perpetual, ineluctable watchfulness, how had she endured it? But she must be calm. What was it Baby had said? "Anything would be better than a scandal." These holy walls, this consecrate house—oh, no, they should never echo the wranglings of her most unholy union!

Sir Arthur was turning over the trinkets on her dressing-table. Where was the thermometer?

She did not know.

Not know where the thermometer was!

"I don't think I've got one," said Lady Gerardine, faintly. "But it's not fever; it's not that! Indeed, I only want rest——"

He turned, in real indignation and surprise.

"Not got one?"

"Perhaps if you were to ask Aspasia——" The suggestion was coupled with a wild look at the door.

Sir Arthur laughed, not very pleasantly. One would almost have thought

she wanted to get rid of him. Women were certainly incomprehensible creatures.

"You have not mislaid your pulse, I take it."

She retreated from his touch till she could retreat no further; then, brought up by the wall, slid both her hands behind her.

"I'm not ill in that way. You know I always did hate being fussed about. Aspasia told you I had a headache. It is true, I have a headache. I only want to be alone; I only want to sleep."

Sir Arthur stood surveying her. Poor gentleman; his mind was generally in a compact and neatly labelled condition, quite ready with an adequate theory for each event of life. But to-night it was as if some one had been making hay in the tidy compartments. His ideas were positively jumbled. Scarcely did he seem to have a proper hold of one when the next would send him off at a tangent. He had come upstairs to make his wife feel how grievously she had offended his idea of decorum, and had immediately lost himself in admiration of her appearance. And now, once more, in the very midst of his real anxiety about her health, he found himself abjectly remarking what an extraordinarily beautiful woman she was.

"I'm not so sure," he said suddenly, half fondly, half irritably, "that those red cheeks are a very good sign."

He put out a finger and stroked the velvet outline. She closed her eyes and set her teeth, nerving herself against the agony of the caress.

"I left a white rose," he went on, with elaborate gallantry; "I find a red one. My dear, your cheeks are certainly very hot."

That voice from the past, to which Rosamond's ears had been so acutely attuned these days, suddenly took up the words: "*My white rose, my red, red rose!*" As the sailor feels the raft break beneath him, she felt the last shreds of her self-control giving way under the stress of seas of passion and terror. She looked round desperately; almost, she thought, that man—that intruder—must have heard the dear voice also. Oh, sacrilege to have him standing there!

"Will you not leave me?" she cried, with a burst of pleading. "I must rest. You were always kind to me—will you not leave me now? Indeed, I am in pain."

"My darling!" he exclaimed, in genuine concern.

That flush was unnatural, it was evident. She had wasted away, too. He could see that. She who used to have such a noble, full throat; and her breathing came all too quick.

"Come, my darling," he went on, "let me see you to bed myself. No one, you know, can look after you as I do. I should not have trusted you away from me all this time. Come, come, we must let this hair down to ease the poor head—your golden hair, Rosamond. It is not the first time I have unbound it—eh, my love?"

"Your golden hair, Rosamond..." whispered the voice in her heart. What

sort of a woman was she that another should dare use these sacred words of love to her? She fixed her piteous eyes upon Sir Arthur, as if, by the sheer intensity of dread, she could keep him from her. But he stretched out his arms.

She shrank, flattening herself against the wall, one arm raised across her brow as though to protect her hair.

"One would almost think you were shy—afraid of me," said he, jocularly, while his embrace hovered over her.

"Once there was fear of me in your eyes..."

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked. "Oh, your horrible hands!"

There fell instantly between them the silence of the irremediable deed.

Rosamond had at last torn across the interwoven fabric of their two lives; the ugly rending sound of the parting hung in the air. These gaping edges no seam could ever join again. To the woman came a fierce realisation of freedom, a sweeping anger at the petty shackles that had held her so long.

Sir Arthur stepped back, his arms falling by his side. He, poor man, felt as if the good old world, of which he was such an ornament, had ceased to be solid beneath his feet.

"Rosamond!"

"What are you doing here?" she cried, in a panting whisper. "What do you want with me? How dare you come into this room?"

"Rosamond!"

"Go!" she bade him, pointing to the door. "In the name of God, leave me. Merciful Heavens ... to follow me here! Have you not a spark of human feeling left in you? Is it not bad enough, is it not terrible, hideous, that you should be in this house at all?" She caught him by the arm, pushing him like a frenzied creature. "Go!"

"Are you mad?" he furiously exclaimed.

Upon the very words he stopped abruptly and stared at her. A horrible suspicion of their truth flashed upon him. Could it be possible, could fate dare to play so horrible a trick on him? Was the wife of Sir Arthur Gerardine actually going out of her mind? He felt his hair rise. A dampness gathered cold on his forehead.

She stood, with outflung arm, motionless, save for her rapid breathing.

"If you're really ill," he faltered now, seeking for his handkerchief and mopping his face with flurried hand. The tail of his apprehensive eye upon her, he was, in his mind, rapidly concocting that telegram to the family physician in London which should be despatched at the earliest possible moment, and bring him—and also a mental specialist—to the manor-house by the first possible train. "Most urgent, serious anxiety." The Lieutenant-Governor muttered the words to himself. He belonged to that type of fond family man who, at the first hint of a

possibly insane member in the home circle, has no other idea than the immediate shutting up and putting away of the dangerous dear one.

Dimly, through the storm and stress in which her soul was struggling, there came to Rosamond some perception of the pathetic figure presented by Sir Arthur in his sudden trouble. The well-worn cloak of self-complacency was rudely torn from him. His was the flurry of the man on the wrong side of life who has neither the elasticity of youth nor the true dignity of age to help him meet an unexpected blow. Her hand dropped by her side. He had been kind to her, after his own fashion; generous, too, and trusting. She sank back against the bed with a moan.

"I am to blame, all through, from the beginning," she said hopelessly. "I have sinned against myself, against you, against him," she faltered; and laid her left hand on the old carven bedpost to steady herself. Her head dropped sideways against her shoulder. "If I could set you free," she murmured.

Sir Arthur turned sharply upon her, one suspicion chased by another. This was coherent enough. There was meaning in this—too much! A purple flush mounted to his face; the veins in his forehead swelled.

"I was content to go on," pursued the woman, in the same vague tones of plaint. "Remember, it was you who insisted. Before you curse me, always remember that. I wanted to dream my life away—why, else, should I ever have listened to you? But you would not let me dream. You thrust my fate upon me—you and that man. What chance had I of escape between you both? you and that man!"

From purple, Sir Arthur's face grew ashen grey. That smiling, genial, handsome face became a positive mask—lips drawn back from the teeth, pupils narrowed to vindictive pin-points of fury. He drew near to her in silence, his head thrust forward, his twitching hands clutching the lapels of his coat on either side.

You and that man—that man, Bethune!

Through the buzzing in his ears there came once again the echo of Lady Aspasia's laugh, her meaning words: "So you were the excuse." And again the gibe: "Aspasia is tired of playing chaperon!"

Mad? Would God it had been madness! This was a confession. His wife, Lady Gerardine, the consort of the Lieutenant-Governor, had had a low intrigue with an obscure Indian officer, a fellow of no standing, of no importance—Bethune! As Sir Arthur drew near her, silent through the very inadequacy of language, his eye fell upon the pale hand clasping the bedpost. There, upon the third finger, flashed the tiny gems of an unknown ring—a miserable, paltry thing. (Sir Arthur was a creature of detail, even at such a moment.) It was the last straw. He gripped her by the wrist, brutally.

"Whose ring is that?" he sputtered.

The physical pain of his clutch did her good—roused her, with a sense of

relief, to face his onslaught. She was glad that he should be angry, that his countenance should be distorted and ugly. In such a mood as this she could meet him and feel strong. It was the broken-down, trembling, aged Sir Arthur she could not meet.

"Whose ring?" he repeated, and shook her as he held her.

She straightened herself, and with her free hand swept a gesture of pride towards the portrait on the wall. Far away was she, in the depth of her grand passion, from the sordid speculations of his mind.

"What!" he shouted, dropped her hand, and ran to the dressing-table, flinging a candle on high to stare. "Why—why!" he stammered, putting down the light. "Pooh, what nonsense is this? You can't put me off like this now. That—why, that's poor English!"

"And I," she cried, walking up to him, "I am Mrs. English. Oh, that was the mistake! You thought I was Lady Gerardine. I never was. You took a dream woman and thought she was your wife. I never was your wife. I am his—his only. Now you understand, do you not?"

Poor Sir Arthur! In proportion as her exaltation mounted, his heat of anger fell away. His bewilderment grew, and his perturbation. For a moment or two he tried to cling to his conviction of her guilt. We are always anxious to vindicate ourselves when we are moved to great wrath; and the more unjust we have been the more loth are we to give up our suspicions. But with these eyes of flame upon him, with these accents of passion in his ears, even he could not maintain his damning judgment. The first hypothesis, that of insanity, came back to him in full force. Then arose a mitigated suggestion. A man of desultory reading, he had a smattering of many subjects. He had heard of that form of mental trouble called auto-suggestion—*idée fixe*. He looked round the room.

By George, there was another portrait of poor English! And, as he lived, a photograph of him on the chimney-piece. He had passed one on the stairs. And now he remembered the daub in the hall. He drew a long breath. This little damp hole of a place, with the fellow's head staring down at one from every corner—yes, that was it—it had been too much for her in her nervous state of health. The next words she spoke brought confirmation:

"Do not think I blame you! I know—I know. It is my own cowardice, my own baseness of soul that has brought it all upon me. And now it is too late. His papers, his letters, too late they came to me. I am lost—lost!"

She put her hands to her forehead, and reeled. He caught her in his arms.

Those dashed papers! How obstinate she had been about them! He had known it would be too much for her; he had even been ready to take the burden upon himself.

"There, there, Rosamond!" She faintly struggled against his supporting em-

brace, every inch of her flesh shuddering from his touch. Oh, that voice from the past: "*There are things a man cannot contemplate in his living body; things the flesh rebels against. The dead will be quiet.*" The dead ... but he was not dead. Perhaps now he was looking on them! The horror of the thought paralysed her, as the snake paralyses the bird. Yet, if she had had a knife in her hand she might, in that madness of nausea, have struck it into the breast against which she was clasped.

"Sir James was certainly right," thought Sir Arthur, tightening his grip upon her waist with one hand, while he patted her shrinking shoulder with the other. "What Rosamond wants, poor girl, is soothing."

She wrenched herself free suddenly, with unexpected strength. Sir Arthur staggered. Then she turned upon him a countenance of such livid vindictive menace and at the same time such torture that, speechless, he recoiled before her.

At the door he muttered something about sending up Aspasia; but it was closed upon him and locked before the words were formulated. He listened awhile. From within came, at first, a faint swish as of her moving draperies, and then a heavy silence.

"She looked at me," said the unhappy husband to himself; "she looked at me as if she could murder me!"

He shook his head, and began once more to concoct his telegram as he slowly walked downstairs.

CHAPTER XIX

Lady Aspasia and M. Châtelard were seated one on each side of the fireplace, fairly monopolising the benefits of the situation. Although the thought of Sir Arthur, upstairs with his young wife—no doubt coaxing the insolent beauty into a better temper—was no very agreeable one to her, Lady Aspasia, with the good-humoured, material philosophy of her kind, made the best of what fate left her. She toasted her well-formed, well-shod foot at the blaze; found that the old-fashioned winged armchair (with the help of a cushion) was as comfortable as any modern copy if not more so, and that M. Châtelard was undoubtedly an entertaining companion. He had seen curious things on his travels, and he could tell of them with a French spice. By a series of jerks the two drew ever closer together; finally blocking the hearth. Their voices were lowered by imperceptible

degrees; their heads inclined towards each other. Lady Aspasia's laugh rang loud and often; and presently, by a tacit agreement in which the conversation gained enormously, each relapsed into the native tongue.

"Upon my word," said Lady Aspasia to herself; "I'll send in his name for my royal party."

M. Châtelard, pouring forth a whispered flow of language, with a pause on the delicate point, and a quiet chuckle after the ready listener had had time to seize it and ring her hearty, unreserved tribute of appreciation, was privately making little notes for future publication, with all the traveller's joy of discovery. "Et il y en a encore qui croient que les Anglaises sont guindées! Un esprit tout Rabelaisien—cette dame! Allons, l'age Victorien est bien mort et enterré!"

Miss Aspasia, who some time back had been told, with a flap of Lady Aspasia's hand, "not to listen, little girl," sat, highly disapproving, at the further end of the room. Bethune, whose existence the great lady now elected to ignore, had taken a chair at a little distance from the girl. A monosyllabic conversation began between them and dropped. He asked her for some music, and she tartly refused with a reproachful look. She wondered at him. Did he not know her aunt's head was bad? He didn't know? Well, he might have seen that she was ill! To this he made no answer, and thereafter they spoke no more. The man had a talent for taciturnity, but the effort of Baby's silence seemed to bristle. She sat very erect. Her mouth pursed, her nostrils dilated, her eyes widely opened, her arched eyebrows more arched than ever. The tittering, the whispering, the laughter, the meaning wriggles of the two backs as they leant towards each other before the hearth, irritated her beyond endurance.

"M. Châtelard," she suddenly cried, in fluent French, with her *enfant terrible* directness, "do tell me—I don't want to be rude; but why do you cut your hair so close to your head? Isn't it very cold this weather?"

"Alas, Mademoiselle," said he, turning round; his alertness of courtesy was ingrain; "I do not dare to show to the world that my head is quite white."

"You think it looks better pink?" said Baby, innocently.

"Pink!" said M. Châtelard, a little disconcerted, passing his hand over his cropped pate. "Is it possible?" Then, sparkling: "Pink? I had no idea that Lady Melbury had so made me blush!"

"Oh, blush!" cried Lady Aspasia, her momentary displeasure with the pert schoolgirl lost in a yell of delight at M. Châtelard's readiness; "It's well that my blushing days are over!"

"Oh, Milady!" And they put their heads together again.

Young Aspasia pinched in her rosy lips so tight that they made the most absurd button of a mouth ever seen. Bethune, who had listened with immovable gravity to this sally, betraying indeed no sign of having heard it, save for the

rolling of an icy eye towards M. Châtelard, now let his glance rest upon her. The hard muscles of his face began to soften.

He had been slowly making up his mind during the whole of the evening, and now he had decided. He would leave the manor-house on the morrow, and cut himself once and for ever apart from its inmates. But, the devil was in it that, in the midst of the most intolerable mental trouble he had ever endured, he should have once and again this absurd unreasonable feeling that if he were to carry away with him this pretty Aspasia, this fluffy, pouting, pert, bird-like thing, it would be sweet! Something like the blessedness of a peep of blue in a sky of lurid clouds, a ray of sunshine across a barren moor, a snowdrop in bleak winter. The feeling had no sense in it. He was a prey to as strong a passion as ever possessed a man; and he not only despised himself, hated himself for his passion, but was conscious that by the object of it he was held a thing of scorn. More than this, she, who thus in spite of reason filled his thoughts, was suffering, and he could not lift a finger to help her. The whole source of her suffering was only vaguely understood by him; but he knew that her husband's presence had nearly driven her to desperation. It was acute torture to him now to think of Sir Arthur in his wife's room; and yet ... haunted by these unworthy degrading thoughts of one who should have been twice sacred to him, he found himself longing to take Aspasia to his breast—bright-eyed Aspasia, pecking, twittering, fluttering like an angry dove, withal so soft, so warm, so true! His inconsequent heart seemed to cry out for the comfort of her.

Sir Arthur opened the door and looked in.

"Pray, pray," said he, inserting an arm, after his head, to wave back the confidential couple who with a great scraping of chairs had risen to their feet, "do not let me disturb any one. I am only looking for Aspasia."

"Oh Lord!" said Aspasia, under her voice, alarm springing to her eyes. "I'm here, Runkle."

"Can you spare me a few minutes' private conversation, my dear Aspasia?"

His tone was very solemn. He was conscious of the hush that had fallen upon the room, conscious of the perturbed looks that were fixed upon him, conscious of his own countenance of trouble. But it was not without a gloomy self-approval that, given circumstances the most woeful that could perhaps be imagined, he realised there were few who could negotiate them like himself.

Aspasia went reluctantly to her uncle's summons. Her heart was heavy with anxiety concerning Rosamond. In her constitutional distrust of whatever course of action Sir Arthur might take it into his head to adopt, she had an oppressive sensation that most of the responsibility of affairs rested upon her own young shoulders.

"Lord," thought the girl to herself, as her lagging feet took her across the

drawing-room; "if one could only just shut up Runkle in a box for six months, there might be some hope of things settling down."

Sir Arthur beckoned her towards the little study, where, through the half-opened door, a ruddy light showed that the room had now been made ready for the smokers. His air of portentous gloom so exasperated Baby that she had to relieve her feelings by childish kicks at the mats in the hall as she passed.

"I presume that we shall be undisturbed here for the present," said Sir Arthur. He pushed open the door and started back with an irritated exclamation: "Confound that fellow, he's like a night moth!"

Between the fire and the lamplight, Muhammed Saif-u-din stood facing them. It seemed as if he had been pacing the little space, and had wheeled round at the sound of their approach. Baby's heart gave a wild throb, and then stood still. The Indian had certainly been very restless all the evening. Sir Arthur Gerardine's arrival seemed to have excited him in a singular manner, and there could be no mistaking now the straight, vindictive look that the secretary fixed upon his master. She was minded of a splendid black panther she had seen at an Indian village fair, not so very long ago.—The beast had been padding the narrow limits of its cage backwards and forwards until she had drawn close to admire it, when it had stopped and fixed her with its eyes—just such a gaze (she told herself, shivering) as that which Muhammed fixed on Sir Arthur; a gaze as concentrated as unfathomably savage. "Him very bad beast," had said the showman, grinning at her.—"Him dreaming of drinking Missie Sahib's blood."

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Sir Arthur's grating voice rang out angrily in a brief phrase of Hindustani. The Pathan unfolded his arms, made a gesture with one hand, and left the room without speaking. In that gesture Baby nervously read the meaning: I can bide my time.

"Runkle," she cried, catching her breath, "how could you bring that dreadful man over from India? I'm sure it's not safe. Even Major Bethune—and he's lived all his life among them, you know—thinks he's mysterious. Oh, do, do be careful!"

"Aspasia," said Sir Arthur, severely, "I am surprised at you. I have other matters, matters of far other moment on my mind, I can tell you. What nonsense is this? The fellow there doesn't know his place, I grant you. I've just told him so. You saw how he quailed. He's devoured with curiosity, that's all. And, indeed," Sir Arthur sighed, "there are strange things taking place in this house. He may well be curious."

"Oh, Runkle, I don't think it's that; he's not the ordinary type of Indian, I'm convinced. He's got some purpose here."

"Pooh, nonsense, my dear Aspasia! Purpose? Ridiculous! I should hope I know how to deal with the creatures by this time. Don't you begin this sort of nerve business, too—I shall begin to think," said poor Sir Arthur, running a distracted hand through his grey curls, "that there's something about this pestilent place that's driving everybody crazy." Again he caught himself up with a deep sigh on the last word. "I shall give Master Muhammed his lesson to-morrow. I don't require to be taught how to manage the cattle—under the heel, my dear, under the heel! To-night—" He paused. "Aspasia," he lowered his voice: "I am addressing you in the utmost confidence, relying upon your good sense and judgment. Listen to me calmly and answer me with truth absolute. Have you ever noticed any symptom in your poor aunt...?"

He had leant forward to drop these words mysteriously into her ear; now he straightened himself, shook his head, and tapped his forehead.

"Uncle Arthur...!" gasped the girl, her pretty round face suddenly pinched and small, her eyes abnormally large. What, indeed, were such trivial speculations as a Pathan's possible yearning for Sir Arthur's blood to so hideous a suggestion as this? Here was her own hidden terror of all these weeks voiced calmly, judicially; in acknowledgment of, almost in resignation to, an accomplished fact.

"You can't mean—" she stammered.

"My dear," said Sir Arthur, with melancholy triumph, "I am in very serious anxiety. Your aunt's manner to-night, the things she has said to me just now, her actions, her looks—I can only explain them, heartrending as it is to me to have to admit it, in one way."

"Poor Aunt has got neurasthenia," faltered the unhappy Baby.

"My dear Aspasia," said Sir Arthur; "may it be only that! I pray it may be only that. But the affair is too serious. I shall have the best professional advice to-morrow, the first mental specialist in England."

"What!" screamed Aspasia, suddenly scarlet to the roots of her hair; "you're never going to get a horrid mad doctor for poor darling Aunt Rosamond?"

"My dear Aspasia!" ejaculated he, beating down the sound of her crude words with his hands. "It is my duty, Aspasia, to get the best advice, the best treatment, at the earliest possible opportunity. And it is your duty," he said, fixing his eyes sternly upon her, "to tell me everything that can conduce to a better knowledge of her state."

Rivulets of cold water ran down Aspasia's back. She felt a sudden, awful premonition of relentless fate closing about her; of the cruelty of human beings to each other; something of the terror of the ignorant patient in the surgical ward.

"What would they want to do with Aunt Rosamond?" she faltered.

Sir Arthur shook his head again.

"Sometimes the only chance is a temporary retreat—temporary, we must

hope and trust.”

”You mean,” she shrieked, and advanced on him with her small fists clenched; ”shut up Aunt Rosamond, shut her up— Never! You wicked, horrible old fool! What should you shut her up for? She’s not mad. She’s no more mad than I am. Why should you call her mad, just because she turned sick at the sight of you all guzzling dinner?”

”Hush, hush!” he cried.

”I don’t care who hears me,” she retorted, in the same high tones of sobbing indignation. ”You *were* guzzling. Your nasty old Lady Aspasia positively gobbled, and so did that disgusting Frenchman with the pink head. I suppose she’s mad because she told you the truth for once, upstairs? I’m glad. If some one had told you the truth before, it would have been better for everybody.”

Upon which cryptic utterance she flung herself from the room, but popped in her head again for a last shot:

”Of course, if the doctor asks me why poor Aunt ever married you, I shan’t quite know what to say—it’s the only queer symptom she’s ever shown, to my knowledge.”

Sir Arthur sank into the armchair, speechless. Presently he sought for his handkerchief, and, with an exhausted hand, passed it across his beaded forehead. The ring of Lady Aspasia’s laugh floated across the hall through the door which the girl had left ajar. The sound of that cheery, heart-whole mirth, the thought of that comfortable, healthy, everyday, high-born woman heightened the sense of his own utter dejection. Had he not made an irremediable mistake after all?

Meanwhile Aspasia, with an unreasoning sense that she could not too soon be at Rosamond’s side to protect her, took the oak stairs at a canter, pausing merely at the first landing to choke down the sobs with which her breast was bursting.

”I only hope and trust Muhammed will be quick about it, and stick Runkle to-night,” she said to herself, mopping her eyes fiercely, her pocket-handkerchief tightly rolled into a ball.

At her aunt’s door she met Jani, who checked the headlong approach with brown finger on lip and long-drawn: ”Hush!”

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In the drawing-room Raymond Bethune, a bad third, heard the ring of Aspasia’s voice and the hammer of her flying heels on the stairs, and realised, with keen disappointment, that she was not coming back. He had been longing for the instant of her return for a twofold reason—his devouring anxiety concerning Lady Gerardine, and the desire to exchange a few last quiet parting words with the girl

herself, since he intended to walk out of the Old Ancient House, unobtrusively, with the coming day.

As the patter of little feet died away, however, he rose stiffly from his neglected corner, and, approaching the jocular pair by the fireside, looked down at them with a sort of dignified awkwardness until they would vouchsafe some consciousness of his approach.

The Frenchman, after struggling for a minute between his courtesy to the lady, who went on pouring a country-house story into his ear, and what was due to the patiently waiting gentleman, at last laid a warning finger on Lady Aspasia's wrist.

"Je crois que Monsieur désire nous parler," he said engagingly.

"Oh," cried the mistress of Melbury Towers, and gave an insolent half-turn of her smooth head, a half-twist of her handsome eyes in the direction of Bethune, as an indication that he might say his say and have done with it.

"I thought I'd bid you good night," said the man, stolidly.

"Comment, mon cher major," cried the polite Châtelard, springing to his feet, "already?"

"I'm going in the morning," went on Bethune, in the same level tones; "I've got to pack." His words and glance were fixed on the indifferent lady. "I think you were kind enough to say something about my coming to Melbury Towers for Christmas. I am sorry I can't accept."

Lady Aspasia's eyebrows were raised a fraction of a line.

"So sorry," she said cheerfully. "I'm sure Sir Arthur would have liked to see more of you."

She did not offer him her hand, or turn her glance upon him. He bowed in the direction of her pronounced profile, and turned to find himself effusively seized by the globe-trotter.

"Comment, cher major," cried the latter in tones of unaffected disappointment; "you leave to-morrow? And I who had so much pleasure in the renewing of our acquaintance. It is not possible we part thus."

"Que diable," the psychologist was saying to himself, "c'est comme ça que l'on arrange ces petites affaires-là en Angleterre? Le mari arrive, vous trouvez en tête-à-tête, et l'amant part. Voilà tout. C'est inouï! Je m'attendais, je l'avoue, à un dénouement plus palpitant. Mais malgré tout..." Bethune had gone, without a word. The door was closed. M. Châtelard was resuming his seat: "N'y-a-t'il pas, quand même, quelque chose de fort intéressant dans cette simple solution?—oui, un caractère exclusivement Britannique dans cette simplicité; comme qui dirait un vestige, au milieu du désordre même, de la vertu puritaine qui tenait si fort aux apparences, de cette horreur du shocking si profondément enracinée dans l'Anglo-Saxon?"

As he raised his musing eye, he found Lady Aspasia's bright grey orb fixed upon him with a world of meaning.

CHAPTER XX

"Hush!" said Jani, "Missie Sahib ill. Must not be disturbed."

"Is she in bed?" whispered Aspasia. "Don't be a stupid, Jani. I shan't do her any harm."

With her hand on the door handle, Jani shook her head till the monstrous gold ear-rings waggled against her cheeks.

"Missie Sahib, no more disturbed to-night," she repeated emphatically. Her opaque eyes were fixed with triumphant resentment upon Aspasia's countenance. Aspasia, the off-hand young lady, who flouted old Jani's vested right, who had taken upon herself to do Lady Gerardine's hair this very night, must learn that her presence was not always desirable.

"Who is there?" cried Rosamond's voice, high and strained, from within. "I can see no one. Jani, you must let no one in."

"There, missie," said the old woman.

Aspasia pushed the claw-like hand ruthlessly from the door knob.

"It is I, Aunt Rosamond," said she, tapping the panels with soft consolatory palms. "You'll let me in, darling, won't you? I'll do police, too, never fear, and better than Jani."

"Oh, you! Come in," bade the voice within, faintly, but with an unmistakable accent of relief.

Aspasia made a face at Jani, but passed in with something less than her usual flounce. Lady Gerardine was seated before the fire in her white dressing-gown, her arms hanging, her hair loose about her. Jani had evidently been interrupted in the act of brushing by the sound of the approaching footsteps, and had flown to her sentry post.

"Stay outside, Jani. Lock the door, Baby."

Lady Gerardine just turned her head sufficiently to give these orders, then relapsed into her brooding attitude, her eyes hard, dry, encircled, fixed unseeingly upon the fire, her face livid, save for the burning spot on either cheekbone. Aspasia, aghast, stopped a second to survey her.

"She does look very ill," she thought hopelessly. "Worse than ill." And her

heart contracted.

"Darling," she said, approaching timidly, "just let me plait this dear hair, and then you must get to bed."

"I wish it were shrivelled on my head!" said Lady Gerardine, staring before her, and sending out her words, it seemed, as aimlessly as her glance. "It is accursed."

"Aunt Rosamond, what are you saying!"

"Harry loved it. It was his hair, his golden hair, and that other man has put his horrible touch upon it."

"There's no doubt of it," said Baby to herself, as with the gentlest of touches she gathered the long strands together, "though I'll never admit it to any one; darling Aunt Rosamond is mad. Those dreadful letters, the poor dead husband, and the horrid old living one have driven her mad between them! They shan't shut her up, though, not while I live, not while I can fight."

The child had no fear in her heart for herself. How could any one, she thought with a great gush of compassion, have fear of this poor, desolate, beautiful creature? She finished the plait, while the figure before her maintained its sinister immobility. Then she leaned forward and slipped her arms round it in a close embrace.

"My angel, how cold you are! Only your cheeks are hot—hot."

"Don't kiss me," said Lady Gerardine. "You don't know what defilement you are holding."

"Dear Aunt, come to bed."

"I was his, his consecrate—body and soul, and I gave myself to another."

"Oh, Aunt Rosamond," cried the girl, with a sudden upspringing of tears, as a glimmering realisation of the other's anguished mind broke, upon her. "He is a happy spirit. He understands."

"It is you who cannot understand," angrily answered the woman. "Even in life he wrote: 'my flesh rebels against the thought.' It was the worst sting of death to him. And I never knew. Now I have lost him, I am lost."

Baby took the nerveless hands in hers, and chafed them while her tears rolled slowly.

"Pray to God, dearest," she whispered. "He will help you."

Rosamond drew away her hand with a great cry.

"God? There is no God!"

"Oh, Aunt!"

"Yes—there is, there is—a God of unsparing justice. Only a God could be so merciless and so just. It is just, it is just. I have sinned irremediably. I am punished for ever. What can you—you child, you child, what can you know of my sin?"

"I know this," cried Baby, kneeling down and gathering the cowering form to her strong embrace; "that you are ill, that you don't know what you're saying. But God is mercy," sobbed Aspasia, very reverently—she was shy of her religion, and spoke low, even amid her tears; "I know that God is mercy, and that those who are with Him must be merciful too."

"Do you cry for me?" said Lady Gerardine, a sort of wonder in her weary tones, as the wet cheeks were pressed against her face. "I cannot cry for myself. I am beyond tears."

With this, she suffered herself to be helped to rise, and made a feeble movement towards the bed. But at the sound of a closing door beneath, of steps on the stairs, she started violently and clutched the girl's arm.

"You will not let anybody in.... Nobody must come into my room—Aspasia—Aspasia!"

"No, no! The door is locked. Darling, don't be so frightened; how your teeth chatter! Aunt, I promise you shall be left in peace. I will watch. Can't you trust me? They'd better not!" she added convincingly, if vaguely.

The long convulsive shudders continued even after Baby had coaxed her to bed, and piled the bedclothes over her. She sat a long while by the sick woman, still rubbing the bloodless fingers, speaking soothingly from time to time. But Rosamond herself spoke no more.

At last silence fell upon the Old Ancient House. Steps ceased to resound along the echoing oak. Doors were definitely closed; even Lady Aspasia's pervading voice seemed to be hushed for the night. Then Lady Gerardine suddenly turned to her niece with something of her old gentle look:

"Go to bed, my child," she said. "Sleep, at least while you can. Your little face looks tired!"

"I'll sleep here with you, if you'll have me," said Aspasia, kissing the hand she held.

"No, no," said the other. "I must be alone. I shall have Jani, she will watch. Good night."

Poor healthy Baby was in truth ready to tumble over with fatigue, and had found her head, to her own fierce displeasure, nodding portentously from time to time. She went forth with the uncertain gait of the sleep-drunken, but paused at the door to give Jani minute and repeated instructions, which the latter, vividly alert, received with undisguised scorn. With much satisfaction the ayah

re-entered her mistress' room, and locked the door upon her drowsy rival.

CHAPTER XXI

Aspasia awoke from a heavy dreamless sleep with a sense of panic. Her heart was beating violently. She sat up in bed, listening eagerly, through the hammering of her pulses.

It is the nature of such old haunted places as Saltwoods that they impress you with their stillness by day and their stirring by night. Then the old boards creak as if to the tread of forgotten steps; old echoes answer to voices long silent; there is a rustle down the narrow passages as of garments the very texture of which is forgotten; there are sighs in the night airs, and little cold blasts wandering round corners, even on the stillest night. You tell yourself that it is the crumbling brick and wood work setting ever a little more towards destruction; but it seems rather as if the years-laden habitation had acquired a sentient being of its own; that when, like the aged, it lies wakeful in the night, the memories of the past come back to it; that it laments, with sighs, lost life, lost mirth, lost dignity.

But Baby would at no time, have had, in her practical young mind, room for such fancies as these; and now, the very real well-grounded fears which were strong upon her lent every stealthy creak about her a hideous material significance, every sighing breath the echo of a present tragedy.

Supposing Muhammed were really to creep into the Runkle's room—Sir Arthur might not have locked his door. It is all very well, in a fit of rage, to wish an irritating relative disposed of; it is a very different thing to wake in the middle of the night and think of the murderer at his work. Poor old Runkle...! Or, suppose Lady Gerardine were to do herself a mischief, were to ... there are ideas to which one cannot bear to give concrete shape, even in one's own imagination.

The girl lit a candle, sprang out of bed, and huddled on a dressing-gown. How foolish, how selfish, how wicked she had been to leave the fevered woman alone with Jani—Jani, the most helpless and unreasoning of human beings!

The old house might have been in league with the evil passions it housed that night, so loudly did it seem to protest against Aspasia's interference.

Heard any one ever door so groan on its hinges, ever boards so complain under tread of light foot? What menacing shadows leapt from every corner! It

was enough to scare any less courageous heart from its purpose. But on went Baby, down the little stairs, past Lady Aspasia's door (the creature snored—it was quite what Baby expected of her); round the corner of the passage, past Sir Arthur's little room. What a dead silence in there! She was afraid to listen to the suggestion, and scurried by, past M. Châtelard's room. Her aunt's door at last in sight. Baby stopped with a great start, her heart in her mouth, the candle almost dropping from her grasp—what was that black thing lying at such sinister length across the threshold? A heap of clothes? ... Jani? No—diminutive Jani could never spread to such bulk. Then what?

The thing moved slowly, reared itself to its knees, turned a wild black head, a wild black-bearded face, fierce eyes, towards Aspasia; then rose, with a spring.

Aspasia, in her mind, flung the light from her and ran into the darkness, shrieking: "The Panther, the Panther!" But Aspasia, in the flesh, stood rooted to the spot, in a paralysis of terror, unable to move a muscle.

The thing came close to her on its noiseless feet. And she saw that the panther was Muhammed. This was no surprise; she had known it.

But, under his dishevelled locks, from out of the barbaric wings of his beard, the savage being's face was gazing upon her—as it gradually filtered to her panic-stricken mind—with no sort of savageness; rather, indeed, a gentle, a pathetic anxiety.

"Miss Cuningham..." said the Pathan.

To her bewildered ears it was the voice of no Pathan that spoke, but the high-bred accents of an English gentleman. The girl rubbed her eyes with her left hand. ("Wake up, Aspasia, wake up. You are still asleep, and in the middle of some ridiculous dream!")

"Miss Cuningham," pursued the dream-creature that was panther and Pathan, and yet looked and spoke like one of her own sober kin; "are you going to her?"

"I was going," answered the girl, abandoning herself to her dream. Then she began suddenly to tremble, and with knees giving way beneath her, advanced uncertainly towards the door, all her energies bent on reaching safety within. But he, with an outflung gesture of prayer, cried to her, in that low English voice that was so amazing, yet which, in spite of its incongruity, soothed her frantic fear.

"In pity, stop one second. Do you hear how she is crying within? Tell me, what is her trouble?" And, as Baby fell from amazement to amazement, as even in dreams one falls, and could find no thought, much less words for answer, he went on in his pleading undertone: "Is the old man not good to her? Oh, do not stop to wonder why I should ask you! Answer me, in the name of God, as one fellow-creature to another: Whom, or what, is she mourning for?"

Aspasia saw how, between the sweep of his moustache and the great fans of

his beard, the man's lips quivered as he spoke: she felt his haggard eyes imploring, compelling; and she made answer, as she was bidden, "as one fellow-creature to another," with a solemnity which she herself was scarce aware of:

"She is mourning for her dead husband."

When she had spoken, Baby had a vision so swift that she had hardly time to seize it, of Muhammed's eyes lightening upon her with an extraordinary illumination. The next instant he had dropped his lids. Then he turned and, running, left her; and she heard the crazy boards creak, the stairs groan under his flying unshod feet.

Utter chaos possessed her thoughts as she turned the handle of the locked door and gently knocked, calling upon Jani; the fantastic terrors of her inexplicable experience, and the sounds of Rosamond's moans and sobs within driving her to urgency. As still in a sort of nightmare she found herself repeating her own phrase to the Pathan, and an odd speech of her aunt's, as if in answer to it: "She is mourning for her dead husband.... He is not really dead, Baby...."

Here an idea so extraordinary, so utterly impossible, suddenly tapped at her brain that, added to all the rest, a new fear of her own self came upon her.

"I think I am going mad, too," said the poor child to herself. "Jani, Jani," she cried louder, "let me in!"

And Jani, hearing, did so—this time, it seemed, with alacrity.

The candles on Lady Gerardine's dressing-table had been lit, and the portrait on the panel was in full illumination.

Rosamond was crouching in bed, her head on her knees, her hair in long strands about her. She did not move upon Aspasia's entrance; she did not seem to have heard it. Now and again a moan escaped her.

"Why did you not call me?" cried the girl, turning angrily upon Jani.

The ayah shook her head, her face was wrinkled into a thousand lines of dismay. She made a helpless gesture with both hands.

"Has she been like that all night?" asked Aspasia.

"All night," answered Jani, adding apologetically: "quieter now."

"Quiet!" echoed Baby.

Quiet! It was indeed this very quietude of suffering that terrified her. From such an extremity of pain she felt herself separated by all her own young vitality as from death itself. Here the science of her heart failed her. This inert woman, moaning like a suffering animal, seemed something horribly different from her beautiful aunt. Baby dared not touch her; she could not even find a word for her.

"Speak to her, you, Jani," she whispered.

Jani obediently approached the bed and, bending towards her mistress, poured forth a flood of Hindustani. Failing to make an impression, she seized the clasped hands in her claw-like grip and shook them.

Then Rosamond raised her head and turned a vacant look. Her face was drawn beyond recognition; Baby saw a slow tear gather and roll down into the open mouth. Anything more forlorn, more hopeless, the girl thought she had never beheld. As the golden head drooped once more into its broken attitude, Baby, her own tears springing scalding to her eyes, turned determinedly to Jani:

"I will get old Mary," she cried; and, seizing her candle again, pattered from the room, all her previous terrors swallowed up in the single huge anxiety. Instinctively Aspasia felt that if Lady Gerardine's reason, nay, her life itself, were to be saved, help must be forthcoming. And the only help she could think of was that of the mystic sorrow-experienced old servant of the family.

Old Mary, whose spirit seemed already a dweller of those regions where from the point of view of the eternal nothing finite can surprise, was soon ready at Aspasia's summons.

"Yes, Miss Cuningham, I'll come. Eh, the poor lady! Don't you fret yourself, miss, she's in God's hands."

The very sight of her, so promptly robed in her everyday black with the white cap tied under her chin, and the familiar little shawl over her shoulders, was enough to inspire confidence. Baby's tremors were calming down into hopefulness when they entered Lady Gerardine's room together.

"Eh, the poor lady," cried old Mary again, after one glance at the bed. Then she approached, and took her mistress' hands into hers: "My Lady," she said, "what ails you?"

If anything could have called Rosamond back from her deep slough of despond it was this appellation from lips that had hitherto so sweetly acknowledged her only as widow. The voice and words pierced to her brain. She reared her head quickly.

"Why do you call me that?"

"My Lady!"

The arrival of Sir Arthur Gerardine had made a distinct impression upon the housekeeper's half-dreaming mind. Lady Gerardine wrenched her hands from the withered clasp, and clapped them over her ears.

"My Lady! my Lady!" she cried wildly, "I am not Lady Gerardine, I never was Lady Gerardine; I am Mrs. English, Mrs. English. Don't you know it?—you of all women!"

"Ma'am!" ejaculated old Mary, while Aspasia nipped her arm, with warning fingers.

"Oh, Mary," wailed Rosamond, and broke into a storm of sobs, "do you think he will ever understand, do you think he will ever forgive me? Oh, Mary, you who have felt his presence here, ask him—ask him if he will forgive me!"

Now Mary hardly needed Aspasia's agitated whispers; she had understood.

Her blue eyes became illumined.

"In God's heaven," she said solemnly, "where dwell the happy spirits who have entered into life, all is peace and understanding—there is no need to forgive. Eh, Ma'am," she went on, while Rosamond stifled her sobs to hang upon her words, "do you think these poor things of earth can hurt those that have gone before? In heaven there is no marriage or giving in marriage!"

A moment Rosamond stared with blazing eyes; then she struck at the woman with both hands.

"How dare you!" she cried hoarsely. "How dare you! Out of my sight! I want none of your God who can make such cruel laws, none of your heaven that can hold such coldness. Oh, Harry, Harry, Harry! Somewhere you are. Hear me—come to me. Come!"

Fiercely, as if madness were indeed upon her, she flung her glance from one to the other of the helpless watchers.

"I must see him! Send old Mary away, she is keeping him from me. Send her away. Harry, Harry, come to me. Tell me you forgive me... Jani, your people can raise the dead, they say. Call him back to me. By your gods or your devils call his spirit to me. Jani, will you let your child die and not help her?"

The fluent Hindustani of her childhood rushed back to her lips. Aspasia, after having huddled old Mary out of sight, stood, feeling again as if one hideous dream had been succeeded by another still more hideous; feeling, while the unknown cry rang out, and the dear voice grew hoarse and feeble, more abjectly useless herself than in her teeming energy she could ever have thought possible. All at once the ayah, who had listened at first bewildered, then with an air of darkling attention, suddenly interrupted the failing accents of her mistress by a few harsh words.

Rosamond fell back upon her pillows with a sigh of exhaustion. The Hindoo turned, and went stealthily from the room, and Aspasia sank into a chair; her limbs would no longer support her.

Rosamond lay very still, almost like death, the girl thought, her eyelids only half closed over her dulled eyes. Never had minutes seemed so interminable; never silence so charged with boding sounds, as during this span of expectation. Never would Aspasia know whether it were hours or minutes that she sat, expecting she knew not what.

At length the shuffling tread of the ayah sounded without the door, and Jani entered. She had thrown a long white veil over her head, and between her hands she held the chafing-dish in which she was wont to cook her own food. The glimmer of the hot charcoal shone fitfully on her dark intent face. A thrill of superstitious terror ran through Aspasia.

"Jani," she cried, catching at the woman's veil, "what are you going to do?"

She thought the black eyes were lit with an evil spark as they looked back at her:

"Do my Missie Sahib's will," whispered Jani.

Baby gave a shivering cry.

"Oh—but, Jani, no one can call back the dead!"

Jani was crouching before the hearth. Without replying, she set her little tripod, and balanced the earthen pan on the top of it. In this lay divers herbs and other substances unknown to the watcher. A fine blue fume, with an aromatic odour, began to rise in the room.

Suddenly Jani looked up from her manipulations and spoke again. It was a belated answer to the girl's expostulation.

"Who knows," said she, in her slow difficult English, "where the spirits dwell, or how close they live to us? I will pray my gods! And you, Missie Sahib, pray yours, pray hard that she may have her wish."

The aromatic steam rose and circled. Jani drew a bag from her bosom and began to shake its contents over the pan.

"See, missie, see," she went on, her eyes fixed, "this is the good medicine. Behold, Missie Sahib shall dream, and in her dream, she shall be happy." She folded her hands, rocked herself backwards and forwards, low croonings and mutterings escaping from her lips. Now, like her who soothes a babe to rest, now with a passionate hypnotic fervour as before one of her own world-old shrines. Once she called sharply to Aspasia again:

"Pray, pray!"

Then Aspasia folded her hands, and obediently began to pray. Her first thought was to plead that she and her aunt be protected against what evil might be called into being by these unholy Eastern doings. She heard Rosamond turn in the bed, and saw dreamily, through the floating mists, that she was lying with her eyes fixed on the burning charcoal. Then the girl's thoughts began to wander. She would find herself earnestly petitioning for something, wanting something; and suddenly become aware that she knew not what it was. From where she sat the illumined portrait of Harry English looked down upon her: as once before in the dusk, it now, through the vapours, began to assume airs of life; seemed to smile, to frown. The lips quivered; then, she told herself, they spoke; the very words were ringing in her ears.

"In God's name, tell me, who is she mourning for?" It was no longer a picture, it was a living presence. Baby's eyelids drooped; her ideas grew less and less coherent. Finally it was the merest wisps of consciousness that floated through her brain. The old house seemed to hold its breath as in expectation. The stillness seemed to become palpable.

Presently, through her stupor, she felt herself called by a moaning voice and made painful clutches towards consciousness. She knew that Rosamond wanted

her and struggled bravely in spirit to break the bonds that held the body.

"Oh," pleaded the voice, "he is dead indeed, and it is I who have made him dead: Harry—Harry!"

* * * * *

All at once Aspasia found herself awake—a blast of cold air had rushed into the drowsy secret atmosphere. The door had been flung open and one had entered—a man who came with quick clean tread, whose face was pale, as if indeed risen from the dead, but whose eyes shone with a wonderful light of life.

The woman in the bed reared herself up with outflung arms, and, as he who entered went straight to her, she cast herself upon his breast with a great cry.

"Oh, Harry, Harry, Harry!"

Such a cry had the walls of the manor-house surely never held before. It might have been the voice of all the anguish and all the ecstasies it had known these centuries. It rang round the old walls; every echo took it up and answered it, as if they had been waiting for it.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

Bethune had soon packed his simple baggage; then he went straight to bed, setting his will upon sleep, against thought.

But what mind perturbed can command repose? Every ugly demon of disquiet that his situation could breed took form and sat beside him on the narrow bed. Three there were of a special torment. One with the eyes of hatred that Lady Gerardine had fixed upon him that evening. A twin demon that for ever repeated in his ear: "You should have died, that he might live." And a third, whose face was veiled, whose immutable hand pointed towards the empty sandy desert of the future.

When at last, far on in the watches of the night, sleep did fall upon him, it

was in trouble and confusion of mind—a dream-struggle with fate, more painful even than the reality.

He was back in the midst of the siege—one of the starving, thirst-plagued, harassed garrison. They were hard pressed, piling sandbags on a newly defiled rampart, but his men were a leaden weight upon him. He could not stir them to activity; when he tried to shout orders or expostulation, he could bring forth nothing but a whisper. Always the barricades melted away beneath his touch, his very rifle twisted like wax when he handled it, and then there sprang into the breach Muhammed Saif-u-din, one of an endless chain of leaping swordsmen: and Muhammed stood with folded arms smiling at him ironically.

Once again the siege. They were going to bury Vane. A file of little Goorkhas were picking the grave, and he was working at it too with the shot whistling overhead. Never was grave so hard to dig. They toiled, it seemed to him, for years, and still the stones rolled back into the hole and all was to begin again. Then suddenly it was ready: they were lowering the stiff figure, rolled in a cerement of tent canvas, into the shallow ditch. And a flap of the cloth fell back from over the face of the dead. It was not the face of Vane, but the face of Harry English. Then, with the awful knowledge of the dreamer, Bethune knew that Harry was not dead. But when he tried to call out to the others to stop, again he had no voice. He saw a little brown Goorkha twist the cloth over the livid countenance. They began shovelling the stony earth upon his friend; and while he felt in his own lungs the suffocation of him that is buried alive, a voice said in his ear: "What is it to you? You, who should have died that he might live!"

The suffocation continued so intense as to drown in physical torture even the workings of the over-active brain. Then, out of the blank, dream-consciousness struggled back to him. And again it was the siege. He was on his hard and narrow couch; it was the middle of the night, there was a great anxious rumour about him; sentries were calling; the enemy were upon them. In spite of anguished struggle, Bethune remained bound, hand and foot, while never had his spirit been more vividly awake. He could hear the running footsteps of the men in the passages, the thud, thud of the soft-shod Easterns. He could hear some one break into his room, hear himself called: "Raymond, Raymond!" And with the curious double personality of the sleeper, he told himself that it was years since any one had called him by that name—long and forlorn years of solitary life.

"Raymond!" called the voice, and the red light as of a torch burned through his closed eyelids. "Wake, Raymond!"

He knew who it was. It was Harry; his comrade who wanted him in the danger. What shame to be sleeping at such a moment!

Bethune wrenched himself from his pillow and sat upright. The room was

full of light to his dazzled eyes; and the voice, the voice of Harry English, was still ringing in his ears.

Muhammed Saif-u-din, who had been bending over the bed, one hand on the sleeper's shoulder, withdrew his touch and straightened himself. In his left hand he held a candle. The light flickered upon his dense black beard. But he was turbanless, and the tossed crisp hair was boyishly loose over his brow. His eyes were fixed upon Bethune, and Bethune stared back. Then Muhammed spoke:

"Raymond," he said.

For a moment that was heavier in the scales of time than most hours of men's lives, the two plunged their gaze into each other.

"My God," said Bethune, in a whisper then, "you!"

A dream! Another dream of torture! Nay, no dream this time; he was awake. The unbelievable had happened. The grave had yawned and given out a living man. Harry English was alive. He had come back from the bourne whence no traveller returns, to claim his own—to claim his wife. As in a sudden vision, more vivid than any of his troubled fancies had been to-night, Bethune saw them in each other's arms, and was himself stabbed through and through by daggers of fire—he, the man whose misery it was to love his friend's wife! ...

The dead had heard her call. He could see it all now, with horrible lucidity. All was clear to him. He himself had brought Lady Gerardine, the forgetful, back to the memory of her love. She had called, and Harry had come—from death.

And here he stood, Harry English, looking into his friend's eyes, reading his friend's soul. Suddenly Bethune grew cold to the marrow.

He would have given everything he had, his life by inches, to be able at that instant to veil those tell-tale eyes of his. But in vain; he could not drop the lids between them. At last, with a short laugh, Harry English turned away and released him, and Bethune covered his face with his hands.

Oh life, more cruel than death! These two had been closer than brothers; it was eternity itself that was giving them back to each other. And thus did they meet!

"Bethune," said he that had been the Pathan, in brief decided accents which once again whirled Raymond back to the hours when all had hung upon their leader in the crucial emergency, "there is no time for explanation. Every moment just now is precious. I must have this beard off—I want scissors, razors." As he spoke he tore his long coat from his back; he caught up the razors on the dressing-table with impatient hands. "Scissors, man, scissors! And for the Lord's sake, give me some more light!"

Bethune sprang out of bed as if he had indeed gone back to that past of which he had been dreaming and his commanding officer had called upon his services.

No stranger scene had ever been enacted within the narrow limits of this antique room, nor one more fraught with vital significance: though here, perchance, life had been born, and from here, surely, life had departed.

A silence as heavy as the last doom lay between the comrades; and every second as it passed was ticked off, it seemed, by Bethune's heart. Death they had faced together often—it was at the test of life that friendship had faltered.

Swiftly the glossy wings of the Pathan's beard fell under the snipping blades. And when he had exhausted what aid he could render, Bethune sat on the edge of the bed and watched the passing of Saif-u-din and the rising of Harry English from the dead.

There was one moment of outward triviality which yet, to the looker-on, was charged with a pain almost beyond bearing; it was when English, with the lather white upon his chin and cheek, turned quickly round upon him with hands outstretched for a towel. How often had not he seen his comrade thus, in the old days, when they had lived together, marched together, laughed and fought and suffered together, and he had been so happy!

The shaving accomplished, Captain English bent forward to the mirror and occupied himself with minute care in trimming and combing the flaunting, up-turned moustache of the Pathan back to the old sober limits. There was not a quiver in the strong busy hands.

Vaguely Bethune, in the chaos of his thoughts, wondered how he could ever have believed this man dead. Such as he did not die, so long as they were wanted in life.

Then it was Harry English, indeed, that looked round. If Bethune's brain had had room for any doubt, the doubt must have died at that instant. Harry English, pallid, where for years the Eastern beard had grown so close—almost as with the pallor of the cheek upon which the earth has lain—worn, not so much by these same years as by a devouring impatience sternly held: but the old leader nevertheless, with such a light in his dark eyes as had been wont to kindle there when he called his men into the heart of the fight.

He spoke suddenly, abruptly; and the other found once more the exorbitant situation heightened rather than lowered by the very triviality of the words that marked it:

"I suppose," he said, "that you can lend me a coat. Where is it? In your bag?"

He could not wait for his companion to draw his wits together. In a couple of movements the whole contents of the portmanteau were on the floor, and his arm was already in the sleeve of a shooting-jacket.

This urgency of haste, under strong control though it was, awoke an answering fever in Bethune's veins. Oh, there was no need of words to make him

understand! When he thought of her to whom the husband was hastening, his own heart beat to madness.

In two steps Harry was at the door, when Bethune, with an inarticulate sound, flung himself before him, stretching out his arms. So poignantly familiar did the old comrade look in the shabby shooting-jacket that his heart was all dissolved within him for ruth and tenderness.

A second English fixed his friend with cold and steel-bright glance, inquiring: then his face relaxed.

"Not now, Raymond," said he, put him on one side with quick but kindly touch, and was gone.

CHAPTER II

"The Captain Sahib! the Captain Sahib!" cried Jani in shrill tones; and prostrated herself before the brazier, her face on the floor.

"Does she think she has called him from the dead?" wondered Baby. Her thoughts danced in a mist; she would have liked to have caught one and clung to it, but they kept whirling beyond all control. She sat as if tied to her chair, staring stupidly at the two who held each other clasped so close—at the black head bent upon the golden head. Then she saw how the grip of Rosamond's hands relaxed; how the whole clinging figure fell inertly, while he—man or ghost—seemed to let it slip from him as though in surprise.

He turned his head and looked at Aspasia. There was indeed, something unearthly about his countenance; in the ashen pallor on cheek and chin, in contrast to the bronze of the rest of the face, which seemed still to hold the touch of that Indian sun under which he had died. His eyes burnt with fierce light in their dark hollows. Aspasia felt that she ought to shudder with terror, that the situation, at least, ought to be one of desperate interest, but she was only conscious of a numb curiosity. She sat and stared. Then her gaze wandered from the mysterious presence to the figure lying on the bed. She saw the sharp outline of Rosamond's chin upturned, and thought, without the least emotion, that perhaps her aunt was dead. The very gold of the hair seemed lifeless, turning to ash. That cry still ringing in her ears must have been a death-cry. It had been as the cry of a soul that is passing.

She watched the man lay his hand on the still forehead, saw him look

sharply about him and inhale the air with deep breath.

Suddenly, in two great strides, he was across the room. There was a noise of tearing curtains and jingling glass; and Aspasia found herself inhaling icy breaths of air in gasps. Heavily, with a sob of pain, she woke from her stupor. She seemed to be drawing this delicious coldness into herself as if it were new life. The man passed before her once again. He was holding Jani's tripod high in his hands. A trail of aromatic vapour swept against her face; and, as she involuntarily breathed it, she had a nauseating sense of suffocation, and the vanishing stupor returned upon her momentarily, like the shadow of some huge bird's wings. With an effort she turned her eyes, saw the man hoist the brazier in his hands and hurl it through the open window, saw the charcoal scattered apart like a shower of falling stars, heard a crash without. Then she knew it was no ghost.

The singular white and bronze face bent over her.

"You are better, Miss Cuningham?" said a voice. She knew that voice, too; she smiled lazily.

"Now I know you," she said. "You are Muhammed."

He smiled back at her, a fugitive smile, mixed sweetness and sadness.

"By-and-by you will know me better—by-and-by," he said. "Now try and wake up, if you can, and help me."

He had left her and was again at the bed. Aspasia did as she was bidden. She shook herself from her torpor and stood up, somewhat dizzy, somewhat sick, but yet herself.

The man, Muhammed or another, she did not allow herself to think out the matter further, was hanging over Rosamond's inanimate form. Now he laid down the hand he held and bent his dark head to her breast. Baby flung one look of horror at the rigid upturned chin.

"She's dead!" she screamed.

He raised himself abruptly, his countenance grey even under the bronze.

"She is not dead," he answered her quickly, with a gesture that forbade her words, "but I have been too sudden with her, and Jani has been playing devil's tricks with her drugs. Is there any brandy—?" He wheeled round as he spoke, for the door had opened and old Mary's figure appeared.

The Ancient House was now full of rumours. Old Mary's blue eyes were fixed in a stare of uttermost ecstasy. Her trembling hands were lifted as if in invocation; all at once she stretched them out, with an inarticulate cry of exaltation. Then her voice faltered into homely accents:

"My lamb!" she stammered.

"Oh, Mary," said the man, and his tones rang with boyish note. "Mary dear, brandy! Mary, if you love me, quick."

He sat down on the side of the bed chafing Rosamond's fingers. Silently

Aspasia held up a bottle of essence, taken from the dressing-table. He nodded, and she began to lave her aunt's temples, not daring to let her thoughts or eyes rest on the waxen face, on the ominous air of irrevocable repose about the long relaxed figure. She wished the silent lips did not wear that mysterious smile. Determinedly arresting her mind on those strong words: "She is not dead," she felt that so long as she could hold this confidence it would help to keep the dread angel at bay.

"I was too sudden with her," said the man again, "but when I heard her call me, I think I went mad—I had waited so long!"

Then it seemed to Aspasia that, from the first moment since he had spoken to her in the passage to-night, she had known him.

"You are Harry English," she said. And saying this, she began to cry. She looked down at the piteous fixed smile. He had waited so long! Was it not now too late?

"Oh," she said aloud, sobbing, "is it now not too late?"

Then he flung himself on his knees beside the bed, and she drew back, for none should come between them. He gathered the inanimate form into his arms; his lips were close to the deaf ear, and he was speaking into it.

"Rosamond, my wife, Rosamond, I have come back to you—come back to me. Rosamond, beloved!"

The room was suddenly full of people.

Was it possible, Aspasia asked herself, that between that cry of Rosamond and this gathering of the inmates of the house so short a time had lapsed. She felt as if she had lived a span of years.

"My goodness," cried Lady Aspasia. "Who was screaming? Any one hurt? I never heard such a scream in my life!"

Then speech and movement alike left the eager lady. Gazing at the bed, she stood open-mouthed with stupefaction—an odious inclination to laugh barely stifled, for decency's sake, in her throat.

Sir Arthur also had halted on the threshold. His eyes were fixed, as if he could hardly credit their evidence, upon the figure of the man in the shooting-jacket who knelt at the side of the low bed, almost covering the unconscious body with his embrace. And, indeed, Sir Arthur's eyes at the moment were playing him false.

"Bethune!" ... he exclaimed. "Major Bethune!"

Not a thought, not a glance had he for the death-like stillness of his wife's face against the crisp black head—to him that head appeared sleek, close-cropped, indefinitely brown. He cried out again loudly:

"You infernal scoundrel..." and caught the intruder roughly by the shoulder. The kneeling man merely turned his head.

"What ... what ... the devil!—" The words died on Sir Arthur's lips. His eyes protruded. "Who the devil are you, sir?"

"Who is it?" came Lady Aspasia's whisper, more penetrating than natural tones.

"Oh hush, hush," said Baby, rebuking she knew not what spirit of sacrilegious curiosity. "Hush! It is Harry English, uncle!"

Slowly the man got up from his knees and looked round; then his eye came back to Sir Arthur.

"Harry English!" repeated Lady Aspasia's lips, voicelessly.

Her mind leaped; an irrepressible lightning satisfaction wrote itself on her harsh, handsome face; then her glance swept over the bed, and the corners of her mouth went down in a grimace. There lay Death—Death already, or very near, or she had never seen it. A double release! This double release was unnecessary—nay, a complication. Fate played such tricks at times! But Sir Arthur had staggered and reeled, and Lady Aspasia, ever practical, had to postpone thought for action. She caught him firmly by the elbow:

"Hold up, Arty; be a man."

The Lieutenant-Governor's first impulse had naturally been to deny the monstrous thought, to wither Aspasia for her impious suggestion. Then a look at the black and white portrait over the dressing-table, fitfully but vividly illumined by the flames of the draught-blown candles—a look from that strong presentment to the pallid-faced, black-haired man by the bed, brought an overwhelming conviction. He faltered under it. For a while he could collect no words, no thought; but presently, as the tide of blood began slowly to recede, eddying, from his brain, broken phrases escaped him, almost in a whisper:

"Your—your conduct is infamous, sir," he babbled, "ungentlemanly—ungentlemanly in the extreme!" ...

Harry English, with one hand on Rosamond's quiet breast as if mutely claiming his own, spoke then, his eyes on the creature who had robbed him.

"Your place, sir, is no longer here," he said. His voice was very low, but it contained an authority which Sir Arthur instinctively felt with a fresh spasm of indignation and self-pity, trembling upon tears. "Your place is no longer here," repeated English. "Leave the room."

The Lieutenant-Governor fairly suffocated:

"How long has she known it?" cried he, panting, as he pointed to the bed. "No wonder I thought her mad. You have killed her!" he exclaimed acridly, upon another revulsion of thought.

"Had you not better have a doctor?" came Lady Aspasia's dispassionate accents. "If it's not too late," she added cynically.

Baby called out as if she had been struck, and burst into fresh tears.

The inert figure on the bed was all the girl had of home, all she had of certain love. This marble woman, no longer kin to her, had lavished on her more than a mother's care; from those lips, now so silent, except in the last sad days of trouble, Aspasia had never heard an ungentle word.

"She must not die," sobbed she.

"She will not die," said Harry English.

He shifted his hand till it rested over Rosamond's heart. Then he looked down at the face, with its faint smile of secret joy, pitifully exposed to all these eyes; and his own countenance took an expression of tenderness so infinite that weeping Baby, catching sight of it, held her breath. He moved and stood with his back to the bed, to shelter in some measure the unconscious woman from the violation of curious looks.

"I must beg you all to go," he said.

Sir Arthur, who had been gradually growing, within and without, to the purple stage of fury, now exploded. Portrait or no portrait, the story was preposterous. This fellow was an impostor!

"Turn me out! ... 'Tis you, sir, I'll turn out. I'll have you committed, sir, I'll—"

"Please," said a voice from the door, "if any one is ill, let it not be forgotten that I am a doctor. I offer my services," said Monsieur Châtelard.

CHAPTER III

Monsieur Châtelard, compact in self-possession, precisely attired, as if he had not been called from slumber at the worst hour of the night by a sense of mortal emergency! And yet a very different Châtelard, either from the eager traveller or the genial raconteur and table companion they had known: this was Châtelard the physician—the world-renowned specialist.

There was a weighty professional seriousness about him as he advanced into the room, fixing his spectacles with thumb and forefinger; an air of confident responsibility. He wasted not a second upon curiosity at the singular group by the bed, but sent his keen direct gaze straight to the patient.

"She's killed herself," was his first thought. "Poison," he murmured aloud, and his gesture was enough to clear the bedside for his own approach.

"No," said a voice close to him. "Not poison-shock."

M. Châtelard looked up quickly, and immediately became aware of a stranger's presence.

"Monsieur?" he exclaimed. He, too, had instantly concluded that the second man in the room must be Bethune. He was shaken into surprise. "In the name of Heaven, who are you?"

"I am her husband, whom she thought dead. I took her by surprise; she fainted."

M. Châtelard formed his lips for a noiseless whistle. Affairs, at one bound, had complicated themselves with a vengeance. Incredibly interesting! ... But the emergency claimed him. He bent over the bed, and there was silence all through the room.

Even Sir Arthur, recalled from his undignified attitude, was stilled; not so much indeed from the sense that a human life was trembling in the balance, but from the demands which the presence of a new witness made upon decorum.

The doctor raised himself and held out his hand.

"A candle," he said briefly.

It was given to him, and again the silence reigned.

M. Châtelard, with deft and gentle touch, lifted the heavy eyelid, passed the flame before it, and peered for some seconds into the fixed pupil, abnormally dilated. Then he handed back the light. Harry English took it, and held it aloft while the doctor once more consulted pulse and heart.

Muttering that he would never travel without his stethoscope again, M. Châtelard laid his cropped head on the fair bosom. Again the seconds ticked by with nightmare slowness. The brown hand that held the candle was shaken with slight tremor. At last M. Châtelard straightened himself with the final air of one who pronounces a verdict.

"This is no mere syncope," he said. "This is brain trouble. Shock, as you said, sir," with a grave inclination of his head towards Captain English.

Old Mary, back from her errand, here proffered some brandy in a glass.

"What is that?" cried the physician, sharply. "Brandy," he said, sniffing. "Heaven preserve us, 'tis well I am here! Above all things she must not be roused. Mon cher Monsieur," he went on, turning again to Harry English, "here all our efforts must be to help nature, not to oppose her. Let all those lights be extinguished," he added authoritatively. "We must have darkness and quiet. How come all these people in the room?" He spoke with the doctor's immediate irritation at surroundings injurious to his patient.

There are situations passing the endurance of human nature, especially when it is the human nature of a person of high political importance. Here was M. Châtelard actually addressing yonder infernal interloper as the leading person!

"I call you to witness, M. Châtelard," Sir Arthur cried excitedly, "that this is

some conspiracy that I by no means acknowledge—”

Old Mary interposed, subdued yet urgent.

”Oh, sir, it is indeed my master!”

”Hush, Arty, come away now!” whispered Lady Aspasia; and once more clasped his elbow with strong sensible hand. ”There will be plenty of time for all this by-and-by.”

”Unless you want to kill her altogether, Sir Gerardine,” said Dr. Châtelard, gravely, ”you will make no scenes here.”

Harry English stood sentinel by his wife’s bed, disdainingly speech.

”Unless you want to kill her,” had said the doctor. As the words had been spoken Sir Arthur looked quickly at her whom he had called wife. ”Better she should die,” thought he. The whole measure of his love for the woman in whose beauty he had gloried was in that mean thought. Better she should die, since her existence was no longer an honour but a shame to him, Sir Arthur. He had loved her as part of himself; no longer his, what was she to him? Nothing more than the amputated limb to its owner, a thing to hide out of sight with all speed, a thing to bury away.

”I beg of you again,” resumed Dr. Châtelard, in tones of restrained impatience; ”I can have no one remain.”

A couple of servant girls, who stood huddled whispering in their corner, slid away one after the other.

Lady Aspasia, by some moral force and a good deal of muscular pressure, succeeded in dragging the protesting Sir Arthur in their wake. The doctor looked at old Mary—she dropped her curtsey.

”I might be of use, sir.”

He considered her a second in silence.

”You may stay,” he said.

”And I?” said Aspasia, her pallid tear-stained face was thrust pleadingly forward.

”You will do better to go, my child,” said the Frenchman, paternally.

”Doctor ... she will not die?”

”Assuredly not this night at least,” he replied, evasive yet consoling. From the door she flung back a piteous look at English, and once again his eyes answered her: ”She will not die.”

Harry English took the last unextinguished candle and laid it on the floor. Outside, the yellow grey dawn was breaking.

”I want hot bottles,” ordered Dr. Châtelard of Mary; and when she had left the room, he turned to the strange man who had called himself Lady Gerardine’s husband.

”You, too, sir,” he said. ”You must leave us.”

Harry English started. For the first time, that evening, discomposure laid hold of him.

"I? ... but I cannot go. She will want me."

"My dear sir," said the other, his tone softening into compassion (here was one who loved as few love, or he knew not how to read countenances), "this affair is very strange, but I, as doctor, am here to judge of nothing but the good of my patient. She has had a shock, and the shock has been caused by you. I repeat, all I can do here is to aid nature—nature demands repose. She is as one who has had concussion of the brain. That brain must rest. Call her back to thought, you may call her to death."

"I would sit in a corner of the room—she would not know."

"Ah," said the doctor, "one never can tell. That is a fallacy I have long since seen through. So long as the soul is there, my dear sir, many things take place inside the body that we know naught of."

Then Harry English submitted. He went forth with bent head.... He who had waited so long! lint, even as Aspasia had done, he halted to question:

"If she comes to consciousness?"

"She will not come to consciousness, perhaps, for days."

"If she wants me—?"

"My dear sir—immediately, of course."

"When she comes to consciousness, will she—?"

"Ah," interrupted the doctor, "who knows? We may have brain trouble—an illness we will surely have."

Then Harry English, who had so confidently said she would not die, looked at the other mutely inquiring yet further.

"Ah, my dear sir," said the Frenchman in his quick apprehension, and shrugged his shoulder. Then he added, compassionately, turning his head towards the bed:

"She is young."

Harry English closed the door and sat down in the dark passage, cross-legged after the habit that had grown second nature, and there remained. Waiting.

Suddenly he rose to his feet again; he had heard the handle of the door click. M. Châtelard stood on the threshold.

"The Indian woman," he whispered, "she makes a noise. She must go."

Jani, crouching in a hidden corner within, had set up a moaning. The sound of her wail caught Harry English's ear: a creeping chill passed over him; that Eastern lament that had nothing human in its note, but was as the despair of the animal that mourns without understanding, how familiar it was to his ear! So did the women there, over seas, wail only over death. He, who had held himself

in such strength hitherto, was shaken to his soul. He could not form the words that rose to his lips.

"You know how to deal with these persons," pursued the Frenchman, absorbed in his thoughts, and in the dusk unable to read the other's countenance, "I beg you to remove her at once. But, *chut, chut*, attention, please, not to disturb my patient!"

English drew his breath sharply. Had he been of those who weep, he might have burst into tears then. It is the instant of relief that catches the strong-fighting soul unawares. He clenched his hands till the nails ran into the palm, and followed the doctor on noiseless feet into the room.

One glance at the bed! It was all in shadow; but even in the deliberate dimness there was evidence that a practised hand had already been at work. He could see that his wife had been settled among her pillows with care. The white of a bandage lay across her brow. A screen was set between the bed and the banked-up fire. Old Mary was seated in a high chair, within the glow, composed and watchful, the very picture of what a nurse should be. The light of the shaded candle illumined but one thing—the white hand that hung slightly over the edge of the bed; it scintillated back from the gems of the ring that guarded the narrow wedding circlet. His rings!

M. Châtelard pulled him by the sleeve. Harry English turned sharply. He had told Sir Arthur "that his place was not here," and must now realise in his turn that neither was his place here. There was bitterness and anger in his eyes as he bent over the ayah.

She looked up at him, terror on her face. He pointed to the passage, and she crawled out, on hands and knees, whimpering to herself like a dog. Without another glance towards Rosamond, Harry retired also, and closed the door behind him. Old Mary followed him with her eyes, and folded her hands; her lips moved as if in prayer.

* * * * *

In the passage Jani dragged herself towards her old master, and clutching his ankles, laid her head upon his feet.

"Sahib!" ...

Harry looked down at her a moment, without speaking. So intense was the bitterness that welled up within him, even towards this poor wretch, that he was ashamed of it. Thus, when he spoke, it was with an added gentleness.

"Ah, Jani," he said, "you knew me, here, from the beginning." ...

This miserable pawn on the chess-board of life, had she not worked against him, how different all might now have been!

Jani once more lifted her face. In the livid dawn it looked grey with fear. Then she was gone from him with a scarcely perceptible rustle, a whisper of soft garments, like some stealthy-winged thing of the night. Harry English sank back into his squatting attitude; to wait again. Never had fate so completely veiled her countenance from him.

Years he had endured. He had clung tenaciously to life, had borne, at the moment of hope renewed, the cruellest and most insulting buffet that could strike a man, and still had fought, still had held to a determined purpose. Had it all been to this hour only?—false servant, failing friend, lost wife! No, not lost. So long as the faintest breath flickered between those silent smiling lips.

* * * * *

Harry English turned to God, with a great cry of his soul. It was no cry of supplication, but a call upon the Infinity. Because of Power, because of Justice, because of Goodness, she must not die.

CHAPTER IV

M. Châtelard sat down by the bed and laid his finger on the slender wrist. A hardening pulse. Fever. He had anticipated fever, he almost welcomed it as the natural course.

Would she live? These nervous creatures are as tough as cats. But, poor soul, were it not perhaps best for her were she to pass? What a situation! Great gods, what a situation! There was not one of these searchers after psychological enigmas, not one of these implacable exponents of the weaknesses of the human heart, not a Maupassant, not a Mirbeau, not a d'Annunzio who could have devised the story of this impasse. To die would be too absolutely commonplace a solution. If he, Châtelard, could help it, she should not die, were it only for the proper working-out of the problem.

Propping his chin on his hand and his elbow on the bed, the savant leaned forward, gazing at his patient, till his keen eyes, piercing the gloom, were able to trace the lines of the unconscious face.

"It is not that she is so beautiful—there are many in this country who possess the same incredible purity of outline, the same delicate wealth of feminine

charm—but *c'est une ensorceleuse!* Did I not say it to the young man? One of those women who create passions that become historic. One of those whose fate is to make havoc as they go. The three men here—they are mad of her, each in his different way. The poor Gerardine, he could have cried like a child, as we turned him from the room ... and the sly, quiet, relentless Bethune, that man of granite ... the lover, he's devoured; the very stone wastes in the furnace. How thin he has grown since that Indian night! And the third—the most surprising of all—the real husband! Oh, the strange story! the husband—the *first* husband *par dessus le marché*, as though matters were not sufficiently entangled already! Ah, ça! mais d'où sort-il, celui-là? C'est qu'il faisait pitié—c'est encore lui le plus atteint des trois! One could feel the frenzied soul under that air of calm command." ...

Then enthusiastically following the trail of his own Gallic deductions, M. Châtelard began to reconstruct, *con amore*, the threads of the drama.

"Un beau gaillard, malgré sa pâleur de revenant.... Avec lui, sans doute, elle a appris ce que c'est que l'amour. Ils se sont aimés jeunes et beaux.... Ils se valaient bien l'un l'autre, certes! Idylle parfaite, heures parfumées! Then comes the cyclone. He is swept from her by relentless duty. He dies, a hero in war as he was a hero in love. She is alone, desolate. She mourns. At the psychological moment, enters upon the scene the handsome, rich, powerful Sir Gerardine. He offers her ease, position, comfort, a home, his protection. She turns to him as a child to a father. She places her hand in his. And thereafter follows the inevitable. The years have gone by; she becomes more and more a woman; the demands of her nature expand; and the old husband who is—and I don't blame him—not content to be father.... *Sapristi*, how he bores her, the old husband! Then arrives the man, the young man, the man of her own age. (He has loved her already as his friend's wife, in the secret of his own soul, all in honour and loyalty.) He seeks her now, knowing that his hour has come." ...

"L'oublierai-je, jamais telle qu'elle était ce soir-là, au moment de la première tentation? Ruisselante du feu vert de ses émeraudes; superbe dans sa beauté, sa chasteté insolente; mais couvant déjà sous la neige de sa blanche beauté, le feu destructeur de la passion renaissante. Elle a lutté. Oh, oui, celle-là a lutté! Son âme et son corps se sont entredéchirés.... Mais, poursuivie jusque dans cette solitude même par l'implacable qui l'a traquée comme le tigre sa proie, la fin est inévitable!"

"Et au moment suprême où, femme au zénith des a gloire, elle cède à la seconde passion—voilà l'objet de la première qui rèsuscite, et vient la réclamer! Ah, dieux, quel cri! Les oreilles m'en tintent encore. Jamais je ne l'oublierai, ce cri d'un coeur qui s'effondre..."

"And the resuscitated man? The devil! where does he come from? Springing up in the old house in the middle of the night. Another tragedy there! He

misdoubts, as yet, nothing. Strong in his right, in the memory of their love, he comes to claim her of the old husband—Of the third, of the lover, he has no suspicion. My God, with what eyes of trouble and wonder did he not look at me when I bade him leave her! Unhappy fellow, why 'tis his very existence that's killing her! How long will it be before he finds out the truth, finds out that, at the very moment of regaining his treasure, he has been robbed, robbed by him who was his friend? And the friend, then, that man of granite, how will he bear himself? Will even his relentless determination stand before that terrible double knowledge of his own unconscious treachery to his comrade and of the mortal danger to his beloved? A stronger man, even than he, might well go mad! ... As for the pitiable second husband, the old man, who counts for so little in the midst of these three young lives, and is yet so stricken in all he holds most dear—his dignity, his honour, his pathetic senile confidence and affection—what of him? Oh, antique, silent house, what palpitating drama do you not hold, this desolate dawn! Those three men, each with his passion and his claim—his just claim—and the woman there, lying so still! ...”

So M. Châtelard mused, with ever and anon a keen eye to the patient, a stealthy touch on the pulse.

A pale shaft of light pierced in between the curtains, and, like a slowly shifting finger, moved straightly till it pointed to the bed. M. Châtelard started, rubbed his eyes, adjusted his spectacles, and stared again. The heavy, half-loosened tress that lay across the sheet shone silver in the light—the tress that had been so richly golden, crown of that haughty head, only the evening before.

”I have heard of such a thing,” said the doctor to himself, ”but it is the first time that I have seen it with my own eyes.” He bent over the pillow and curiously lifted the strand of hair. There was no illusion about it. Rosamond's glorious hair was white.

CHAPTER V

”I think you had better get your uncle a little whisky, or something,” said Lady Aspasia to Baby, as, upon their ejection into the passage, she guided the poor gentleman's vague footsteps towards her own room. ”Come in here, Arty; there's a good fire.”

Sir Arthur turned his eyes upon her with a vacant look, catching at surprise.

"Yes, my room. But, Lord, I don't think any of us need mind the *convenances* to-night!"

She gave a dry laugh. At least, whatever rules were transgressed now—they only regarded him and her: the thought came with sudden and exceeding pleasantness upon her; and that heart of hers, atrophied by long disuse, was stirred. She looked at the helpless, dazed creature, sinking into her armchair, with a softness that, even in his most gallant youth, his image had not evoked. "Good fellow" as she was, Lady Aspasia was yet a woman in the hidden fibre.

Young Aspasia, shuffling about in her slippers, yet still fleet of foot, broke in upon their silence with the decanter. Shivering, partly with fatigue, partly with the chill of the dawn, she stood, vaguely watching the elder lady administer a stiff bumper to Sir Arthur.

Complete as was the turmoil in her own mind, deep as was her distress and anxiety anent Rosamond, Baby's sense of humour was irresistibly acute: the vision of Lady Aspasia, incompletely attired under her motor coat, her loose coiled hair (divested of the dignity of her "transformation") presenting a strangely flat appearance, bending with such solicitude over so reduced a Runkle, brought a hysterical giggle in her throat.

"Pray," said Lady Aspasia, wheeling round upon her, "don't begin to cry here, my dear! One is as much as I can manage."

"I'm not crying," retorted young Aspasia, as indignantly as her chattering teeth would allow. "I'm laughing."

"Then that's worse," responded the other, succinctly. "Take some whisky, too. Go to bed."

Sir Arthur, gulping down the potent mixture provided for him, extended a forbidding left hand:

"One moment," he ordered; then choked and coughed. But the stimulant was working its effect, his backbone was notably stiffer. The native dignity, not to say pomposity, was returning to his support. He regarded his niece with eyes, severe, if somewhat watery. "How long, Aspasia, have you known this—this—disgraceful state of affairs?"

He rolled his suffused gaze from the girl to his distinguished relative, seeking a kindred indignation.

"You mean, how long I have known that Aunt Rosamond wasn't married at all? Oh, Lord, what am I saying?—that she's got two husbands—gracious, I can't help being muddled. Who could? Anyhow, that she's not married to you? I—"

"The premises are by no means established," interrupted Sir Arthur, with not unsuccessful reaching after his old manner. "But how long, I ask, have you known of the presence in this house—or in this neighbourhood—of the person, impostor or no, who dares to present himself as Harry English?"

"Well, as a matter of fact," said Baby, hugging herself in her dressing-gown, the warmth of the fire, the heat of her reawakening antagonism, getting the better of her chill tremors; "as a matter of fact, you have known him a good deal longer and more intimately than I have."

"Lord, child, how you bandy words!" said Lady Aspasia, disapprovingly; "let her go to bed, Arty. Surely, you'll have plenty of time by-and-by for all this."

But the Lieutenant-Governor waived the interruption aside with impatience. Miss Cuningham did not await further questioning. It would be scarce human to feel no complacency in the power to impart weighty information. And Baby was among the most human of her race.

"You went and fished him out yourself," she cried. "Your own particular, private secretary."

And still Sir Arthur was all at sea.

"Private secretary," he repeated blankly, hastily running over in his mind all the members of his staff within recent years. Nonsense! Preposterous! There was not one who bore the faintest resemblance to this black-avised, domineering intruder.

Lady Aspasia whistled under her breath to mark her displeasure at the inopportune discussion, and mixed herself a companion bumper to Sir Arthur's.

"The native spring, not quite so native as we all fancied, Runkle. Muhammed Saif-u-din. My goodness," cried the girl, clasping her hands, and struck with a new aspect of the situation, "no wonder I thought him queer! ... No wonder, Runkle, he looked at you as if he could murder you! Lord, it's just too romantic! To think of his being with you all these days and weeks, and of his being here, alone with us—waiting, waiting all the time."

"Muhammed..." ejaculated Sir Arthur, and sat in his chair as if turned to stone.

Then suddenly:

"Muhammed!" he cried again, in a high shrill voice, and bounded to his feet. "The damned black scoundrel," foamed the Lieutenant-Governor, "the wretched nigger. The miserable beggar, whom I took from the gutter and admitted into my household, and treated as a gentleman—a gentleman, begad! By the Lord, he shall smart for this! It's a hideous conspiracy! No, no, Lady Aspasia, you don't know the race as I do. It's trickery, it's a piece of monstrous Indian jugglery. I tell you, it's a conspiracy between them all."

"Of course," cut in sarcastic Baby, trembling again, this time with anger, "it's all a conspiracy, merely to annoy the Runkle. Captain English has simply plotted not to have been killed, and poor Aunt Rosamond lies at death's door out of sheer aggravation—that's part of the conspiracy also."

"And pray," said Sir Arthur, unheeding anything but the opposition of her

tone, and turning furiously again upon the girl, "will you have the kindness to answer me at last? You, you, my niece, how long have you been in the business? A nice set of vipers I've been nourishing! Oh, my God!"

He put his hand to his forehead and reeled; then stretched out his arm, gropingly. Promptly, Lady Aspasia popped the glass she had destined for herself into the vague fingers; and, as if mechanically, it was instantly conveyed to his lips.

"I've been in the business no longer than you, yourself, Runkle."

Young Aspasia, between anger, scorn, and her sense of humour, was now perilously near the hysterics dreaded by her namesake.

"Now look here," said the latter, catching the small figure by the elbow and turning it towards the door, "you get out of this in double-quick time; I'll manage your uncle."

"Master Muhammed will find he has made a little mistake—a little mistake," said the great man, spurred once more to his normal vigour of intellect.

He was standing, legs wide apart, on the hearthrug, and glared at his niece as she wheeled round on the threshold for her usual Parthian shot.

"It's rather a pity that he does not happen to be Muhammed any more; isn't it, Runkle?" she cried spitefully; "that he never was Muhammed, but always Harry English, Harry English, Harry English, who never was dead at all!"

She closed the door with a slam upon a picture of her uncle's suddenly stricken face, of Lady Aspasia's swift advance towards him with outstretched hands.

"She'll manage him!" said Baby to herself, with a sobbing giggle, as she ran down the dark passage.

CHAPTER VI

The Old Ancient House lay in silence—a sinister silence, Bethune thought—after the rumours and alarms of the night. The dawn was breaking yellow over a grey, still world. What did it herald? he wondered, as he looked out of his dormer window under the roof.

One thing it was bringing, he told his sullen heart—the new day of the new life of Raymond Bethune. Raymond Bethune, the disgraced, who had failed his comrade.

When that wild cry had rung out into the night, "Harry, Harry, Harry!" it had sounded, in his ears, like the death-cry of his honour; a parting from all that he had held dear; a parting from his highest and closest, than which no parting between soul and body could be more bitter.

He had sat on his bed, and listened—listened, expecting he knew not what. What, indeed, had he now to expect? He had heard the running of feet, the opening and shutting of doors, all the busy noises of a house alarmed. Was she dead? Dead of her joy, in that supreme moment of reunion? Would there not be a heaven, even in his anguish, for him who could thus take her dying kiss!

By-and-by he had roused himself; and, after a look of horror upon that bed of dreams, mechanically dressed for his departure. To go away—that was all that was left to him—the last decency. He put a grim control upon his nerves as he wielded the razor and the brushes that Harry English's fingers had so recently touched.

Harry English ... out of the grave!

Bethune could not yet face the marvel of the situation. He had yet no power over his dazed brain to bring it to realise that for so long he had been living near his old comrade in the flesh, and had not known—he who had not passed a day, since their parting, without living with him in the spirit! Still less could he speculate upon the reasons of English's incognito, upon his singular scheme, his recklessness of his own reputation; nor by what miracle he had been saved from death; nor by what freakish cruelty of fate he had been buried from their ken till the irreparable had been worked on other lives.

No; Bethune had no single thought to spare from the overwhelming fact of what he had himself done.

How silent was this house, now, in the dawn! And how much worse was silence than the most ominous sounds. Was it not his own silence that had betrayed both himself and his friend?

He packed deliberately, feeling the while a fleeting childish warmth of comfort in the thought that Harry wore his old shooting-jacket—that Harry had still something of his about him. He folded the discarded babu garments with almost tender touch. Then he paused and hesitated.

There were the papers—the damnable, foolish papers that had started all the mischief; and these he must sort. Some must be destroyed; some, not his to deal with, must be laid by before he could leave the place.

He stole to the door, carrying his portmanteau. There was no fear of his meeting any of those whom he dreaded; for, in the rambling old house, his floor had a little breakneck stairs to itself which landed him in a passage outside the hall.

There was a stir of life and a leap of firelight behind the half-open door of

the kitchen; but, in a panic, he passed quickly out of reach of the voices lest he should hear. Was she dying ... or dead? Or, since joy does not kill, was she happy in a sublime egotism of two? He had no courage for the tidings—whatever they might be.

The little room where he had worked with such fervour was filled with a grey glimmer that filtered in through the mist-hung orchard trees. The fire had been set but not yet lit. He put a match to it; he would have much to burn. Then he sat down by the table and drew forth his manuscripts. The last line he had written—that line set only yesterday from a full heart—met his eye:

English was then in the perfection of his young manhood—a splendid specimen of an Englishman, athletic, handsome, intellectual, a born leader of men, and withal, the truest comrade ever a man had.

Out of the half-finished page, the past rose at Raymond Bethune and smote him in the face. So had he written, so had he thought of Harry English yesterday, when he believed him dead.

A man of more sanguine temperament, of more imaginative mind, might well have comforted himself with explanatory reflections, with reasons so plausible for his own behaviour, that he must end by believing in them himself, regarding his own act in a gradually changing light, till it assumed a venial, not to say meritorious, aspect. But Raymond Bethune, with his narrow conception of life, with his few, deep-cut affections, had this in him—virtue or deficiency—that he could not lie. And now he knew the naked truth. He knew that, when his only friend had come from out the dead and laid claim upon him, in the overwhelming surprise of the moment he had betrayed friendship—that some unknown base self had sprung into life. He had not been glad—he had not been glad ... and Harry had seen it. Harry had read into his heart—and there had read, not gladness but dismay.

The sweat started again upon Bethune's forehead as he re-lived that moment and again saw his failing soul mirrored in the wide pupils of English's eyes.

* * * * *

Outside, upon the grey-brown twisted boughs of the apple-tree nearest the window, a robin began to sing. The insidious sweetness of the little voice pierced the lonely man to the marrow, with an intolerable pang of self-pity. He looked out on the bleak winter scene of the garden, where the mist hung in shreds across

the sodden grass, over the bare boughs. It was an old, old orchard and the trees were leprous with grey lichen. It seemed as though they could not bear flower or fruit again. Vaguely, for his brain was not apt to image, he thought: "In some such desolation lies the future for me." And if the robin sang—oh, if the robin sang—its message never could be for him!

His eye wandered back into the room. Here had he worked so many days, in austere, high ardour of loyalty. Aye, and yonder, in the armchair, had she sat; and he had judged her from this same altitude of mind. Now he knew himself better, saw the earthy soul of him as it really was. All his anger, all his scorn, all his antagonism, from the very first instant when her pale luminous beauty had dawned upon him, had been but fine-sounding words in his own mind to hide the thing, the fact—his passion for Harry English's wife!

He took some of the manuscript into his hands, rough sheets as well as neatly typed copy; and, standing before the now leaping fire, began slowly to tear it, page by page, and fling it into the blaze. He smiled as he watched the red twists fly up the chimney. There was subtle irony in the situation. Major Bethune calling upon his friend's widow to wake from her sleep of oblivion, forcing her back to the sorrow she would fain forget, sparing her no pang, watching her as the warder watches the convict to see that not a jot of her task escape her; seeing, as he watched, the old love reclaim her with strong hands, so that, wooed once more and once more won, she was ready, as surely no woman was before, to greet the dead returned! ... "Harry, Harry, Harry!" He would never get that cry out of his head.

He let himself fall into the chair upon the hearth, his hands resting listlessly from their task. How was he to endure life, how carry out the most trivial business with this sick distaste of all things upon him?

* * * * *

Aspasia opened the door and looked in. She gave a cry of pleasure as she saw him.

"How cosy!" she said, and came over to the fire.

Then she stood, gazing down at him, with a small smile trembling on her lips. She had evidently been crying, and the curves of these same lips looked softer and more childish than ever. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes darkly shadowed.

Bethune sat motionless. After a pause she spoke, still staring reflectively at the flames.

"I wondered where you had been all this dreadful night. You know what has happened? Of course you know."

"I know."

Nothing in his voice or manner struck her—she was so full of the tremendous occasion.

"Ah!" she cried, suddenly flashing upon him, "I think I'm sorry you already know. I should have liked to have been the first to tell you. For you—for you, at least, it's all glorious. Oh, how glad you must be! What it must mean to you!"

He sat like stone: she was worse than the robin. He had thought he had suffered to the fullest capacity; but the girl, with her clear voice and her honest eyes, was tearing his heart to pieces. Then she became conscious that in his silence, though she had known him ever as a silent man, there was something almost sinister.

"What is it?" she asked him. "Oh, I suppose you knew all along? No—you didn't, you couldn't!"

He shook his head.

"Ah!" Her bright face clouded. "It is because of her, of poor Aunt Rosamond—of him, rather? You think he has come back to her too late, only to lose her?"

He resumed the tearing up of his manuscript with fingers clenched upon the page.

"What are you doing?" she cried, quickly diverted. "Oh, Major Bethune, why? Don't tear up all that beautiful life—all you've been working at so long. Oh, what a pity—what a pity!"

He crumpled a mass of paper violently together and flung it into the flames, thrusting it down among the embers with his hand. He felt the startled amazement growing upon her, and forced his pale lips to speak.

"He would hate it."

Saying this, he tried to smile. Aspasia contemplated him for a while, her eyes wondering. Then she stretched out her hand and touched his timidly.

"Don't be unhappy—let me tell you; I think I understand. Oh! I'm sure I understand, for we have been friends a little, too, have we not? You think it's worse for him to come back. You think he had better be dead, if she is to die. But she won't." Aspasia nodded confidently. "I tell you she won't die. I've just seen Dr. Châtelard; he's quite satisfied. I have seen him—Captain English—too. I said to him: 'She won't die.' And he said to me: 'I know it.' He is there outside her room—so strong and patient. Now," said the girl, and was not, in her innocent wish to comfort, aware how tenderly she spoke, "now you will let yourself be glad for yourself, since you've got him back, will you not?"

Bethune suddenly turned and caught the gentle hand that touched him in both his. He broke into sobs—a man's difficult, ugly, tearing sobs, that surprise no one more than him whom they overtake. For an instant Aspasia was terrified.

But for that desperate clutch she would have fled. The next moment, however, all the woman in her awoke.

"Oh, don't cry!" she said, as if she were speaking to a child, and laid her free hand upon his close-cropped hair.

And then—neither of them knew how it happened—her arm was round his shoulder, and his head was lying upon her tender breast. The dry agony that shook him passed; and tears that fell like balm rolled down his cheeks.

Baby, carried quite out of herself in this astounding whirl of events, began to weep, too, quite softly, to herself. And, as he lifted his face to hers and drew her down to him, their lips met upon the bitter of their tears, and yet in sweetness undreamed of. At the touch of that child-mouth and at her voiceless surrender, Bethune knelt before her in his heart and consecrated himself to her for ever. Closed henceforth for him the magic casement on "perilous seas" of passion, "on faëry lands forlorn." Gone those visions, exquisite and deadly! A faithful loving hand, a child's hand, had been held out to him in his moment of utmost misery; it had lifted him from the deeps; it he would clasp and go to meet life's duty, content—aye, humbly grateful—that his winter should have harboured a robin after all; ready to open his heart to its song of spring.

* * * * *

Afterwards, he knew, he would blame himself for that moment of weakness which had won him, unworthy, so true and unsuspecting a heart. But the deed was irrevocable, and he would not have been human not to rejoice.

* * * * *

The secret of the sorrow that had given to Aspasia the man she loved, she would never know. And even her frank lips could never seek the story. As sacred as the memory of their first kiss, she would hide in her heart the memory of those strange and terrible sobs.

Wiser than Psyche she would light no lamp, but keep this first mystery of love in unprofaned shadow.

CHAPTER VII

Bethune and Aspasia quickly parted.

Love had come as a messenger of comfort; but to linger under its wings in anything that approached to joy, in that stricken house would have seemed desecration. Bethune, moreover, was glad to be alone. His own trouble was too strong upon him. He felt as if he must have the cold clean air upon his face, gather the winter solitude about the nameless confusion of his thoughts. He wanted to meet himself face to face and have it out with Raymond Bethune; Raymond Bethune, who had gained an unlooked-for love, but had lost—everything else. He went forth into the orchard—seeking himself in those barren spaces, that, but a while ago, had seemed to hold the image of his future.

But he was no longer the shamed, hopeless man of that hour of dawn, with his eye fixed on some near death, as the savage instinct of some sick wild creature is fixed upon the hole that shall hide the last struggle. Henceforth he would be no longer alone; and if the thought of the gentle comradeship brought solace, it brought also its own serious responsibility, almost its terror—the weight of another life, the loss of his soul's freedom....

Presently, as he tramped up and down the drenched grass, a chill and numbing touch seemed to be laid upon him and to invade him with the blankness of the universal winter sleep. The recurrent waves of a lover's exaltation that had seized him at each reminiscence of the young bosom beneath his cheek, of the tear-wet face pressed so close to his, died down within him; and died, too, those spasms of horror over that moment when, by a single evil thought, he had betrayed the true facts of a lifetime.

His mind seemed to become nearly as dull as the sky above him—iron grey, flecked with meaningless wrack; his heart to grow cold, like the inert sod beneath his feet. And he let himself go to the respite of this mood. The robin was silent. He was glad of that. There was no sound but the drip of the boughs as he passed. Disjointed visions, foolish tags of memory, flashed through his brain—the echo of Baby's thrumming, the picture of the Eastern palace room, with its English illusions, as he stood waiting; Lady Gerardine, in the rosy radiance of the Indian evening, fitting her slender hand into the imprint of the queens' death-touches on the stone; her smile upon him over the languid Niphotis roses in the narrow varnished cabin, the open port-holes and the green sea-foam springing up across them in the lamplight, the mingled smell of the brine and the flowers; Aspasia dancing on the frozen grass, brown and red like a robin; Muhammed standing before him in his soldier-pride, the ironic smile on his face—son of the East, with the winter-lichened boughs of the English orchard above him!

At the end of his beat Raymond wheeled round and looked down the moss-grown avenue where that day the red-turbaned Eastern had met his gaze; and now, with the fantastic effect of a dream, he beheld the selfsame square-

shouldered figure swing into sight between the grey boles with their ghostly look of age. Advancing with quick strides, it was bearing straight upon him.

Bethune stood as if held by a resistless force. He knew life would have no more crucial moment for him; yet his heart beat not a stroke the faster. He turned his face towards the inevitable. After all, a man can but endure. The illusion of Muhammed had quickly passed, as the steady step drew closer, into that reality that was stranger than any fantasm.

Harry English, with head bare to the tart airs, with strong line of clean-shaven chin catching the bleak light, and deep eyes lit with a very human lire—the old comrade in the flesh! He halted within a pace, and the two looked at each other for a second's silence. Then, while Bethune's countenance remained set in that iron dulness, the other's face was suddenly stirred.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" cried Harry English, in a loud voice of anger. "I see your portmanteau packed. Do you think for a second that you can leave me now?"

The deepest reproach, the utmost note of sorrow or scorn, could not have touched Bethune so keenly as this familiar explosion. A thousand memories awoke and screamed. How often had not his captain rated him with just such a rough tongue and just such a kindly gleam of the eye! All the ice of his cold humour of reaction was shivered into bits under the rush of upheaving blood.

"Harry!" he stammered. "Harry ... I ... my God!" ...

He saw, as before, in that hideous moment in the little bedroom, but now blessedly, a reflection of his own thought on the face opposite to him.

Harry English put out his hand and clapped him on the shoulder.

"My God!" said Bethune again. He turned his head sharply away and his jaw worked. The cry broke from him. "I ought to have died for you! Would to Heaven I had died for you at Inziri! ..."

The grasp of his shoulder was tightened. English shook his comrade almost fiercely.

"Old man, you were never one of the talkers. Hold your tongue now."

Bethune drew a deep breath. The intolerable weight rolled from his heart. English's hand dropped. It was over and done with; the two friends had met again, soul to soul.

In silence they turned and walked towards the house, side by side, steps together, as so often—God, so often!—in the good old days of hardship.

"Let us go in," said English, at the door. "They tell me that there can be no change, up there, and she's in good hands, thank Heaven, but I cannot find a moment's peace out of the house. Come, we'll have a cup of tea together."

The sun had risen just clear of the moor line into a space of clarity, and shone, a white dazzling disc, sending faint spears into their eyes. It shone, too,

pale yet brisk, through the open window of the little dining-room, where, as yet, the board was but half spread, where an ill-kindled fire had flickered into death. (What self-respecting servant could do her work as usual when the family is in affliction?)

"Just see to the fire, Ray," said English, and went out of the room.

Bethune, with the bachelor's expediency, had recourse to a candle culled from a sconce, and produced a cheerful, if somewhat acrid flame, to greet his friend when he returned, black kettle in one hand, brown teapot in the other. Soon the hot fragrance circled into the room.

"If we'd had a brew of this up at Inziri, those last days, it would have made a difference, eh?" said the master of the house.

They drew their chairs to the hearth and sat, each with his cup in his hand, even as in times bygone, with their tin mugs before the camp fire at dawn. In spite of the sense of that hushed room above and the suspense of its brooding over them, Bethune had not felt so warm in his heart these many years.

"Man!" he exclaimed suddenly, reverting unconsciously to the Scotch idiom of his youth, "why in the name of Heaven did you do it?"

Harry English, staring at the red coals, answered nothing for a while. Not that he had failed to understand the train of thought that ended in the vague-seeming, yet comprehensive question—but that the answer was difficult if not painful.

"You see," he said slowly, at last, without shifting his abstracted gaze, "there was so much to find out and so much to consider...."

"To find out?"

"I had to be sure."

Bethune laid his cup on the hob and leaned over towards his friend, his fingers lightly touching the arm of the other's chair. After a while: "I think I understand," he said, knitting his rugged brows.

English gave him a fleeting smile of peculiar sadness.

"When one has been dead eight years, it is wiser, before coming to life again, to make sure that one's resurrection will be a benefit."

Bethune fell back into his place, with a grey shade about the lips. English dropped his eyes and there came silence between them. After a pause, he began to mend the fire from the scuttle; and, placing the lumps of coals one by one, he spoke again:

"It was all a story of waiting, you see, from beginning to end."

"Rajab—Rajab is gone, by the way, poor old chap. He swore he'd seen you fall, more dead than the prophet himself," said Bethune, with the harsh laugh that covers strong emotion. "And from the fort, through the glass, we watched those devils chucking the bodies into the torrent—dead and wounded, too. We thought

the great river was your grave with many another's! Never a bone could we find of all the good chaps."

Harry English straightened himself and laughed, too, not very mirthfully. Then he pulled open the loose collar of his shirt and laid bare a jagged scar that ran from the column of the throat across the collar bone.

"I'm confoundedly hard to kill, you know. Just missed the jugular. I must have been spouting blood like a fountain. And then I got a blow on the head from a hilt that knocked me into nothingness. Rajab was about right—I was as dead as the prophet for the time being. If I had not had nine lives—"

Again the silence. Then Bethune inquired, casually, fumbling in his pocket for a pipe:

"And how is it you weren't chucked overboard with the rest?"

"Old Yufzul had a fancy for keeping me alive. Ah, if he could have caught the chap that cut me down, he would not have left much skin on him. He'd given stringent orders to spare mine. The old beggar took a notion that I was a sort of mascot, or something, that I carried luck—that it was the influence of my precious person kept things going so triumphantly at the fort.... You may remember he was always sending envoys to me with flattering offers? By the Lord, Ray, I believe it was half to get me that he stuck to the business so long. So much for my carrying luck!"

The speaker smiled, with a bitter twist of the lip, and poked the fire unnecessarily.

"Remember," he added, "that business about the flag on the roof, when the bullets were going so lively? It seems our friend was watching and was much struck to see that I was not."

"I remember," answered Bethune's deep bass.

Did he not remember? Had he been of the nationality of M. Châtelard, with what a hand-clasp, with what a flow of rhetoric would he not now emphasise his vivid recollection of that hour!

English, lying back in his armchair, with his head resting on the top, closed his eyes wearily. His face looked very pallid and sharp-featured thus upturned and relaxed from its usual stern control; and Bethune shot many an anxious look at it as he sat silent, the pipe he forgot to draw hanging loosely between his teeth.

Presently the other resumed, in low, reminiscent tones:

"I became the Khan's fetish. So long as he had me he was sure of his luck. He thought himself safe. In the end, I think, he thought he could not die."

"Well?" said Bethune, as the pause grew over long.

"Well, that's all. I was a fetish, very well looked after. Too well. God!" said the man, sitting up, a sudden passion on eye and lip, "I was kept prisoner, if you like. For five years, Raymond Bethune, I was chained to that old Khan's carcase,

night and day.”

”For five years,” echoed Bethune, stupidly; ”and what were you doing?”

English did not answer till the silence seemed to have obliterated the question. Then he said slowly:

”I was waiting.”

”Then?”

”Then the old devil died—and I escaped. Oh, you don’t want me to spin you that yarn now! You can imagine it for yourself, if you ever imagine anything, you old dunderhead. There was blood spilt, if you care to know. I had waited a long time, you see.”

”But,” objected the Major of Guides, after some minutes devoted to calculation, ”that was three years ago.”

”Aye,” laughed English, good-naturedly contemptuous, ”but a man doesn’t walk off the Karakoram on to the English lines in a day, especially if he’s an Afghan captive. I had to take a little round through Turkestan, and back through Baluchistan—on foot, Raymond, every yard of the way—as a dervish.”

”Good Lord!” said Bethune.

”I flatter myself I know more of the Karakorams and the Turkoman frontier than any white man yet. And I can speak the lingo of every tribe that calls Ali chief. Aye, and I know their tricks and customs, their very habit of thought. There was not a camp or hut where they did not take me for one of themselves. It was just a year after Yufzul’s death that I landed at Kurrachee.”

”Oh, Harry,” cried his friend, impulsively, ”why did you not come to me?”

”Have I not told you already?” answered English, after one of his deep pauses. ”I had things to find out first. Where is your canniness? If live men have to go slow, what about dead men? ... No—no.” The bitter smile came back to his lips. ”I lay low, and lived in the bazaar, as good a servant of the prophet as ever salaamed to the East; and then”—his voice changed—”oh, then—I got all the news I wanted!”

Bethune dared not raise his eyes.

”More than I wanted,” added Harry English, with his bleak laugh. ”You don’t need to be told why I remained a Pathan, do you?”

When Bethune once more found courage to speak to his friend, it was because the stillness, pregnant with so much meaning, seemed intolerable.

”Well?” he queried hoarsely.

”Well, then,” said Harry English, ”I waited—again.” ...

And his comrade felt more than this he was never to know of the hardest moment of all the man’s hard life.

”I dare say,” resumed English, his old air of serenity coming back to him, ”you wonder why I did not extend that botched business as far as the jugular this

time, and have done with it. But, you see, there was just a chance, I told myself; and so," he repeated, falling back into his significant formula, "I waited. I got work with an old babu; and by-and-by my opportunity came, and I took it."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Bethune, shifting restlessly in his chair. "It was the maddest business!"

"Perhaps," said English, a shade of pain sweeping across his face. "But I had to know. Any other course was too dangerous. Oh, I am not speaking of myself—think how dangerous!"

"But, man—man," cried the other, "it need not have taken you all that time! When you'd seen with your own eyes, when you had found that the old fellow was killing her, when you were here in this house, and had seen her in her sorrow—then—"

English flung one lightning glance upon the speaker.

"And even then," he said slowly, "I had still to know—more."

A moment Bethune stared at him open-mouthed; then his own unclear conscience pointed the otherwise inconceivable idea to his slow-working wits. He felt the dark blood mount to his forehead.

"Now I've told you all," said Harry English, and got up from his chair.

"Thank you," said Bethune.

* * * * *

Aspasia's bright presence was suddenly with them. English wheeled round; but her smiling face was reassurance sufficient.

"I've come as I promised," she said, "to give you the last report. Dr. Châtelard says all is going as he wishes. He will be down immediately for some breakfast, and then he will tell you himself. Isn't he a darling little man?" she went on. "I am sorry I said he had a pink head! What should we do now without it? By the way, some one must send a wire to Melbury Towers for his luggage."

"Let me go," said Bethune, starting forward.

"Let him go," echoed Baby, saucily, turning to Captain English.

With such new happiness before her, the natural buoyancy of her nature was triumphant over all present doubt and anxiety. Bethune put out his hand, and she slipped her own confidently into it.

"Harry," said he, and the girl wondered and was highly flattered at the sudden emotion that shook his voice, "you see how things stand between us?"

Again English flashed that glance of vivid scrutiny. This time his friend met it steadily, though again with a heightening colour. Then, after a perceptible pause:

"I am glad," said Captain English, simply.

And Bethune dropped the girl's hand to meet the strong clasp held out to him.

He knew that from henceforth all misunderstanding was swept away from between them. If he had felt before for his friend that love closer than a brother's, it was cemented now by the strongest bond that can exist between generous natures—that of forgiver and forgiven. He was forgiven with the only real forgiveness—that which understands.

"Have they not brought breakfast?" cried Baby, the housekeeper, very bustling all at once, to cover her pretty confusion. She sprang to the bell, then checked herself, with finger on lip, and tripped from the room, pointing her feet and laughing over her shoulder, as if to her happy years even that sad precaution of quietness must have its mirthful side.

Both men looked after her indulgently. Then Bethune's face clouded.

"She is but a child, after all," he said doubtfully.

"Nay," said Harry, "it seems to me she has a woman's heart."

"She is as true as steel," asserted her lover.

When the girl returned, English went restlessly forth. He would wait for M. Châtelard, he said, in the hall. The newly betrothed were alone; and, for a second or two, eyed each other shyly. Then Bethune's face softened in the old, good way; and yet with something, too, that had never been there before, something which made Aspasia drop her lids.

"Well, Robin?" said he, and beckoned. She came to him sidling.

It would always be thus between them. He would beckon and she would come. Had the impossible happened, had that mistress of his hidden ideal condescended to him, he would have gone far to crave the least favour, and always with a trembling soul. But the life that touches the transcendent joy, the rare ecstasy is fated to know but little happiness. Providence, perhaps, was not dealing unkindly with this man.

"Why do you call me Robin?" she asked.

He was not of those who explain. With a kiss on her hand he told her simply that she was like a robin.

"Then I hope you'll remember, sir," she said, briskly disengaging herself, "that the robin is a bird that makes music in season and out of season."

CHAPTER VIII

Bethune went off in the cart, at the best speed of Aspasia's pony, carrying a second telegram, more weighty than that concerning M. Châtelard's luggage. This was a summons for a London specialist.

Although unaware that the Frenchman had himself a world-wide reputation for such cases, English, with his habit of quick judgment, had decided to trust the proffered skill. But, in the course of their conversation, he had tentatively touched upon the advantage of a consultation; and the suggestion was accepted; with so much alacrity, indeed, that a more livid pallor spread over the husband's countenance.

M. Châtelard saw the impression he had unwittingly produced. With fat forefinger thrown out in emphasis, he promptly endeavoured to remove it.

"In cases of obscure diagnosis, two heads are always better than one," said he, kindly. "Yet your great Farrar will, I have no doubt—so much confidence have I in myself, my dear sir—merely confirm my treatment—a treatment, in parenthesis, purely negative. Paradoxical, yet true, sir, the slower our fair patient recovers the better."

To himself, as he sat down to his coffee, the genial physician remarked complacently, that it would be *du dernier intérêt* to see *ce fameux Farrar* at work.

M. Châtelard was entirely satisfied with the situation, as far as it concerned himself. He kept Harry English at his elbow, and, while enjoying the excellent fare (*les émotions, ça creuse!*), discoursed learnedly upon the brain, that terrible and fragile organism which he had made his own especial study. His insatiable curiosity the while was anticipating with gusto the moment when it could gratify itself upon the enigmatic personality of his new-found host.

Fate played into his hand. For, ere he could insinuate the first leading question, there entered upon them Sir Arthur. M. Châtelard was forthwith made witness to a scene between the "two husbands" which was to give him, in the most dramatic manner, all the information he desired.

There they stood opposite each other—the old and the young. The most complete contrast, perhaps, that it was possible to imagine. Harry English, erect, square-shouldered, extraordinarily quiet, with head held high and pendant arms, in an attitude not unlike that of the soldier in the orderly-room, the oriental composure of his countenance occasionally contradicted by a flash of the eye and a twist of the lip. Sir Arthur, swinging between bluster and authority, both equally futile, painfully conscious of a hopelessly ungraceful position. It is only the young that the stress of passion becomes. When a man is past the prime of life, every emotion that shakes him from the dignified self-control of his years betrays him on to senility.

"Here, then, do we behold his Excellency as he is," thought the judicial looker-on. "Without toilet, without what milady Aspasia so brutally calls

'grooming'; without the support of a commanding position—here stands the natural man. And he is an old man, impotently angry—a sorry spectacle, while the rival—ah, *belle jeunesse!*"

To the elderly Frenchman Harry English, still in the thirties, was to be reckoned among the youthful. Sir Arthur began the interview by a renewal of his last night's threat of the police. Harry English smiled, and the smile instantly worked havoc upon the Governor's assumption of confident authority. Rage broke forth.

"Look at him, Châtelard! There's a pretty fellow to call himself an Englishman. Look at the colour of his skin; look at his hair! By God, man," he yelled, "look at his teeth! The trick's been done before, sir. The wily servant, with his thieving knowledge of family secrets, playing the part of his dead master. This is a new Tichborne case, and the babu Muhammed will find what comes of such tricks."

"Muhammed!" interrupted M. Châtelard, rising from his seat, "Muhammed! dites-vous? Ma parole!"

His fingers flew up to steady his spectacles; his shrewd eyes fixed themselves upon English with a gaze in which admiration contended with amazement.

"Muhammed! ... Ah, what the devil—a wonderful disguise! Even now I hardly recognise, save, indeed, that he has worn a beard recently, as is revealed by that pallid chin and throat—I protest I do not even recognise Muhammed now in Captain English. No wonder," thought the Frenchman, in a rapid parenthesis, "that we French were as children in India compared to these English. English he remains," he chuckled, playing on the name, "and yet, to suit his purpose, he can assimilate himself to the black devil."

"Ha, we've had a Tichborne case!" repeated Sir Arthur.

The silent man opposite looked at him, still silent, still smiling; but into his eyes there crept a shade of pity. There was, indeed, something pitiable in this pomposity so fallen, in this tyranny so powerless—in Sir Arthur, brandishing his rag of defiance, standing the while in all the nakedness of his cause.

"You are witness, Châtelard," he was insisting.

M. Châtelard, pinching the wire of his glasses, lifted his gaze to inspect the portrait which hung in the panel over the mantelpiece; then brought it solemnly back to Harry English's countenance. He turned and spoke, not without enjoying the consciousness of the weight of his own adverse verdict.—Expect no bowels of mercy from one whose life-work is the study of other people's brains.

"Alas! my excellent Sir Gerardine; I fear there above hangs a witness with a testimony more emphatic than ever mine could be."

Sir Arthur rolled his bloodshot eye towards the picture—another of those infernal daubs! From the first instant he had set eyes on them, all over the place, he had thought it in bad taste—in confoundedly bad taste. Last night, in the

bedroom, the sight of one of them had put him off his balance altogether. But he had been, then, in a nervous state. He knew better now.

"Pooh!" He tried to laugh, but his mouth twitched down at the corners, with a childish tremble. "If every black-haired man is going to claim to be my wife's first husband—"

But everything was against Sir Arthur this morning. Who knows how far he might have gone in convincing the inconvenient English that he could not possibly be himself, if that objectionable person, Bethune—it was most reprehensible of Rosamond to have received the fellow in her husband's absence—had not marched in upon them.

The Major of Guides stood a second, with beetling brows, measuring the situation. Then, without a word, he strode across the room and took up his post beside his comrade, so close that their shoulders touched. It was mute testimony, but more convincing than spoken phrase.

M. Châtelard experienced one of those spasms of satisfaction which the discovery of some fresh trait characteristic of the race under his microscope never failed to cause him.

Those two silent ones, with what force they imposed themselves! "Voilà bien, l'Angleterre—sa morgue, son arrogance! She steps in—her mere presence is enough. She disdains argument, she stands passive, massive, she smiles—she remains. As for my poor Sir Gerardine, he represents here the enemy. Ah, *sapristi*, it is not astonishing if it makes him enraged."

Sir Arthur, in truth, turned to an apoplectic purple, stammered wildly, shook his balled hand—the telling retort failed him. Upon this, at last, Captain English spoke:

"Sir Arthur," said he, "believe me, you will, in due time, be furnished with every proof of my identity that you can desire to see. Meanwhile you will be wise if you accept the evidence of"—he paused, and there was a subtle alteration in the clear steady voice—"the evidence of all that has occurred this night—of my friend here, Major Bethune, and of the old servant of my house."

Sir Arthur turned sharply and met the vindictive stare of Bethune's pale eyes.

"I have recognised my friend, Captain English," said Bethune, with harsh decision.

Sir Arthur's glance went quickly from one to the other. It was typical of the man that, for the moment, the secondary irritation of having a pair of twopenny-halfpenny Indian officers brow-beating him—browbeating him, egad! the Lieutenant-Governor of the Province—for the moment, almost outweighed the fact that his own huge personal tragedy was being irremediably established.

"You are a witness, are you?" he snarled.

Bethune nodded.

"Then," cried Sir Arthur, springing to his feet and thumping the table so that all the china rattled, "you are a witness, sir, to as peculiar a business as I think has ever been heard of in his Majesty's service. Captain English, I think—since it is agreed that this man is Captain English—will find some little difficulty in explaining his proceedings all these years."

"You have heard of people being held prisoners," said English, quietly.

"Yes," screamed Sir Arthur, "but what about this disguise—this Muhammed business?"

"I don't expect you to understand my reasons," pursued the other, in the same manner; while, beside him, Bethune kept his taciturn watch. "But you have, I recognise, the right to be told of them. I had to find out if my wife was happy."

"You had to find out if——" Sir Arthur pouncing upon the new suggestion, to lay bare its folly, was suddenly arrested midway by a glimmer of the other's meaning and its extraordinary bearing upon himself.

"If you wish, I shall put the matter clearer," said the first husband, incisively. "I had to find out if your wife was happy."

"If my wife was happy!"

A vision rose before Sir Arthur—his wife, the wife of Sir Arthur Gerardine, the wife of the Lieutenant-Governor, her Excellency, Lady Gerardine, queen of her world, flashing in the glory of his diamonds and emeralds, treading palace rooms, herself the centre of a court—his wife petted, adulated, envied, the object of his chivalrous attention, of his lavish indulgence, his constant solicitude—not happy! He broke into boisterous laughter.

"Not happy! For that was your conclusion, I suppose?"

Still laughing, he flung a glance at M. Châtelard—eloquent. "Did you ever hear such an absurdity in your life?" it said, in all languages.

M. Châtelard unaccountably dropped his eyes before that triumphant appeal; and a dry cough of unwonted embarrassment escaped him. Sir Arthur's mirth changed from its first genuine note of sarcastic fury to something that rang hollow and forced. Abruptly withdrawing his eyes from the unresponsive Frenchman, he caught sight of his own countenance reflected, in all the cruel morning light, by a mirror that hung between the two windows. He stood staring. For a second he could not recognise himself—an unkempt old man, with yellow trembling cheeks and vacant mouth.

In such moments the body works unconsciously. Had Sir Arthur had proper control over himself, the swift look at his rival, the immediate comparison, was the last thing his vanity would have condescended to. But his treacherous eyes had done their work before self-esteem could intervene. And, for once, Sir Arthur

Gerardine saw.

The braced figure of Henry English, with its noble lines of still young manhood; the romantic head, refined, not aged, by suffering and endurance, the vital flame in the eye. What a contrast! Sir Arthur swayed, fell into a chair, and covered his face with his hands. Acrid tears of self-pity were burning his lids. This is what they have brought me to!

Of the other three in the room, there was not one who could find a word. To see the strong suffer may be a painful yet inspiring sight, but there are tragedies of the weak, before the sordid pity of which the mind instinctively recoils.

"And you thought it honourable and gentlemanly to come into my house and eat my bread and—and spy?" said the Lieutenant-Governor, raising his head at last, turning dull orbs upon his whilom secretary.

The blood raced into Harry English's face.

"Here," thought Châtelard, scarcely breathing in his quiet corner of observation, "here it is the old one scores at last."

"I could not choose my methods, Sir Arthur."

The ancient Chippendale clock, with a sigh between its ticks, measured half a minute of heavy waiting. Then English spoke again, decisively, vigorously, stepping to the table with the air of one determined to put an end to an unbearable situation.

"Useless, all this. You shall have full evidence, as I said, in due time. Meanwhile, here is a house of sorrow, and your presence in it adds grievously to its burdens."

A gleam lit the watery depths of Sir Arthur's eyes.

"Here is a house of sorrow." He was suddenly reminded of what, in the absorption of his own misery, he had well-nigh forgotten—that the woman lay in danger of death.

Were she to die now—who had committed this inconceivable indiscretion—the situation might yet be saved. If she were to die, the affair could be hushed up. He jumped to his feet.

"Well, and what do you think of her state, doctor?" cried he.

The greedy glance was a revelation. The whole mind of the man was laid bare in its odious pettiness. With a dignified gesture the physician refused answer.

But the soul of Harry English leaped forth in wrath, as the blade leaps from the scabbard.

"Out of my house!" said he, his arm flung wide, pointing to the door. Voice, gesture, look, spoke of a passion so intense that for a second Sir Arthur quailed before it as one may before an unexpected flash of lightning.

He retreated hurriedly a few steps, then wheeled round, his natural com-

bativeness reasserting itself.

"Your story is strange, singularly strange, Captain English," he sneered. "I shall consider it my duty to report it in proper quarters without delay. You will have to produce some better explanations there, sir, I fancy, than those which seem to satisfy a couple of silly women and an ignorant foreigner—I mean," his old habit of courtesy tugging against the impulsiveness of his irritation—"I mean a foreigner ignorant of our customs." (M. Châtelard had an indulgent smile for the correction.) "I shall report you, sir, and your accomplice there."

A withering look included the stolid Bethune in this last indictment.

"Raymond, see that he goes," said English, "that he goes at once—and quietly."

"Ah, yes, I beg," interposed the doctor, with gravity. "Quiet is imperative, Sir Gerardine."

English walked over to the window and began to drum on the pane. Dr. Châtelard removed his spectacles, and put them into his pocket.

"One is reminded of the history of the judgment of Solomon," he remarked genially, as he followed Bethune to the door. "Permettez, cher capitaine? I return to your wife."

CHAPTER IX

"They're going!" said Bethune, triumphantly. "Their fellow has patched up the motor; it will take them as far as the station at least."

Harry English, pacing the little study much after the manner of Muhammed the night before, halted abruptly.

"They ought to have gone an hour ago," he answered. And, when he looked like that, for a certainty Captain English wore no pleasant countenance. "What has he been doing?"

The relaxation of the muscles, which was Bethune's usual substitute for a smile, came over his face.

"First, he's been trying to persuade Aspasia to go away with him. And secondly, he's been reproaching her for her unfilial behaviour in refusing to leave us; and thirdly, he has been bestowing his avuncular curse upon her and repudiating her for ever and ever. All this naturally took some time."

A flash of pleasure swept across the other's gloom.

"So the girl sticks to us. That is right," he said. Then the frown came back. "You've warned them to be quiet, I hope, with their infernal car?"

"I've told the chauffeur if he makes a sound more than he can help, he'll have me to deal with. I made the fellow swear to wait for them halfway down the avenue. Lady Aspasia's a good sort too, take her all in all—has her head screwed on the right way. She'll keep the old man in order."

English took a couple of turns again, and halted, his head bent. There were voices passing in the hall without: Sir Arthur's querulous tones, Lady Aspasia's unmistakable accents, strident even under her breath. Bethune went to the window.

"There they go," said he, presently. "She's giving him her arm. By George," he went on, "she, for one, won't be anxious to dispute your identity, Harry!"

The other had sat down by the fire and was gazing into the flames after his old attitude. Bethune, at the window, remained gazing upon the departure of the undesired guests. In a second or two he broke forth again:

"The motor's jibbing! Good Lord, they'll have it into the gate—now into the apple-tree!" He gave a single note of mirth. "Lady Aspasia is holding down Sir Arthur by main force. Of course he wants to teach the chauffeur how to do it. But she knows better. By George," ejaculated Bethune, in a prophetic burst, "she's the very woman for him! Ah, here comes Miss Aspasia, hatless, to offer her opinion. I'd give something to hear her; she does not want them back upon us—I warrant." There was a pause. "They're off! Thank God, they're off!" Still the man lingered by the window.

Aspasia was waving her handkerchief ironically after the departing company, as the car proceeded down the avenue, fitfully, at a speed which (as she subsequently remarked) "would have made any self-respecting cart-horse smile."

When she turned to re-enter the house, Bethune had the vision of her rosy face, all brightening with smiles. The interchange of mute greetings, the swift impression of her fair light youth as she flashed by, left him lost in a muse.

Harry English stirred in his chair and, on the moment, his friend was at his side.

"They're gone," repeated he, rubbing his hands.

The other made no direct reply; but, stooping forward, picked up one of the fragments of paper that had escaped Bethune's hand in the morning's work of destruction.

He looked at it for a few seconds, abstractedly, and then laughed.

"So you were writing a life of me, old man?" said he.

Bethune stood, looking as if he had been convicted of the most abject folly. And English lightly flicked the scrap into the blaze:

"The life that counts is the life that no other soul can know," said he.

But he had no sooner said the words than he corrected himself, and his voice took that altered note which marked any reference to his wife.

"At least," he said, "no other soul but one."

Those friends, who were so much to each other, in speech communicated less than the most ordinary acquaintances. Bethune stood, in his wooden way, looking down at the armchair. Just now he had something to say, and it was difficult to him. At last, pointing to the hearth, as if he still beheld the fruit of his labour of friendship being consumed in it, he spoke, awkwardly:

"It did its work, though."

English flashed an upward look, half humorous, half searching.

"What did its work?"

"The—my—oh, the damned Life!"

The other man pondered over the words a little while. Then, with a smile that had something almost tender in it, he looked up at his friend again:

"I am afraid you will have to explain a little more, Ray."

Bethune shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The colour mounted to his face. He stared down at English, wistfully.

"It's a bit hard to explain," he said, "yet I'd like you to know—that diary, those letters of yours, I had to have them, extracts of them, for the work, you see.... Well—"

Here came a pause of such length that English was fain to repeat:

"Well?"

Then Bethune blurted it out:

"She had never read them—"

"Ah!"

"She never wanted to read them. Oh!"—quickly, "it's not that she didn't care."

"You need not explain that."

English's head was bent. His voice was very quiet, but Bethune's whole being thrilled to the tumult he inarticularly felt in the other's soul. He half put out his hand to touch him, then drew it back.

"Go on with your story—with your own part of the story," said Harry.

"She did not want to read them," said Bethune. "I made her."

The husband offered no comment; and, drawing a long breath like a child, his friend went on:

"And when she read at last—oh! even I could see it—it was as if her heart broke."

Still the bent head, the hands clasped over the knees, the silence. Bethune could bear it no longer, and took courage to lay that touch of timid eager sympathy upon English's shoulder.

"Harry, I'm such a fool, I can't explain things."

"Oh, I understand," answered English then, in a deep vibrating voice. He rose suddenly and squared himself, drawing in the air in a long sigh. "Do you think I could misunderstand—her?"

Their looks met. There was a wonderful mixture of sweetness and sorrow on the face of him whom life and death had equally betrayed.

Suddenly they clasped hands, for the first time since their parting in the Baroghil passes. Then they stood awhile without speaking. Harry English once more fixing visions in the fire, and Bethune looking at his comrade.

For most of his years he had known no deeper affection than his friendship for this man. He had mourned him with a grief which, now to think on, seemed like a single furrow across the plain field of his life; and there he stood!

"Captain, my Captain..." said Raymond. His rough voice trembled, and he laughed loud to conceal it.

The other flashed round upon him with his rarely beautiful smile.

"Ah," said he, "it's like old times at last to hear you at your rags and tags of quotation again!"

There fell again between them the pause that to both was so eloquent.

Then, from the far distance, into their silence penetrated a faint uncouth sound: from the moorland road, the motor, carrying for ever out of their lives him who had had so much power upon them, and was now so futile a figure, seemed to raise a last impotent hoot.

Sir Arthur Gerardine was gone. Raymond rubbed his hands and smiled as since boyhood he had scarcely smiled.

"It is good," cried Harry, then, boyishly in his turn, "to see your nut-cracker grin once more, Ray. As Muhammed, I've looked for it many a time in vain—I thought I had lost my old sub."

* * * * *

"But there's one thing we must remember," said Bethune, suddenly earnest again, in the midst of the welcome relaxation. "We must remember the old fellow's threat. You will have a bit of a job to keep out of trouble with the powers that be, won't you, after Sir Arthur's meddling?"

The anxiety on his countenance was not reflected upon English's face.

"I shall have my own story to tell," he said, "and I think that I have knowledge of sufficient value to make me a *persona grata* in high quarters just now. They will be rather more anxious, I take it, to retain my services rather than dispense with them—in spite of Sir Arthur."

He broke off, his brow clouded again. He sighed heavily.

"But what does that matter?" he cried; "just now there is only one thing that matters in the whole world."

BOOK IV

CHAPTER I

It was the most interesting case I have ever had (wrote M. Châtelard, in the third volume of his "Psychologie Féminine"), and the most abnormal. The illness, caused by shock, concussion—call it what you will—was benign, yet it was long. There was a little fever, a little delirium: un petit délire très doux, tout poétique, que, plongé dans mon vieux fauteuil de chêne, au milieu du silence de cet antique manoir, j'écoutais presque avec plaisir. Un gazouillement d'oiseau; une âme de femme, errant comme Psyché elle-même, sur les fleurs dans les jardins embaumés; délicates puerilités parfumées de la vie. Jamais une note de passion. Jamais un cri de ce coeur si profondément blessé....

And when later, by almost imperceptible steps, we drew the gentle creature back to health, the singular phenomenon persisted.

We physicians are, of course, accustomed in similar circumstances, to find a strong distaste in the patient suffering from shock to any effort of memory. Memory, indeed, by one of those marvellous dispensations of nature, is reluctant to bring back the events which have caused the mischief. But, with the beautiful Lady G— (it is always thus I must recall her) there was something more than the mere recoil of weakness....

On eût pu croire que cette âme ébrisée de passion, abreuvée de douleur, s'était dit qu'elle n'en voulait plus; qu'elle n'en pouvait plus. Ce n'était pas, ici, les souvenirs, qui faisaient défaut. Je l'ai trop observée pour m'y méprendre. En avait-elle des souvenirs et d'assez poignants, mon Dieu! ... But with a strength of will which surprised

me in her state, she put these memories from her and deliberately lived in the present. Elle goutait son présent, elle savourait la paix voluptueuse de sa convalescence....

Je n'ai qu'à fermer les yeux, pour la revoir, sur son lit—longue, blanche et belle. Je revois ce jeune teint—divinement jeune sous cette grande chevelure d'argent; cet air de lys au soleil, à la fois languissant et mystérieusement heureux. Ces yeux noyés dans une pensée profonde. Ces lèvres entr'ouvertes par un léger sourire. A qui rêvait-elle—à quoi? Cette belle bouche muette n'en soufflait jamais mot....

Of the three who had loved her, for whom was that smile? Certes, not for the poor Sir! And of the other two? (I must here frankly set down the humiliating admission, to me, that woman was, and remains Sphynx—yes, Sphynx, even to me, her physician, who beheld her, watched, tended her, through all those moments of suffering, weakness, *défaillance* where the soul reveals itself.) Which of the two, then, reigned in her secret dream? The sardonic Major, who had tracked her till she could escape him no longer, whose love was merciless. There are women, and many, who would never know passion but for defeat. The husband? The reincarnated ghost? Well reincarnated, that one!—The most virile type that I ever met. Nature of fire, born lover, under all his reticence of English gentleman and soldier. I have seen that face of his, half bronze, half marble, grow crimson and white within the minute, as I spoke to him of the woman, the while there would not be a tremble in the hand that held this pipe. I will confess he had all my sympathy; he was worthy of her. But she—why, to this day I ask myself: does the man who possesses her know the secret of her heart?

The day after the damaged motor had carried away the poor Governor—machine détraquée, clopin-clopat, symbole de cette vie qui jusqu'ici semblait rouler en triomphe et qui, désormais, se trainera si gauchement—the day following Sir G—'s departure, I say, the Major B— also left. It was the very least he could have done. And after the astounding fact of his betrothal to the pretty little Miss C—, I myself felt his presence antipathetic.... Ah, but a strategist, that officer of Guides, strategist of the first order! A masterly move, that betrothal, to disarm any possible suspicion of his friend and keep the while a footing in his beloved's house! But the little one, she deserved better ... *delicieuse enfant!* With what innocent eyes she looked at me when I told her that, above all things, she must not whisper to my

patient a word of her engagement. "Understand well, Miss," said I to her; and was ashamed of myself thus to join with him who was deceiving her. "It is because the least agitation, even a happy one, must be avoided." "Ah, that is why," said she, "you will not let her poor husband go to her?" "That is why," I replied, dissembling, "above all things, above all things, she must not be hurried."

* * * * *

She must not be hurried!

"If she wants me?" had said Harry English to Dr. Châtelard, in that dawn hour of dire omen.

"My dear sir," had answered the other, "immediately, of course!"

Rosamond lay, restored to those that loved her, a pale rose among her white tresses, and Harry English still waited her summons.

Still waiting!

* * * * *

"Above all," repeated the genial physician, who had stood by them so stoutly in their hour of trouble, as he took his reluctant departure from a house where his presence was, obviously, no longer needed, and where yet—unfortunate psychologist—he had failed to probe the story to the core, "above all, she must not be hurried!"

These were his farewell instructions.

It seemed to him that the patient husband had a strange smile on hearing this admonition.

"How much does he know?" asked Châtelard of himself, clinging with characteristic pertinacity to his peculiar interpretation of events. "How much does he suspect?"

Never before, perhaps, had the active-minded and gregarious Frenchman found himself thus regretting the prospect of a return to the congenial movement of his native city. But it was with a definite sense of reluctance that, on this March morning, he drove away through the budding orchard trees, leaving the Old Ancient House and all the desolate moorland behind him. This lonely antique habitation still held close the enigma of lives in which he had become deeply interested—interested, not only with that vivid intelligence which was ever eager to know, but with the warmth of a very excellent heart.

He would dearly have loved to know, true; but, above all, he would dearly have loved to help.

"Eh, Dieu sait," he sighed, as the fly jingled and bumbled over the grass-grown avenue, "Dieu sait ce qui va se passer là-bas, maintenant que je n'y suis plus!"

He gave a lingering look at the twisted chimney-stacks against the pale sky, before setting his face for Paris, Ville Lumière, once more.

* * * * *

"She must not be hurried!—Until she asks for me; then," had resolved Harry English, "I will wait."

And at first, indeed, it seemed as if the waiting could not be hard. For with the young year had come new hopes to the Old Ancient House. And with Rosamond turning to life in her room upstairs under the gables, he who loved her could well afford to sit with patience below.

Yet time went by, and the summons came not.

Upon that first blessed morning, indeed, when after all these long days she had awakened at last, and looked upon the world with seeing eyes once more, Rosamond had whispered to Aspasia:

"Harry—is he here?"

The girl's heart had leaped with joy.

"Yes," came her eager answer. "Will you see him?"

Like a little Mercury, one foot poised, hand outstretched to grasp the happy moment, Aspasia stood ready to take flight upon her errand of comfort. But the pale woman in the bed shrank. The old shy withdrawal from the thought of emotion—as once from sorrow, now from joy—seemed to be upon her.

"Not yet," she faintly sighed.

And, day by day, the singular little scene was re-enacted. In defiance of doctor's orders, Baby—with the sense of that other's hungry disappointment heavy upon her heart—would put her query ever more pleadingly:

"Will you not see him? Can you not see him? May it not be for to-day?"

But ever would come the same reply, while the lids sank over the timid eyes, and colour mounted slowly in the transparent face:

"Not yet."

Then the woman would fall back into her secret dream, lying hours in that quietude at which her physician marvelled, while he welcomed its healing power. It was a pause in life. So the young mother may lie and hold her infant in her languid arms and be happy because of its very weakness and incompleteness; and deem it more safely her own that it has yet no speech for her, no will to meet hers, even no power of love with which to answer hers.

It is harder to be patient in happiness than in sorrow. These days of waiting

began to tell upon Harry English more than all the years had done.

Yet it was idle to say: "She must not be hurried," since time marches with us all, whether we will or no; and with time, the events which change our destiny. The most guarded being cannot escape the influence of those lives with which Fate has thrown his fortune, and Rosamond was destined at last to be shaken out of her dreams by the combined energies of other fortunes.

M. Châtelard had been gone some time. The green buds were swelling over the March land. The convalescent had been promoted to her armchair for an hour or two daily, when a telegram summoned Harry English to London.

Bethune had undertaken all the preliminary official steps for his friend. Now the moment could not be delayed when the missing officer must give his personal explanations. The excuse of his wife's danger could no longer be maintained for his absence: he had to leave the Old House without having seen her again.

For two mornings after his departure Baby entered her aunt's room to find her lying among a bower of flowers. The husband was pleading for himself, wooing his love, for the third time. At first he sent no word with his gift, but let these most gracious messengers speak in fragrance. Aspasia was wise enough to hold her tongue upon the subject. Even to her downright perceptions the silence which enwrapped the invalid seemed stirred, palpitating with the awakening of emotions, just as, all over the land, after her winter sleep, the earth was stirred, palpitating, to the promise of spring.

The third morning the girl was unwontedly late in making her appearance. But Rosamond did not seem to miss her. She rested, smiling among her pillows, her diaphanous hand enfolding the letter that Mary had (with a subdued look of triumph) brought her on top of an open box overflowing with lily-of-the-valley.

Rosamond's first love-letter had come to her blent with the same perfume. The acrid sweetness rose like a greeting, an intangible intermingling of past and present. It spoke more eloquently than even his words. She drew the flowers slowly from their case. Below all, nestling beneath the waxen bells, she found one deep-hearted dark crimson rose.

She held it to her lips, the while she read his letter.

* * * * *

And so Baby's presence was not missed. At mid-day she rushed into the room and flung herself upon the bed with so much of her old impetuosity that Rosamond sat up, startled at first, then smiling, shaken from her languor.

"What is it, Baby? What a little face of blushes!"

In the midst of her own turmoil of emotion, Baby's faithful heart leaped

with joy. Rosamond had not spoken with that natural air these months.

"What is it?" repeated the woman, smiling.

Aspasia edged along the bed till her hot cheeks were hidden on Rosamond's neck. Then she thrust out her left hand blindly for inspection.

"Look!"

"What—?"

Yes, in very truth, Rosamond was laughing.

"What is it, Baby? ... Ah—"

Baby moved her long musician fingers slowly one after the other and finally stuck out the third.

"Ah," cried Rosamond again, sharply.

"She has seen," thought Aspasia, and was fain to raise her head to behold the effect of the great surprise.

"Is it possible," said the other, slowly, "or are you playing me some trick?"

"A trick," echoed Aspasia, indignantly. "No such thing!" She surveyed the important hand, with head on one side and an air of great complacency. Yet never had it appeared a more childish object. Upon the pink out-thrust finger the wedding-ring seemed absurdly misplaced.

"Baby, Baby, how is it you have never told me? Major Bethune, of course?"

"Yes," said the bride, suddenly shy. "They would not let me tell you. Idiots!"

The next instant the two women were clasped in each other's arms—both crying a little, as they kissed.

"There now," cried the new wife, at last, awakening to the conviction that she was hardly carrying out the doctor's instructions; and, indeed, it was evident that, left to her own devices, Aspasia had peculiar views upon the art of breaking news. "There now, this won't do. You lie still, and I'll tell you everything."

Placidly enough to reassure a more anxious nurse, Rosamond obeyed, her hand creeping down to her letter once more. This was but a surface agitation, after all—there was only one in the world who had power to stir the deeps.

Aspasia knelt down by the bed, and began to pour forth her story.... They had been engaged, oh, ever so long; but she never would have dreamed of anything so preposterous as marriage, especially now—not for ages, at least, but Raymond had ramped so....

It was only from the youthful Mrs. Bethune's picturesque tongue that such a description of Bethune's reticent wooing could have fallen.

And then something had happened, out there, and his blessed leave was curtailed, and, he had said, he positively would not go without her. "And so," said Baby, laughing and crying together, as pretty and absurd a spring bride as it was possible to see; "so he came down from London yesterday—with a special licence in his pocket—he went to the Inn, but he came to see me last night. I

don't know how it happened, but we were married this morning, at the little church—you know, your little church, Aunt Rosamond.... Did you ever hear of such a thing? Without a trousseau, without a present, without a lawyer, without a cake! And I am going to Vienna for my honeymoon."

She laughed a little wildly, and dabbed her wet cheeks with a corner of the sheet. Then she stopped suddenly, abashed. Rosamond's eyes were lost in space; she was not even listening.

"I knew you did not want me," said Aspasia—a very different quality of tears welling up.

Rosamond started:

"I, not want you! Why, Baby, what makes you say that?"

"Oh," cried the girl, with a swift change of mood, "how can you want me, have you not got him? Dear Aunt Rosamond, darling Aunt Rosamond, don't keep him waiting any more!"

She was going to cast herself upon the bed in another fervent embrace, when something in Rosamond's look arrested her. Here were the deeps astir! It was as if a flame enkindled in a fragile lamp, as if she could see it tremble and burn.

She drew back before a mystery to which she vaguely felt she would never have the key.

"You know, he will return to-day," stammered she at last. "It's all right about his business. He is coming back."

"I know," answered Harry English's wife, in a low vibrating voice. Then she hesitated, and turned to look at the girl, a wistful inquiry in her shadowed eyes.

"Have they told him?" she asked, under her breath, raising one of the heavy white locks that lay across her breast.

"Oh," exclaimed Aspasia, springing to her meaning, "but you are beautiful with it, you are more beautiful than ever! No—I don't know if they've told him. Oh, darling," she cried, melting all into tenderness, pity, and amusement, as over a child, "it wasn't for that, it could not be for that, you wouldn't see him?"

"For that!" said Rosamond. A flame seemed to pass over her again. She quivered from head to foot, and a deep flush rose to the very roots of her blanched hair. "Oh, Baby, no. How could you guess, how could you understand—poor little bride of an hour?"

And, as once before, upon that crucial morning in the distant Indian palace, she had taken all her golden hair to cover her face and hide its misery from violating eyes, Rosamond now swept the silver veil across the betrayal of her blood, that even Baby might not look upon the tumult of her heart.

The scent of the dark rose, stronger even than the lilies, filled the room.

* * * * *

Bethune carried off his bride unobtrusively—unromantically. Rosamond was still upstairs. And that no farewells should take place between her and Major Bethune fell out so naturally that even Baby scarcely commented upon it. Rosamond had always held herself so much aloof. That this procedure should have been planned by Bethune himself because he could not trust himself in this good-bye, would have been the last thought to enter the little wife's head; her Raymond had always rather disliked poor Aunt Rosamond than otherwise. Such was her conviction. He could never forgive her for having been his friend's forgetful widow.

She herself had shed torrents of easy tears of parting within the walls of the panelled bedroom; and had subsequently driven away beside the man of her choice (in the selfsame fly, smelling of straw, that had provoked her enthusiasm at arrival, her modest luggage atop), petulantly reviling her bridegroom for his inconsiderate hurry, the while nestling comfortably into the hollow of his shoulder.

How far was she from guessing at the complex emotions that made the heart, against which she leaned, beat so heavily; from guessing that this very haste, this wilfully informal departure, this quick marriage itself, were all part of the determined act of renunciation he had sealed in his soul, with the touch of her lips on his! Renunciation, it is true, of no more tangible passion than a thought. Yet, had she known, she need not have feared, for he who can renounce the insidious sweetness of a dream, need fear no overthrow from realities.

As for her, her marriage was the irresponsible mating of a little bird. And she was setting forth with as airy a freedom, with as busy and cheerful an importance, as any small winged lady of the woods on the flight to choose a favourable aspect for her nest.

As the vehicle wheeled out of the noiseless grassy avenue upon the moorland road, Bethune caught her to him, and kissed her with more of ardour than he had ever shown.

"And so, Robin," said he, "you are going to set all traditions at defiance, and pipe your pretty songs in the morning land."

Mrs. Bethune smiled importantly; she still chose to keep up the fiction that in matrimony she by no means intended to give up her musical career, that career, with a capital C, that she had so often flourished defiantly in Sir Arthur's face! But, in her heart, she knew very well that when she had let love enter in, it had

driven forth ambition.

CHAPTER II

A keen wind swept from the moor, shaking the sap of the drowsy orchard trees, setting the daffodil buds in the sheltered corners dancing, flecking the blue sky with sudden patches of cloud: a day typical of the bright, cruel, energies of youth, scurrying old tired mother earth into activity, ruthlessly eager to set her about her business and call up the joys of spring.

Saltwoods seemed very quiet and empty, standing alone with its memories, in the midst of this cheery bustle of the world without.

Rosamond wandered from room to room, restless alike from weakness and the strain of her dear, wonderful expectation. How long must she wait still? The opiate-effect of her languor had passed and it seemed to her that the suspense of these hours she could not endure. And then, all at once, behold, they had gone by!—The moment was at hand, and she was not ready.

She stood before the mirror, looking wistfully upon her white tresses. She wanted to appear beautiful in his eyes. But, alas! she had lost the golden crown of her woman's glory.... This grey dress that she had chosen, because some such colour had she worn upon the gorse-gold shore those many years ago, it was too pale, too cold, she thought, now that the sunshine of her hair had vanished.

Then she fancied she heard wheels, and caught the rose from her breast to thrust it haphazard into the waves that so strangely shaded in snow the delicate bloom of her face. And then, with the piteous coquetry of the woman who loves, she flung over that white head a scarf of lace, that he might not see too soon, that she might first have made him think her beautiful still, by a smile, a kiss.

But when she came to the door of the hall, there was no one. The wind and her impatience had but made mock of her. The avenue of swaying boughs was empty of all but the eager presence of the spring. She saw how the long grass bent, and whitened, and shivered; how a little unsuspected almond bush had burst into pink blossom among the hoary apple-trees; how, in the gusts, the rosy petals were already scattered abroad.

The panic that the heart knows in the absence of the beloved seized upon her. It was surely long past the time! Oh, God, was the cup to be dashed from their lips?

Frenzied with terror, she ran a pace or two down the avenue, to halt, panting in weakness—pressing her hand to her leaping breast. For a second everything swam before her. Then there came the moan of the gate swinging, and all her senses, strained beyond human limits, echoed to a distant footstep that yet made no sound upon the grass-grown way.

He came with great strides through the old ghost-like trees, whose withered boughs still held the swelling promise of the year's growth. He caught her in his arms, without a word. But she, like a child, clinging to him, cried, complaining:

"Oh, Harry, how late you are! Oh, how I have waited!"

"And I! ..." he made answer, almost inaudibly. "Eight years!"

His lips were on her eyelids as he spoke.

At this she dropped her head upon his breast, hiding her face; but he could see the crimson creep to the edge of the lace kerchief. There was a slackening of her arms about him, almost as if she would have knelt at his feet—there, in the lonely bare orchard.

He kept her close with his embrace; he had to stoop to hear her stammered words:

"Forgive—I have been shamed."

"Ah, hush!" cried he, quickly, his low voice vibrating with that tenderness for which there is no utterance. "Need there be this between us? Would I be here if I did not understand—if I did not know? ... The music is mine, at last—the music, Rosamond, that you kept silent, even from me. It is mine, at last—this is our wedding-day—the rest is nothing."

He raised her quivering face and looked into her eyes, deep, deep. The kerchief fell back from her white hair; the perfume from the fading rose was wafted to his nostrils.

"Oh, my white rose!" he cried, and passionately kissed the blanched head. "Oh, my red, red rose ... your lips, at last, at last, Rose of the World!"

Thus was fulfilled in the barren home orchard, Harry English's Eastern dream. And there was not a lichened bough that March day but bore him a wealth of leaf and blossom.

THE END

* * * * *

By Agnes & Egerton Castle

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THE PRIDE OF JENNICO
THE SECRET ORCHARD
THE BATH COMEDY
INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

By Egerton Castle

YOUNG APRIL
THE LIGHT OF SCARTHEY
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