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VIVIETTE

BY

WILLIAM J. LOCKE

1916

[Illustration: "No, don't, Viviette; forgive me"]

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"No, don't, Viviette; forgive me"

"Dick glared at him"

"He held out imploring hands"

"I want you to love me forever and ever"

VIVIETTE

CHAPTER I

THE BROTHERS

"Dick," said Viviette, "ought to go about in skins like a primitive man."

Katherine Holroyd looked up from her needlework. She was a gentle, fair-haired woman of thirty, with demure blue eyes, which regarded the girl with a mingling of pity, protection, and amusement.

"My dear," she said, "whenever I see a pretty girl fooling about with a primitive man I always think of a sweet little monkey I once knew, who used to have great sport with a lyddite shell. Her master kept it on his table as a paper-weight, and no one knew it was loaded. One day she hit the shell in the wrong place--and they're still looking for the monkey. Don't think Dick is the empty shell."

Whereupon she resumed her work, and for a few moments the click of thimble and needle alone broke the summer stillness. Viviette lay idly on a long garden chair admiring the fit of a pair of dainty tan shoes, which she twiddled with graceful twists of the ankles some five feet from her nose. At Mrs. Holroyd's remark she laughed after the manner of one quite contented with herself--a low, musical laugh, in harmony with the blue June sky and the flowering chestnuts and the song of the thrushes.

"My intentions with regard to Dick are strictly honourable," she remarked. "We've been engaged for the last eleven years, and I still have his engagement ring. It cost three-and-sixpence."

"I only want to warn you, dear," said Mrs. Holroyd. "Anyone can see that Dick is in love with you, and if you don't take care you'll have Austin falling in love with you too."

Viviette laughed again. "But he has already fallen! I don't think he knows it yet; but he has. It's great fun being a woman, isn't it, dear?"

"I don't know that I've ever found it so," Katherine replied with a sigh. She was a widow, and had loved her husband, and her sky was still tinged with grey.

Viviette, quick to catch the sadness in the voice, made no reply, but renewed the contemplation of her shoe-tips.

"I'm afraid you're an arrant little coquette," said Katherine indulgently.

"Lord Banstead says I'm a little devil," she laughed.

If she was in some measure a coquette she may be forgiven. What woman can have suddenly revealed to her the thrilling sense of her sex's mastery over men without snatching now and then the fearful joy of

using her power? She was one-and-twenty, her heart still unawakened, and she had returned to her childhood's home to find men who had danced her on their knees bending low before her, and proclaiming themselves her humble vassals. It was intoxicating. She had always looked up to Austin with awe, as one too remote and holy for girlish irreverence. And now! No wonder her sex laughed within her.

Until she had gone abroad to finish her education, she had lived in that old, grey manor-house, that dreamed in the sunshine of the terrace below which she was sitting, ever since they had brought her thither, an orphaned child of three. Mrs. Ware, her guardian, was her adopted mother; the sons, Dick and Austin Ware, her brothers--the engagement, when she was ten and Dick one-and-twenty, had hardly fluttered the fraternal relationship. She had left them a merry, kittenish child. She had returned a woman, slender, full-bosomed, graceful, alluring, with a maturity of fascination beyond her years. Enemies said she had gipsy blood in her veins. If so, the infusion must have taken place long, long ago, for her folks were as proud of their name as the Wares of Ware House. But, for all that, there was a suggestion of the exotic in the olive and cream complexion, and the oval face, pointing at the dimpled chin; something of the woodland in her lithe figure and free gestures; in her swimming, dark eyes one could imagine something fierce and untamable lying beneath her laughing idleness. Katherine Holroyd called her a coquette, Austin whatever the whim of a cultured fancy suggested, and Lord Banstead a little devil. As for Dick, he called her nothing. His love was too great; his vocabulary too small.

Lord Banstead was a neighbour who, in the course of three months, had proposed several times to Viviette.

"I'm not very much to look at," he remarked on the first of these occasions--he was a weedy, pallid youth of six-and-twenty--"and the title's not very old, I must admit. Governor only a scientific Johnnie, Margetson, the celebrated chemist, you know, who discovered some beastly gas or other and got made a peer--but I can sit with the other old rotters in the House of Lords, you know, if I want. And I've got enough to run the show, if you'll keep me from chucking it away as I'm doing. It'd be a godsend if you'd marry me, I give you my word."

"Before I have anything to do with you," replied Viviette, who had heard Dick express his opinion of Lord Banstead in forcible terms, "you'll have to forswear sack, and--and a very big AND--"

Lord Banstead, not being learned in literary allusions, looked bewildered. Viviette laughed.

"I'll translate if you like. You'll have to give up unlimited champagne and whiskey and lead an ostensibly respectable life."

Whereupon Lord Banstead called her a little devil and went off in dudgeon to London and took golden-haired ladies out to supper. When he returned to the country he again offered her his title, and being rejected a second time, again called her a little devil, and went back

to the fashionable supper-room. A third and a fourth time he executed this complicated manoeuvre; and now news had reached Viviette that he was in residence at Farfield, where he was boring himself exceedingly in his father's scientific library.

"I suppose he'll be coming over to-day," said Viviette.

"Why do you encourage him?" asked Katherine.

"I don't," Viviette retorted. "I snub him unmercifully. If I am a coquette it's with real men, not with the by-product of a chemical experiment."

Katherine dropped her work and her underlip, and turned reproachful blue eyes on the girl.

"Viviette!"

"Oh, she's shocked! Saint Nitouche is shocked!" Then, with a change of manner, she rose and, bending over Katherine's chair, kissed her. "I'm sorry, dear," she said, in pretty penitence. "I know it was an abominable and unladylike thing to say, but my tongue sometimes runs away with my thoughts. Forgive me."

At that moment a man dressed in rough tweeds and leggings, who had emerged from the stable side of the manor-house, crossed the terrace, and, descending the steps, walked over the lawn towards the two ladies. He had massive shoulders and a thick, strong neck, coarse reddish hair, and a moustache of a lighter shade. Blue eyes looked with a curious childish pathos out of a face tanned by sun and weather. He slouched slightly in his gait, like the heavy man accustomed to the saddle. This was Dick Ware, the elder of the brothers and heir to fallen fortunes, mortgaged house and lands, and he gave the impression of failure, of a man who, in spite of thews and sinews, had been unable to grapple with circumstance.

Viviette left Katherine to her needlework, and advanced to meet him. At her spontaneous act of welcome a light came into his eyes. He removed from his lips the short corn-cob pipe he was smoking.

"I've just been looking at the new mare. She's a beauty. I know I oughtn't to have got her, but she was going dirt cheap--and what can a man do when he's offered a horse at a quarter its value?"

"Nothing, my dear Dick, save pay four times as much as he can afford."

"But we had to get a new beast," he argued seriously. "We can't go about the country in a donkey-cart. If I hadn't bought one, Austin would, for the sake of the family dignity--and I do like to feel independent of Austin now and then."

"I wish you were entirely independent of Austin," said Viviette, walking with him up the lawn.

"I can't, so long as I stay here doing nothing. But if I went out to Canada or New Zealand, as I want to do, who would look after my mother? I'm tied by the leg."

"I'd look after mother," said Viviette. "And you'd write me nice long letters, saying how you were getting on, and I would send you nice little bulletins, and we should all be very happy."

"Do you want to get rid of me, Viviette?"

"I want you to have your heart's desire."

"You know what my heart's desire is," he said unsteadily.

"Why, to raise sheep or drive cattle, or chop down trees in the backwoods," she replied, lifting demure eyebrows. "Oh, Dick, don't be foolish. See--there's mother just come out."

With a light laugh she escaped and ran up the steps to meet an old lady, rather infirm, who, with the aid of a stick, was beginning to take her morning walk up and down the terrace. Dick followed her moodily.

"Good morning, mother," said he, bending down to kiss her.

Mrs. Ware put up her cheek, and received the salute with no great show of pleasure.

"Oh, how you smell of tobacco smoke, Dick. Where's Austin? Please go and find him. I want to hear what he has to say about the stables."

"What can he say, mother?"

"He can advise us and help us to put the muddle right," said Mrs. Ware.

These stables had been a subject of controversy for some time. The old ones having fallen into disgraceful disrepair, Dick had turned architect and erected new ones himself. As shelters for beasts, they were comparatively sound; as appanages to an Elizabethan manor-house, they were open to adverse criticism. Austin, who had come down from London a day or two before to spend his Whitsuntide holiday at home, had promised his mother to make inspection and report.

"But what does Austin know about stables?" Viviette asked, as soon as Dick had slouched away in search of his brother.

"Austin knows about everything, my dear," replied the old lady decisively. "Not only is Austin a brilliantly clever man, but he's a successful barrister, and a barrister's business is to know all about everything. Give me your arm, dear, and let us walk up and down a little till they come."

Presently Dick returned with Austin, whom he had found smoking a cigar

in a very meditative manner in front of the stables. Dick's face was gloomy, but Austin's was bright, as he came briskly up and, cigar in hand, stooped to his mother. She put her arms round his neck, kissed him affectionately, and inquired after his sleep and his comfort and the quality of his breakfast.

"Doesn't Austin smell of tobacco smoke, mother?" asked Dick.

"Austin," replied Mrs. Ware, "has a way of smoking and not smelling of it."

Austin laughed gaily. "I believe if I fell into a pond you'd say I had a way of coming up dry."

Dick turned to Viviette, and muttered with some bitterness: "And if I fell into a dry ditch she'd say I came up slimy."

Viviette, touched by pity, raised a bewitching face. "Dry or slimy, you would be just the same dear old Dick," she whispered.

"And what about the stables?" asked Mrs. Ware.

"Oh, they're not bad. They're rather creditable; but," Austin added, turning with a laugh to his brother, "the mother will fidget, you know, and the somewhat--let us say rococo style of architecture has got on her nerves. I think the whole thing had better come down, don't you?"

"If you like," said Dick gruffly. He had given way to Austin all his life. What was the use of opposing him now?

"Good. I'll send young Rapson, the architect, along to make a design. Don't you worry, old chap, I'll see it through."

Young, brisk, debonair, flushed with success and the sense of the mastery of life, he did not notice the lowering of Dick's brows, which deepened into almost a scowl when he turned frankly admiring eyes on Viviette, and drew her into gay, laughing talk, nor did he catch the hopelessness in the drag of Dick's feet as he went off to gaze sorrowfully at the fallen pride of his heart, the condemned stables.

But Viviette who knew, as Austin did not, of Dick's disappointment, soon broke away and joined him in front of the amorphous shed of timber. She took him by the arm.

"Come for a stroll in the orchard."

He suffered himself to be led through the stable-yard gate. She talked to him of apple blossoms. He listened for some time in silence. Then he broke out.

"It's an infernal shame," said he.

"It is," said Viviette. "But you needn't put on such a glum face when

I'm here especially to comfort you. If you're not glad to see me I'll go back to Austin. He's much more amusing than you."

"I suppose he is. Yes, go back to him. I'm a fool. I'm nobody. No, don't, Viviette; forgive me," he cried, catching her as she turned away somewhat haughtily. "I didn't mean it, but things are getting beyond my endurance."

Viviette seated herself on a bench beneath the apple blossoms.

"What things?"

"Everything. My position. Austin's airy ways."

"But that's what makes him so charming."

"Yes, confound him. My ways are about as airy as a hippopotamus's. Look here, Viviette. I'm fond of Austin, God knows--but all my life he has been put in front of me. He has had all the chances; I've had none. With my father when he was alive, with my mother, it has always been Austin this and Austin that. He was the head of the school when I, the elder, was a lout in the lower fourth. He had a brilliant University career and went into the world and is making a fortune. I'm only able to ride and shoot and do country things. I've stuck here with only this mortgaged house belonging to me and the hundred or so a year I get out of the tenants. I'm not even executor under my father's will. It's Austin. Austin pays mother the money under her marriage settlement. If things go wrong Austin is sent for to put them right. It never seems to occur to him that it's my house. Oh, of course I know he pays the interest on the mortgage and makes my mother an allowance--that's the humiliation of it."

He sat with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, staring at the grass.

"But surely you could find some work to do, Dick?"

He shrugged his great shoulders. "They stuck me once in an office in London. I suffocated and added up things wrong and told the wrong lies to the wrong people, and ended up by breaking the junior partner's head!"

"You had some satisfaction out of it, at any rate," laughed Viviette.

A faint reminiscent smile crossed his face. "I suppose I had. But it didn't qualify me for a successful business career. No. I might do something in a new country. I must get away from this. I can't stand it. But yet--as I've told you all along, I'm tied--hand and foot."

"And so you're very miserable, Dick."

"How can I help it?"

Viviette edged a little away from him, and said, rather resentfully:

"I don't call that polite, seeing that I have come back to live with you."

He turned on her with some fierceness. "Don't you see that your being here makes my life all the more impossible? How can I be with you day after day without loving you, hungering for you, wanting you, body and soul? I've never given a thought to another woman in my life. You're my heart's blood, dear. I want to hold you so tight in my arms that not the ghost of another man can ever come between us. You know it."

Viviette shredded an apple blossom that had fallen into her lap. The fingers that held the petal tingled, and a flush rose in her cheek.

"I do know it," she said in a low voice. "You're always telling me. But, Dick"--she flashed a mischievous glance at him--"while you're holding me--although it would be very nice--we should starve."

"Then let us starve," he cried vehemently.

"Oh, no. Oh, most decidedly no. Starvation would be so unbecoming. I should get to be a fright--a bundle of bones and a rundle of skin--and you'd be horrified--I couldn't bear it."

"If you would only say you cared a scrap for me it would be easier," he pleaded.

"I should have thought it would be harder."

"Anyhow, say it--say it this once--just this once."

She bent her head to hide a smile, and said in a voice adorably soft:

"Dick, shut your eyes."

"Viviette!" he cried, with sudden hope.

"No. Shut your eyes. Turn round. Now tell me," she continued, when he had turned obediently, "just what I've got on. No!" she held him by the shoulders, "you're not to move."

Now, she was wearing a white blouse and a blue skirt and tan shoes, and a yellow rose was pinned at her bosom.

"What dress am I wearing?"

"A light-coloured thing," said Dick.

"And what's it trimmed with?"

"Lace," said the unfortunate man. Lace indeed!

"And what coloured boots?"

"Black," said Dick, at a venture.

"And what flower?"

"I don't know--a pink rose, I think."

She started up. "Look," she cried gaily. "Oh, Dick! I'll never marry you till you have the common decency to look at me--never! never! never! I dressed myself this beautiful morning just to please you. Oh, Dick! Dick, you've lost such a chance."

She stood with her hands behind her back regarding him mockingly, as Eve in the first orchard must have regarded Adam when he was more dull and masculine than usual--when, for instance, she had attired herself in hibiscus flowers which he took for the hum-drum, everyday fig-leaves.

"I'm a born duffer," said Dick pathetically. "But your face is all that I see when I look at you."

"That's all very pretty," she retorted. "But you ought to see more. Now let us talk sense. Mind, if I sit on that bench again you're to talk sense."

Dick sighed. "Very well," said he.

That was the history of all his love-making. She drew him on to passionate utterance, and then, with a twist of her wit and a twirl of her skirts, she eluded him. When she had thus put herself out of his reach, he felt ashamed. What right had he, dull, useless, lumbering, squireless squire, to ask a woman like Viviette to marry him? How could he support a wife? As it was, he lived a pensioner on Austin's bounty. Could he ask Austin to feed his wife and family as well? This thought, which always came to him as soon as his passion was checked, filled him with deep humiliation. Viviette had reason on her side when she said, "Let us talk sense."

He glowered at his fate, and tugged his tawny moustache for some time in silence. Then Viviette began to talk to him prettily of things that made up his country interests, his dogs, the garden, the personalities of the country-side. Soon she had him laughing, which pleased and flattered her, as it proved her power over the primitive man. Indeed, at such moments, she felt very tenderly towards him, and would have liked to pat his cheeks and crown him with flowers, thus manifesting her favour by dainty caresses. But she refrained, knowing that primitive men are too dense to interpret such demonstrations rightly, and limited herself to less compromising words.

"I am going to tell you a secret," he said at last, in a shamefaced way. "You mustn't laugh at me--promise me you won't."

"I promise," said Viviette solemnly.

"I am thinking of going in for local politics--Rural District Council, you know."

Viviette nodded her head approvingly. "A village Hampden--in Tory clothing?"

"They're running things on party lines down here. The influence of Westhampton is Radical, and fills the Council with a lot of outsiders. So they've got together a Conservative Committee, and are going to run a good strong man for a vacancy. I've given them to understand that I'll be a candidate if they'll have me. I'd like to be one. It's a rubbishy thing, dear, but somehow it would give me a little interest in life."

"I don't think it a rubbishy thing at all," said Viviette. "A country gentleman ought to have a hand in rural administration. I do hope you'll get in. When will you know that the committee have selected you?"

"There's a meeting this evening. I ought to know to-night or to-morrow morning."

"Are you very keen on it?"

"Very," said Dick. And he added proudly, "It was my own idea."

"But you're not as keen on that as on going abroad?"

"Ah, that!" said Dick. "That, bar one, is the dearest wish of my heart. And who knows--it might enable me to carry out the other."

The sound of a gong within the house floated through the still June air. Viviette rose. "I must tidy myself for lunch."

They walked to the house together. On parting she put out both her hands.

"Do be reasonable, Dick, and don't look for slights in what you call Austin's airy ways. He is awfully fond of you, and would not hurt you for the world."

At the luncheon table, however, Austin did hurt him, in utter unconsciousness, by his gay command of the situation, his eager talk with Viviette of things Dick did not understand, places he had not visited, books he had never read, pictures he had never seen. It was heartache rather than envy. He did not grudge Austin his scholarship and brilliance. But his soul sank at the sight of Austin and Viviette moving as familiars in a joyous world as remote from him as Neptune. Mrs. Ware kept Katherine Holroyd engaged in mild talk of cooks and curates, while the other two maintained their baffling conversation, half banter, half serious, on a bewildering number of topics, and poor Dick remained as dumb as the fish and cutlets he was eating. He sat at the head of the table, Mrs. Ware at the foot. On his right hand sat Katherine Holroyd, on his left Viviette, and between her and his mother was Austin. With

Viviette talking to Austin and Mrs. Ware to Katherine, he felt lonely and disregarded in a kind of polar waste of snowy tablecloth. Once Katherine, escaping from Mrs. Ware's platitudinous ripple, took pity on him, and asked him when he was going to redeem his promise and show her his collection of armour and weapons. Dick brightened. This was the only keen interest he had in life outside things of earth and air and stream. He had inherited a good family collection, and had added to it occasionally, as far as his slender means allowed. He had read deeply, and understood his subject.

"Whenever you like, Katherine," he said.

"This afternoon?"

"I'm afraid they want polishing up and arranging. I've got some new things which I've not placed. I've rather neglected them lately. Let us say to-morrow afternoon. Then they'll all be spick and span for you."

Katherine assented. "I've been down here so often and never seen them," she said. "It seems odd, considering the years we've known each other."

"I only took it up after father's death," said Dick. "And since then, you know, you haven't been here so very often."

"It was only the last time that I discovered you took an interest in the collection. You hid your light under a bushel. Then I went to London and heard that you were a great authority on the subject."

Dick's tanned face reddened with pleasure.

"I do know something about it. You see, guns and swords and pistols are in my line. I'm good at killing things. I ought to have been a soldier, only I couldn't pass examinations, so I sort of interest myself in the old weapons and do my killing in imagination."

"You give a regular lecture, don't you?"

"Well, you know," said Dick modestly, "a lot of them are historical. There's a mace used by a bishop, an ancestor of ours. He couldn't wield a sword in battle, so he cottoned on to that, and in order to salve his conscience before using it he would cry out 'Gare! gare!'--and they say that's what our name comes from--see? 'Ware--Ware.' He was the founder of our family--though, of course, he oughtn't to have been. And then we have the duelling pistols my great-grandfather shot Lord Estcourt with. They're beautiful things--in the case just as he left it after the duel, with powder, balls, and caps, all complete. It's a romantic story--"

"My dear Dick," interposed Mrs. Ware, with fragile, uplifted hand, "please don't offend us with these horrible family scandals. Katharine, dear, are you going to the vicar's garden party this afternoon? If you are, will you take a message to Mrs. Cook?"

So Katherine being monopolized, Dick was silenced, and as Austin and

Viviette were talking in a lively but unintelligible way about a thing, or a play, or a horse called Nietzsche, he relapsed into the heavy, full-blooded man's animal enjoyment of his food and the sensitive's consciousness of heartache.

When the ladies had left the table and the coffee had been brought in, and the men's cigars were lit, Austin said:

"What a magnificently beautiful creature she has grown into."

"Whom do you mean?" asked Dick.

"Why, Viviette, of course. She's the most fascinating thing I've come across for years."

"Do you think so?" said Dick shortly.

"Don't you?"

Dick shrugged his shoulders. Austin laughed.

"What a stolid old beggar you are. To you, she's just the same little girl that used to run about here in short frocks. If she were a horse you'd have a catalogue yards long of her points."

"But as she's a lady," said Dick, tugging his moustache, "I don't care to catalogue them."

Austin laughed again. "Fairly scored!" He raised his cup to his lips, took a sip, and set it down again.

"Why on earth," said he with some petulance, "can't mother give us decent coffee?"

CHAPTER II

THE CONSPIRATORS

Dick went heavy-hearted to bed that night, pronouncing himself to be the most abjectly miserable of God's creatures, and calling on Providence to remove him speedily from an unsympathetic world. He had said good night to the ladies at eleven o'clock when the three went upstairs to bed, and had forthwith gone to spend the rest of the evening in the friendly solitude of his armoury. Emerging thence an hour later into the hall, he had come upon a picturesque, but heart-rending, spectacle. There, on the third step of the grand staircase, stood Viviette, holding in one hand a candle, and extending the other regally downwards to Austin, who, with sleek head bent, was pressing it to his lips. In the candle-light her hair threw disconcerting shadows over her elfin face, and her great eyes

seemed to glow with a magical intensity that poor Dick had never seen in them before. As soon as he had appeared she had broken into her low laugh, drawn away her hand from Austin, and, descending the steps, extended it in much the same regal manner to Dick.

"Good night again, Dick," she said sweetly. "Austin and I have been having a little talk."

But he had disregarded the hand, and, with a gruff "Good night," had returned to his armoury, slamming the door behind him. There he had nourished his wrath on more whiskey and soda than was good for him, and crawled upstairs in the small hours to miserable sleeplessness.

This was the beginning of Dick's undoing, the gods (abetted by Viviette) employing their customary procedure of first driving him mad. But Viviette was not altogether a guilty abettor. Indeed, all day long, she had entertained high notions of acting fairy godmother, and helping Dick along the road to fortune and content. He himself, she learned, had taken no steps to free himself from his present mode of life. He had not even confided in Austin. Viviette ran over the list of her influential friends. There was Lady Winsmere, a dowager countess of seventy, surrounded by notabilities, at whose house she stayed now and then in London. On the last occasion an Agent-General for one of the great Colonies had sat next her at dinner. Then there was her friend Mrs. Penderby, whose husband gathered enormous wealth in some mysterious way in Mark Lane. Why should she not go up to London and open a campaign on Dick's behalf, secure him an appointment, and come back flourishing it before his dazzled and delighted eyes? The prospect was enchanting. The fairy godmother romance of it fascinated her girlish mind. But first she must clear the ground at home. There must be no opposition from Austin. He must be her ally.

When a woman gets an idea like this into her head she must execute it, as the Americans say, right now. A man waits, counts up all the barriers, and speculates on the strength and courage of the lions in the path--but a woman goes straight forward, and does not worry about the lions till they bite her. Viviette resolved to speak to Austin at once; but, owing to a succession of the little ironies of circumstance, she found no opportunity of doing so all the afternoon or evening. It was only when, standing at the top of the stairs, she had seen Dick go off to the armoury, and Austin return to the drawing-room--for the men had bidden the ladies good night in the hall--that she saw her chance. She went downstairs and opened the drawing-room door.

"I don't want to go to bed after all. Do you think you can do with me a little longer?"

"A great deal longer," he said, drawing a chair for her, and arranging the shade of a lamp so that the light should not shine full in her eyes. "I was just thinking how dull the room looked without you--as if all the flowers had suddenly been taken away."

"I suppose I am decorative," she said blandly.

"You're bewitching. What instinct made you choose that shade of pale green for your frock? If I had seen it in the pattern I should have said it was impossible for your colouring. But now it seems to be the only perfect thing you could wear."

She laughed her little laugh of pleasure, and thanked him prettily for the compliment. They bandied gay words for a while.

"Oh, I'm so glad you have come down--even for this short visit," said Viviette at last. "I was pining for talk, for wit, for a breath of the great world beyond these sleepy meadows. You bring all that with you."

Austin leaned forward. "How do you know I'm not bringing even more?"

The girl's eyes drooped before his gaze. Then she fluttered a glance at him in which there was a gleam of mockery.

"You bring the most valuable gift of all--appreciation of my frocks. I love people to notice them. Now Dick is frock-blind. Why is that?"

"He's a dear old duffer," said Austin.

"I don't think he's happy," said Viviette, who, in her feminine way, had worked round to the subject of the interview.

"He did seem rather cut up about the stables," Austin admitted. "But the things are an eyesore, and mother was worrying herself to death about them."

"It isn't only the stables," said Viviette. "Dick is altogether discontented."

Austin looked at her in amazement. "Discontented?"

"He wants something to do."

"Nonsense," he laughed, with the air of a man certain of his facts.

"He's as happy as a king here. He shoots and hunts--looks after the place--runs the garden and potters about in his armoury--in fact, does just what he likes all day long. He goes to bed without a care sharing his pillow, and, when he wakes up, gets into comfortable country clothes instead of a tight-fitting suit of responsibilities. For a man of his tastes he leads an ideal existence."

He threw away the end of the cigarette he was smoking, as though to say that the argument was finished. But Viviette regarded him with a smile--the smile of woman's superior wisdom. How astonishingly little he knew of Dick!

"Do you really think there is one contented being on earth?" she asked.

"Even I know better than that."

Austin maintained that Dick ought to be contented.

"Dependent for practically all he has on you?"

"I've never let him feel it," he said quickly.

"He does, though. He wants to get away--to earn his own living--make a way for himself."

"That's the first I've heard of it," said Austin, genuinely surprised.

"I really thought he was perfectly contented here. Of course, now and then he's grumpy--but he always has had fits of grumpiness. What kind of work does he want?"

"Something to do with sheep or cattle--in Arizona or New Zealand--the place doesn't matter--any open-air life."

Austin lit another cigarette and walked about the room. He was a man of well-regulated habits, and did not like being taken unawares. Dick ought to have told him. Then there was their mother. Who would look after her? Dick was a dispensation of Providence.

"Perhaps I might be a deputy dispensation, mightn't I?" said Viviette.

"I don't think mother is so desperately attached to Dick as all that. It could be arranged somehow or other. And Dick is growing more and more wretched about it every day. Every day he pours out his woes to me till I can almost howl with misery."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Not to stand in his way if he gets a chance of going abroad."

"Of course I won't," cried Austin eagerly. "It never entered my head that he wanted to go away. I would do anything in the world for his happiness, poor old chap. I love Dick very deeply. In spite of his huge bulk and rough ways there's something of the woman in him that makes one love him."

They catalogued Dick's virtues, and then Viviette unfolded her scheme. One or other of the powerful personages whom, in her young confidence, she proposed to attack, would surely know of some opening abroad.

"Even humble I sometimes hear of things," said Austin. "Only a day or two ago old Lord Overton asked me if I knew of a man who could manage a timber forest he's got in Vancouver--"

Viviette jumped up and clapped her hands.

"Why, that's the very thing for Dick!" she cried exultingly.

"God bless my soul!" said Austin. "So it is. I never thought of it."

"If you get it for him I'll thank you in the sweetest way possible." She

glanced at him swiftly, under her eyelids. "I promise you I will."

"Then I'll certainly get it," replied Austin.

Austin then went into details. Lord Overton wanted a man of education--a gentleman--one who could ride and shoot and make others work. He would have to superintend the planting and the cutting and the transportation of timber, and act as agent for the various farms Lord Overton possessed in the wide district. The salary would be £700 a year. The late superintendent had suddenly died, and Lord Overton wanted a man to go out at once and fill his place. If only he had thought of Dick!

"But you're thinking of him now. It can't be too late--men with such qualifications aren't picked up at every street corner."

"That's quite true," said Austin. "And as for my recommendation," he added in his confident way, "Lord Overton and I are on such terms that he would not hesitate to give the appointment to a brother of mine. I'll write at once."

"And we'll say nothing to Dick until we've got it all in black and white."

"Not a word," said he.

Then they burst out laughing like happy conspirators, and enjoyed beforehand the success of their plot.

"The old place will be very strange without him," said Austin.

A shadow passed over Viviette's bright face. The manor-house would indeed be very lonely. Her occupation as Dick's liege lady, confidante, and tormentor would be gone. Parting from him would be a wrench. There would be a dreadful scene at the last moment, in which he would want to hold her tight in his arms and make her promise to join him in Vancouver. She shivered a little; then tossed her head as if to throw off the disturbing thoughts.

"Don't let us look at the dismal side of things. It's selfish. All we want is Dick's happiness." She glanced at the clock and started up. "It's midnight. If Katherine knew I was here she would lecture me."

"It's nothing very dreadful," he laughed. "Nor is Katherine's lecture."

"I call her Saint Nitouche--but she's a great dear, isn't she? Good night."

He accompanied her to the foot of the stairs and lit her candle. On the third stair she paused.

"Remember--in all this it's I who am the fairy godmother."

"And I," said Austin, "am nothing but the fairy godmother's humble and

devoted factotum." He took the hand which she extended and, bending over it, kissed it gallantly.

Then by unhappy chance out came Dick from the armoury, and beheld the spectacle which robbed him of his peace of mind.

The next morning, when Dick came down gloomily to breakfast, she was very gentle with him, and administered tactfully to his wants. She insisted on going to the sideboard and carving his cold ham, of which he ate prodigious quantities after a hot first course, and when she put the plate before him laid a caressing touch on his shoulder. She neglected Austin in a bare-faced manner, and drew Dick into reluctant and then animated talk on his prize roses and a setter pup just recovering from distemper. After the meal she went with him round the garden, inspected both roses and puppy, and manifested great interest in a trellis he was constructing for the accommodation later in the summer of some climbing cucumbers, at present only visible as modest leaves in flower-pots. Neither made any reference to the little scene of the night before. Morning had brought to Dick the conviction that in refusing her hand and slamming the door he had behaved in an unpardonably bearish manner; and he could not apologise for his behaviour unless he confessed his jealousy of Austin, which, in all probability, would have subjected him to the mocking ridicule of Viviette--a thing which, above all others, he dreaded, and against which he knew himself to be defenceless. Viviette, too, found silence golden. She knew perfectly well why Dick had slammed the door. An explanation would have been absurd. It would have interfered with her relations with Austin, which were beginning to be exciting. But she loved Dick in her heart for being a bear, and evinced both her compunction and her appreciation in peculiar graciousness.

"You've never asked me to try the new mare," she said. "I don't think it a bit kind of you."

"Would you care to?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course I should. I love to see you with horses. You and the trap and the horse seem to be as much one mechanism as a motor-car."

"I can make a horse do what I want," he said, delighted at the compliment. "We'll take the dog-cart. When will you come? This morning?"

"Yes--let us say eleven. It will be lovely."

"I'll have it round at eleven o'clock. You'll see. She's a flyer."

"So am I," she said with a laugh, and pointed to the front gate, which a garden lad had just run to open to admit a young man on horseback.

"Oh, lord! it's Banstead," said Dick with a groan.

"Au revoir--eleven o'clock," said Viviette, and she fled.

Lord Banstead dismounted, gave his horse to the lad, and came up to

Dick. He was an unhealthy, dissipated-looking young man, with lustreless eyes, a characterless chin, and an underfed moustache. He wore a light blue hunting stock, fastened by a ruby fox in full gallop, and a round felt hat with a very narrow flat brim, beneath which protruded strands of Andrew aguecheek hair.

"Hallo, Banstead," said Dick, not very cordially.

"Hallo," said the other, halting before the rose-bed, where Dick was tying up some blooms with bast. He watched him for a moment or two. Conversation was not spontaneous.

"Where's Viviette?" he asked eventually.

"Who?" growled Dick.

"Rot. What's the good of frills? Miss Hastings."

"Busy. She'll be busy all the morning."

"I rather wanted to see her."

"I don't think you will. You might ring at the front door and send in your card."

"I might," said Banstead, lighting a cigar. He had tried this method of seeing Viviette before, but without success. There was another pause. Dick snipped off an end of bast.

"You're up very early," said he.

"Went to bed so bally sober I couldn't sleep," replied the misguided youth. "Not a soul in the house, I give you my word. So bored last night I took a gun and tried to shoot cats. Shot a damn cock pheasant by mistake, and had to bury the thing in my own covers. If I'm left to myself to-night I'll get drunk and go out shooting tenants. Come over and dine."

"Can't," said Dick.

"Do. I'll open a bottle of the governor's old port. Then we can play billiards, or piquet, or cat's-cradle, or any rotten thing you like."

Dick excused himself curtly. Austin had come down for Whitsuntide, and a lady was staying in the house. Lord Banstead pushed his hat to the back of his head.

"Then what the devil am I to do in this hole of a place?"

"Don't know," said Dick.

"You fellows in the country are so unfriendly. In town I never need dine alone. Anyone's glad to see me. Feeding all by myself in that

dining-room fairly gives me the pip."

"Then come and dine here," said Dick, unable to refuse a neighbour hospitality.

"Right," said Banstead. "That is really like the Samaritan Johnnie. I'll come with pleasure."

"Quarter to eight."

Banstead hesitated. "Couldn't you make it a quarter past?"

Dick stared. "Alter our dinner hour? You've rather a nerve, haven't you, Banstead?"

"I wouldn't suggest it, if we weren't pals," replied the other, grinning somewhat shamefacedly. "But the fact is I've got an appointment late this afternoon." The fatuity of vicious and coroneted youth outstripped his discretion. "There's a devilish pretty girl, you know, at 'The Green Man' at Little Barton; I don't know whether I can get away in time."

Dick stuffed his bast in his pocket, and muttered things uncomplimentary to Banstead.

"Dinner's at a quarter to eight. You can take it or leave it," said he.

"I suppose I've jolly well got to take it," said Banstead, unruffled. "Anything's better than going through dinner from soup to dessert all alone under the fishy eye of that butling image of a Jenkins. He was thirty years in my governor's service, and doesn't understand my ways. I guess I'll have to chuck him."

A perspiring, straw-hatted postman lurched along the gravel drive with the morning's post. He touched his hat to Dick, delivered the Manor House bag into his hands, and departed.

"I'll sort these in the morning-room," said Dick, moving in the direction of the house, and Lord Banstead, hoping to see Viviette, followed at his heels. The control of the family post was one of the few privileges Dick retained as master of the house. His simple mind still regarded the receipt and despatch of letters as a solemn affair of life, and every morning he went through the process of distribution with ceremonial observance. In the morning-room they found Austin and Viviette, the former writing in a corner, the latter reading a novel by the French window that opened on to the terrace. Dick went up to a table, and, opening the mail-bag, began to sort the letters into various heaps. Austin greeted Lord Banstead none too warmly, and, with scarcely an apology, went back to his writing. He disapproved of Banstead, who was of a type particularly antagonistic to the young, clean, and successful barrister. When Viviette had informed him of the youth's presence in the garden, he had exclaimed impatiently:

"It ought to be somebody's business to go round the world occasionally

with a broom and sweep away spiders like that."

Viviette, mindful of the invective, received Lord Banstead with a smile of amusement. As she had two protectors against a fifth proposal of marriage, she stood her ground.

"I expected you to come over yesterday," she said.

"No, did you really?" he exclaimed, a flush rising to his pale cheeks. "If I had thought that I should have come."

"You've made up for it by arriving early to-day, at any rate," said Viviette.

"And I'm making up for it further by coming to dinner to-night. Dick asked me," he added, seeing the polite questioning in her eyes.

"That will be very nice," she said. "You can talk to mother. You see, Dick talks to Mrs. Holroyd, who is staying with us, Austin talks to me, so poor mother is left out in the cold. She'll enjoy a nice long talk with you."

When Banstead took the chorus out to supper he had the ready repartee of his kind. In such a case he would have told the lady not to pull his leg. But the delicate mockery in Viviette's face seemed to forbid the use of this figure of speech, and as his vocabulary did not readily allow him to formulate the idea in other terms he said nothing, but settled his stock, and looked at her adoringly. At last he bent forward, after a glance at the protectors, and said in a low tone:

"Come out into the garden. I've something to say to you."

"Why not say it here?" she replied in her ordinary voice.

Banstead bit his lip. He would have liked to call her a little devil. But he reflected that if he did she would be quite capable of repeating the phrase aloud, somewhat to the astonishment of Dick and Austin, who might ask for embarrassing explanations. Instead he bent still nearer, and whispered:

"I can only say it to you alone. I've been awake all night thinking of it--give you my word."

"Wait till to-morrow morning, and by then you may have slept upon it," she counselled.

"You'll drive me to drink!" he murmured.

She rose with a laugh. "In that case I must go. I ought to be labelled 'dangerous.' Don't you think so, Dick? Besides, I'm going for a drive, and must put on my things. These my letters? Au revoir." And, with a wave of her hand she left them.

Banstead lingered by the threshold and took up an illustrated paper. The maid, in response to Dick's summons, bore away the letters for the rest of the household. Austin and Dick concerned themselves with their correspondence, Dick's chiefly consisting of gardeners' catalogues.

For a while there was silence. It was broken by a loud laugh from Austin.

"Dick! I say, Dick! What do you think these village idiots have asked me to do? To accept their nomination and stand as a Rural District Councillor! Me!"

Dick quickly crossed to the table where his brother was sitting.

"That's my letter, old chap. I must here put it in your heap by mistake. The invitation is meant for me."

"You?" laughed Austin. "Why, what do you want to fool about with village politics for? No. The letter is meant for me right enough."

"I can't understand it," said Dick.

Lord Banstead looked up from his paper.

"That the Rural District Council? I'm on the committee. Had a meeting yesterday. I'm chairman of the silly rotters."

"Then your silly rotter of an honorary secretary," cried Dick angrily, "has sent Austin the letter of invitation that was meant for me."

"Oh, no, he didn't," said Banstead. "It's all right. They chucked you, old son. Now I remember. I promised to explain."

Dick turned aside. "Oh, you needn't explain," he said bitterly.

"But I must. They had their reasons, you know. They thought they'd rather have a brainy nobleman like your brother than a good old rotter like you. You're--"

"Oh, hold your tongue, Banstead," cried Austin, rising and putting his hand on Dick's shoulder. "Really, my dear old Dick, you're the right person to stand. They only thought a lawyer could help them--but I'm far too busy--of course I decline. I'm deeply pained, Dick, at having hurt you. I'll write to the committee and point out how much fitter, as a country gentleman, you are for the duties than I am. They're bound to ask you."

Dick swung away passionately, his lips quivering with anger and mortification beneath his great moustache.

"Do you think I would accept? I'm damned if I would. Do you expect me to pick up everything you've thrown in the mud and feel grateful? I'm damned if I will!"

He flung out of the room on to the terrace and strode away in a rage.

"Seems to take it badly," remarked Banstead, looking at his disappearing figure. "I had better say good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Austin. And he added, as he accompanied him with grim politeness to the front gate, "if you exercise the same tact in the chair as you've done here, your meetings must be a huge success."

He returned with a shrug of the shoulders to his table in the morning-room. He was deeply attached to Dick, but a lifelong habit of regarding him as a good-natured, stupid, and contented giant blinded him to the storm that was beginning to rage in the other's soul. The occurrence was unfortunate. It wounded the poor old fellow's vanity. Banstead's blatant folly had been enough to set any man in a rage. But, after all, Dick was a common-sense creature, and, recognising that Austin was in no way to blame, he would soon get over it. Meanwhile, there was awaiting him the joyful surprise of Vancouver, which would soon put such petty mortifications out of his head. Thus Austin consoled himself, and settled down to the serious matters of his correspondence.

Viviette, coming in later in hat and jacket, found him busily writing. He looked up at her admiringly as she stood against the background of light framed by the great French window.

"Am I presentable?" she asked, with a smile, interpreting his glance.

"Each modification of your dress makes you seem more bewitching than the last."

"I trimmed this hat myself," she said, coming into the room, and looking at herself in a Queen Anne mirror on the wall.

"That's why it's so becoming," said Austin.

She wheeled round on him with a laugh. "You really ought to say something cleverer than that!"

"How can I," he replied, "when you drive my wits away?"

"Poor me," she said. And then, suddenly, "Where's Dick?"

"What do you want Dick for?"

"He promised to take me for a drive." She consulted the watch on her wrist. "It's past eleven now."

"I'm afraid poor Dick is rather upset. He seems to have been counting on being nominated to stand for the Rural District Council, and the imbeciles invited me instead."

"Oh, how could they?" she cried, smitten with a great pity. "How could

they be so stupid and cruel? I know all about it. He told me yesterday. He must be bitterly disappointed."

Austin did not tell her of Lord Banstead's tactful explanation of the committee's action. He was a fastidious man, and did not care to soil his mind with the memory of Banstead's existence. If he had described the scene, the young man's vulgarity, his own attempt at conciliation, and Dick's passionate outburst--the course of the drama that was shaping itself might have been altered. But the stars in their courses were fighting against Dick. Austin only said:

"If we get him this appointment, it will be ample compensation, anyhow."

"Please don't say 'if,'" exclaimed Viviette, "we must get it."

"Unless Lord Overton has already found a man, which is unlikely, owing to the general suspension of business at Whitsuntide, it's practically a certainty."

"When shall we know?"

"My letter's written and is waiting for the post. If he replies by return we shall hear the day after to-morrow."

"That is such a long time to wait. Do you know what to-morrow is?"

"Wednesday," said Austin.

"It's Dick's birthday." She clapped her hands at a happy inspiration, and hung on his arm. "Oh, Austin! If we could only give him the appointment as a birthday present!"

Her touch, her fresh charm, the eagerness in her eyes roused him to unwonted enthusiasm. In his sane moments he did not care a fig for anybody's birthday. What man ever does? He proclaimed the splendour of her idea. But how was it to be realised?

"Send a long prepaid telegram to Lord Overton, of course," said Viviette triumphantly. (How unresourceful are men!) "Then we can get an answer to-day."

"You forget the nearest telegraph office is at Witherby, seven miles off."

"But Dick and I are going for a drive. I'll make him go to Witherby and I'll send the telegram. Write it."

She drew him in her caressing way to the table, seated him in the chair, and laid the block of telegram forms before him. He scribbled industriously, and when he had finished handed her the sheets.

"There!"

He fished in his pockets for money, but Viviette checked him. She was the fairy godmother in this fairy tale, and fairy godmothers always held the purse. She glanced again at her watch. It was ten minutes past eleven.

"Perhaps he's waiting with the trap for me all the time. Au revoir."

"I'll see you off," said Austin.

They went together into the hall and opened the front door. The new mare and the dog-cart in charge of the stable lad were there, but no Dick.

"Where's Mr. Ware?"

"Don't know, miss."

Then the Devil entered into Viviette. There is no other explanation. The Devil entered into her.

"We must get to Witherby and back before lunch. You drive me over instead of Dick."

They exchanged glances. Austin was young. He was in love with her. Dick had committed the unpardonable offence of being late. It would serve him right.

"I'll come," said he, disappearing in search of cap and gloves.

Viviette went into the hall and scribbled a note.

"Dear Dick,--You're late. Austin and I have the most important business to transact at Witherby, so he's driving me over. We're preparing a great surprise for you.--Viviette."

"Give this to Mr. Ware," she said to the stable boy as she prepared to get into the dog-cart.

The boy touched his cap and ran to open the gate. Viviette lightly mounted by Austin's side. They had just turned into the road when Dick came racing through the hall and saw them disappear. He walked up the drive, and met the boy coming down, who handed him the note, with some words, which he did not hear. He watched the boy out of sight. Then he tore the note unread into tiny fragments, stamped them furiously into the mould of the nearest bed, and, flying into his armoury, threw himself into a chair and cursed the day that ever Austin was born.

CHAPTER III

KATHERINE

The drive was a memorable one for many reasons. First the new mare flew along at an exhilarating trot, as if showing off her qualities to her new masters. Then the morning sunshine flooded the soft, undulating Warwickshire country, and slanted freshly through the bordering elms in sweet-scented lanes. Summer flaunted its irresponsible youth in the faces of matronly, red-brick Manor House, old grey church, and crumbling cottage, danced about among the crisp green leaves, kissed the wayside flowers, and tossing up human hearts in sheer gaiety, played the very deuce with them. The drive also had its altruistic side. They were on an errand of benevolence. Austin, his mind conscious of nothing but right, felt the unusual glow of unselfish devotion to another's interests. When he had awakened that morning he had had misgivings as to the advisability of sending Dick to another hemisphere. After all, Dick was exceedingly useful at Ware House, and saved him a great deal of trouble. An agent would have to be appointed to replace him, whose salary--not a very large one, in view of the duties to be performed, but still a salary--would have to be provided out of his, Austin's, pocket. Who, again, could undertake the permanent care of his mother? Viviette would stay at home for some little time; but she would be marrying one of these fine days--a day which Austin had reasons for hoping would not be very remote. He would have to make Heaven knows what arrangements for Mrs. Ware and the general upkeep of the Manor House, while he was in London carrying on his profession. Decidedly, Dick had been a godsend, and his absence would be a calamity. In sending him out to Vancouver Austin had all the unalloyed, pure pleasure of self-sacrifice.

They talked of Dick and Dick's birthday and Dick's happiness most of the way to Witherby. The telegram despatched, prepaid with the portage by Viviette, Austin felt that he had done his duty by his brother, and deserved some consideration on his own account. And here it was that the summer began its game with their hearts. On such sportive occasions it is not so much what is said that matters. A conversation that might be entirely conventional between comparative strangers in a fog may become the most romantic interchange of sentiment imaginable between intimates in the sunshine. There are tones, there are glances, there are half-veiled allusions, there are--in a dog-cart, especially when it jolts--thrilling contacts of arm and arm. There is man's undisguised tribute to beauty; there is beauty's keen feminine appreciation of the tribute. There is a manner of saying "we" which counts for more than the casual conjunction of the personalities.

"This is our day, Viviette," said Austin. "I shall always remember it."

"So shall I. We must put a white mark against it in our diaries."

"With white ink?"

"Of course. Black would never do, nor red, nor violet."

"But where shall we get it?"

"I'll make us some when I get home out of white cloud and lilies and sunshine and a bit of the blue sky."

Laughter fluttered through her veins. Yesterday she had teasingly boasted to Katherine that Austin was in love with her. Now she knew it. He proclaimed it in a thousand ways. A note of exultation in his laugh, like that in a blackbird's call, alone proclaimed it. Instinct told her of harmless words she might use which would bring the plain avowal. But the hour was too delicate. As yet nothing was demanded. All was given. Her woman's vanity blossomed deliciously in the atmosphere of a man's love. Her heart had not yet received the inevitable summons to respond. She left it, careless in the gay hands of summer.

When they drew up before the front door of Ware House he lifted her from the dog-cart and set her laughing on her feet.

"How strong you are," she cried.

"I'm not a giant, like Dick," said he, "but I'm strong enough to do what I like with a bit of a thing like you."

She entered the hall and glanced at him provokingly over her shoulder.

"Don't be too sure of that."

"Whatever I like," he repeated, striding towards her.

But Viviette laughed, and fled lightly up the stairs, and on the landing blew him an ironical kiss from her finger tips.

When Viviette came down for lunch, she found Dick awaiting her in the hall. With a lowering face he watched her descend and, his hand on the newel, confronted her.

"Well?" said he indignantly.

"Well?" she said, cheerfully smiling.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Lots of things. I had a lovely drive. I got through all my business, and I have a beautiful appetite. I also don't like standing on a stair."

At her look he drew aside and let her pass into the hall.

"You promised to drive with me," he said, following her to a chair in which she sat. "Driving with me is no great catch, perhaps; but a promise is a promise."

"You were late," said Viviette.

"My mother kept me--some silly nonsense about vegetables. You must have

known it was something I couldn't help."

"I really don't see why you're so angry, Dick," she said, lifting candid eyes. "I explained why we had gone in my note."

"I didn't read the note," said Dick wrath-fully. "A thousand notes couldn't have explained it. I tore the note into little pieces."

Viviette rose. "If that's the way you treat me," she said, piqued, "I have nothing more to say to you."

"It's the way you're treating me," he cried, with a clumsy man's awkward attempt at gesture. "I know I'm not clever. I know I can't talk to you as sweetly as other people; but I'm not a dog, and I deserve some consideration. Perhaps, after all, I might have the brains to jest and toss about words and shoot off epigrams. I'll try, if you like. Let us see. Here. A man who entrusts his heart to a woman has a jade for his banker. That's devilish smart, isn't it. Now then--there must be some repartee to it. What is it?"

Viviette looked at him proudly, and moving in the direction of the morning-room door, said with much dignity:

"That depends on the way in which the woman you are talking to has been brought up. My repartee is--good morning."

Dick, suddenly repentant, checked her.

"No, Viviette. Don't go. I'm a brute and a fool. I didn't mean it. Forgive me. I would rather go on the rack than hurt your little finger. But it maddens me--can't you believe it? It maddens me to see Austin--"

She broke into a little laugh and smiled dazzlingly on him.

"I do believe you're jealous!" she interrupted.

"Good heavens!" he cried passionately. "Haven't I cause? Austin has everything his heart can desire. He has always had it. I have nothing--nothing but one little girl I love. Austin, with all the world at his feet, comes down here, and what chance has a rough yokel like me against Austin? My God! It's the one ewe lamb."

He raised his clenched fists and brought them down against his sides and turned away. The allusion and a consciousness of Vancouver brought a smile into Viviette's eyes. She had a woman's sense of humour, which is not always urbane. When he turned to meet her she shook her head reprovingly.

"And David put Uriah into the forefront of the battle, and carried off poor little Bathsheba. No one seemed to have concerned himself with what Bathsheba thought of it all. Don't you consider she ought to have some choice in the matter--whether she should follow the sprightly David or cling to the melancholy Uriah?"

"Oh, don't jest like that, Viviette," he cried. "It hurts!"

"I'm sorry, Dick," she said innocently. "But, really, Bathsheba has her feelings. What am I to do?"

"Choose, dear, between us. Choose now--in Heaven's name, choose."

"But, Dick, dear," said Viviette, all that was wickedly feminine in her shouting her sex's triumph song, "I want a longer time to choose between two hats!"

Dick stamped his foot. "Then Austin has been robbing me! I'm growing desperate, Viviette, tell me now. Choose."

He seized her arms in his strong hands. She felt a delicious little thrill of fear. But knowing her strength, she looked up at him with a childish expression and said plaintively: "Oh, Dick, dear, I'm so hungry."

He released her arms. She rubbed them ruefully. "I'm sure you've made horrid red rings. Fancy choosing a hard, uncomfortable hat like that!"

He was about to make some rejoinder when the presence of Mrs. Ware and Katherine Holroyd at the top of the stairs put an end to the encounter. The victory, such as it was, remained with Viviette.

At lunch, Austin, his veins still tingling with the summer, laughed and jested light-heartedly. What a joy it was to get away from stuffy courts of justice into the pure Warwickshire air. What a joy to drink of the wine of life. What was that? Only those that drank of the wine could tell.

"What about the poor devils that only get the dregs?" muttered Dick.

Austin declared that the real wine had no dregs. He called his mother and Katherine Holroyd to witness. Mrs. Ware was not sure. Old port had to be very carefully decanted. Did he remember the fuss his dear father used to make about it? She was very glad there was no more left--for Dick would be sure to drink it and it would go to his head.

"Or his toes!" cried Viviette.

When Austin explained Viviette's meaning to his mother, who had not an allusive habit of mind, she acquiesced placidly. Port was not good for gouty people. Their poor father suffered severely. Austin listened to her reminiscences and turned the talk to the drive. It had been more like driving through Paradise with Pegasus harnessed to Venus's car than anything else. He must take his mother out and show her what a good judge of horseflesh was dear old Dick.

"As she's my mare, perhaps I might have the privilege," said Dick.

Austin cried out, in all good faith: "My dear old boy, is there anything especially mine or yours in this house?"

Katherine, a keen observer, broke quickly into the talk.

"There's Dick's armoury. That's his own particular and private domain. You're going to explain it all to me this afternoon, aren't you? You promised yesterday."

She drew Dick into talk away from the others. The lecture on the armoury was fixed for three o'clock, when she would be free from the duty from which, during her stay at the Manor House, she had freed Viviette, of postprandial reading of the newspaper to Mrs. Ware. But her interest in his hobby for once failed to awaken his enthusiasm. The dull jealousy of Austin, against which his honest soul had struggled successfully all his life long, had passed beyond his control. These few days of Austin's Whitsun visit had changed his cosmic view. Petty rebuffs, such as the matters of the stables and the Rural District Council, which formerly he would have regarded in the twilight of his mind as part of the unchangeable order of things in which Austin was destined to shine resplendently and he to glimmer--Austin the arc-lamp and he the tallow-dip--became magnified into grievances and insults intolerable. Esau could not have raged more against Jacob, the supplanter, than did Dick, when Austin carried off Viviette from beneath his nose. Until this visit of Austin he had no idea that he would find a rival in his brother. The discovery was a shock, causing his world to reel and setting free all the pent-up jealousies and grievances of a lifetime. Everything he had given up to Austin, if not willingly, at least graciously, hiding beneath the rough, tanned hide of his homely face all pain, disappointment, and humiliation. But now Austin had come and swooped off with his one ewe lamb. Not that Viviette had encouraged him by more than the real but mocking affection with which she had treated her bear foster-brother ever since her elfin childhood. In a dim way he realised this, and absolved her from blame. Less dimly, also, he felt his mental and social inferiority, his lack of warrant in offering her marriage. But his great, rugged manhood wanted her, the woman, with an imperious, savage need which took all the training of civilisation to repress. Viviette alone in her maidenly splendour, he could have fought it down. But the vision of another man entering, light-hearted and debonair, into those precincts maddened him, let loose primitive instincts of hatred and revenge, and robbed him of all interest in the toys with which men used to slay each other centuries ago.

Austin, being nearest the door, opened it for the ladies to pass out. Viviette, going out last, looked up at him with one of her witch's glances.

"Don't be very long," she said,

Before Austin could resume his seat Dick leaped up.

"Austin, look here; I've something to say to you."

"Well?" said Austin.

Dick pulled out a cigar, bit the end off, and finding that he had ripped the outer skin, threw it angrily into the fireplace.

"My dear old boy," said Austin, "what in the name of all that's neurotic is the matter?"

"I've something to say to you," Dick repeated. "Something that concerns myself, my life. I must throw myself on your generosity."

Austin, his head full of philanthropy, thrust his hands into his pockets and smiled indulgently on Dick.

"Don't, old chap, I know all about it. Viviette has told me everything."

Dick, his head full of passion, staggered in amazement.

"Viviette has told you?"

"Of course; why shouldn't she?"

Dick groped his way to the door. It were better for both that he should not stay. Austin, left alone, laughed, not unkindly. Dear old Dick! It was a shame to tease him--but what a different expression his honest face would wear to-morrow! When the maid brought in his coffee he sipped it with enjoyment, forgetful for once of its lack of excellence.

There was one person, however, in the house who saw things clearly; and the more clearly she saw them the less did they seem satisfactorily ordered. This was Katherine Holroyd, a sympathetic observer and everybody's intimate. She had known the family since her childhood, spent in a great neighbouring house which had now long since passed from her kin into alien hands. She had known Viviette when she first came, with her changeling face, a toddling child of three, to the Manor House. She had grown up with the brothers. Until her marriage the place had been her second home. Her married life, mostly spent abroad, had somewhat broken the intimacy. But her widowhood after the first few hopeless months had renewed it, although her visits were comparatively rare. On the other hand, her little daintily-furnished London house in Victoria square was always open to such of the family as happened to be in town. Now, as Austin was the most frequently in town, seeing that he lived there all the year round, with the exception of the long vacation and odd flying visits to Warwickshire, to Austin was her door most frequently open. A deep affection existed between them, deeper perhaps than either realised. To be purely brotherly in attitude towards a woman whom you are fond of and who is not your sister, and to be purely sisterly in your attitude towards a man whom you are fond of and who is not your brother, are ideals of spiritual emotion very difficult to attain in this respectably organised but sex-ridden world.

During the dark time of her early widowhood it was to Austin's delicate tact and loyalty that she owed her first weak grasp on life. It was he

that had brought her to a sense of outer things, to a realisation that in spite of her own grey sky there was still a glory on the earth. He was her trusted friend, ally, and adviser, who never failed her, and she contemplated him always with a heart full of somewhat exaggerated gratitude--which is as far on the road to love as it is given to many women to travel.

She had barely reached the top of the hall stairs--on her way to spend her reading hour with Mrs. Ware, when she saw Dick come out of the dining-room with convulsed and angry face, the veins standing out on his thick bull's neck. She felt frightened. Something foolish and desperate would happen before long. She resolved to give Austin a warning word. With an excuse to Mrs. Ware she went down again to the dining-room, and found Austin in the cosiest and sunniest frame of mind imaginable. Obviously there had been no serious quarrel between the brothers.

"Can I have a few minutes with you, Austin?"

"A thousand," he said gaily. "What has gone wrong?"

"It is nothing to do with me," she said.

He looked amusedly into her eyes. "I know. It's about Viviette. Confess."

"Yes," she replied soberly, "it's about Viviette."

"You've seen it. I make no bones about it. You can believe the very worst. I have fallen utterly and hopelessly in love with her. I am at your mercy."

This beginning was not quite what Katherine had expected. In his confident way he had taken matters out of her hands. She had not anticipated a down-right confession. She felt conscious of a little dull and wholly reprehensible ache at her heart. She sighed.

"Aren't you pleased, Katherine?" he asked with a man's selfishness.

"I suppose I must be--for your sake. But I must also sigh a little. I knew you would be falling in love sooner or later--only I hoped it would be later. But *que veux-tu?* It is the doom of all such friendships."

"I don't see anything like a doom about it, my dear," said he. "The friendship will continue. Viviette loves you dearly."

She took up a peach from a dish to her hand, regarded it for a moment, absent-mindedly, and delicately replaced it.

"Our friendship will continue, of course. But the particular essence of it, the little sentimentality of ownership, will be gone, won't it?"

Austin rose and bent over Katherine's chair in some concern. "You're not distressed, Katherine?"

"Oh, no. You have been such a kind, loyal friend to me during a very dark and lonely time--brought sunshine into my life when I needed it most--that I should be a wicked woman if I didn't rejoice at your happiness. And we have been nothing more than friends."

"Nothing more," said Austin.

She was smiling now, and he caught a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"And yet there was an afternoon last winter--"

His face coloured. "Don't throw my wickedness in my face. I remember that afternoon. I came in fagged, with the prospect of dinner at the club and a dismal evening over a brief in front of me, and found you sitting before the fire, the picture of rest and comfortableness and companionship. I think it was the homely smell of hot buttered toast that did it. I nearly asked you to marry me."

"And I had been feeling particularly lonely," she laughed.

"Would you have accepted me?"

"Do you think that it is quite a fair question?"

"We have always been frank with one another since our childhood," said he.

She smiled. "Has Viviette accepted you?"

He broke away from her with a gay laugh, and lit a cigarette.

"Your feminine subtlety does you credit, Katherine."

"But has she?"

"Well, no--not exactly."

"Will she?"

He brought his hand down on the table. "By heavens, I'll make her! I've got most of the things I've wanted during my life, and it'll be odd if I don't get the thing I want more than all the rest put together. Now answer my question, my dear Katherine," he continued teasingly. "Would you have married me?"

The smile faded from Katherine's face. She could not parry the question as she had done before, and it probed depths. She said very seriously and sweetly:

"I should have done, Austin, as I always shall do, whatever you ask me to do. I'm glad you didn't ask me--very glad--for the love a woman gives a man died within me, you know."

He took her hand and kissed it.

"My dear," said he, "you are the truest friend that ever man had."

There was a short pause. Austin looked out of the window and Katherine wiped away some moisture in her eyes. This scene of sentimentality was not at all what she had come for. Soon she rose with a determined air and joined Austin by the window.

"It was as a true friend that I wanted to speak to you to-day. To warn you."

"About what?"

"About Dick. Austin, he's madly in love with Viviette too."

Austin stared at her for a moment incredulously. "Dick in love--in love with Viviette?" Then he broke into a peal of laughter. "My _dear_ Katherine! Why, it's absurd! It's preposterous! It's too funny."

"But seriously, Austin."

"But seriously," he said, with laughing eyes, "such an idea has never penetrated into old Dick's wooden skull. You dear women are always making up romance. He and Viviette are on the same old fairy and great brown bear terms that they have been ever since they first met. She makes him dance on his hind legs--he wants to hug her--she hits him over the nose--and he growls."

"I warn you," said Katherine. "Great brown bears in love are dangerous."

"But he isn't in love," he argued light-heartedly. "If he were he would want to stay with Viviette. But he's eating his heart out, apparently, to leave us all and go and plough fields and herd cattle abroad. The life he lives here, my good mother's somewhat arbitrary ways, and one thing and another have at last got on his nerves. I wonder now how the dear old chap has stood it so long. That's what is wrong with him, not blighted affection."

"I can only tell you what I know," said Katherine. "If you won't believe me, it's not my fault. Keep your eyes open and you will see."

"And you keep your eyes open to-morrow morning and _you_ will see," he said, with his bright self-confidence.

So Katherine sighed at the obtuseness and inconvincibility of man and went to read the leader in The Daily Telegraph to Mrs. Ware. Austin, with a smile on his lips, wandered out into the sunshine in search of Viviette.

Before they parted, however, Katherine turned by the door.

"Are you coming to the armoury to hear Dick's lecture?"

"Of course," said Austin gaily. "The dear old chap loves an audience."

CHAPTER IV

THE FAMOUS DUELLING PISTOLS

Dick's great-grandfather (Wild Dick Ware, as he used to be called by the country-side), besides other enormities of indiscretion, committed an architectural crime. Having begun to form the collection of arms which was Dick's pride and hobby, he felt the need of a fencing gallery where they could be displayed to advantage. None of the rooms in the house were suitable. Building a new wing would cost too much. So, like a good old English gentleman, accustomed to get what he wanted, he ruthlessly cut off a slice of the nobly proportioned morning-room, containing a beautifully-mullioned casement at the side, knocked a French window through one end, so that he could wander in and out from the terrace, knocked a door through the other so that it opened on a corner of the hall, forgot all about the fireplace, and left his descendants to make the best of things.

This long, narrow, comfortless strip of a room was Dick's armoury, den, and refuge. It was furnished with extreme simplicity. At the further end two rusty leather arm-chairs flanked a cast-iron stove in the corner, and were balanced in the other and darker corner by a knee-hole writing-desk littered with seeds and bulbs and spurs and bits of fishing tackle, and equipped for its real purpose with a forbidding-looking pen and inkpot, and a torn piece of weather-beaten blotting-paper. At about a third of the way down from the terrace door a great screen, covered with American cloth, cut the room almost in two. Against this screen stood two suits of beautifully-finished fifteenth-century Italian armour. Between them and the further end of the room ran a long deal table, with a green baize cover. An odd, dilapidated chair or two stood lonely and disconsolate against the opposite wall. The floor was covered with old matting and a few faded rugs. The walls, however, and the cases ranged along them gave an air of distinction to the room. There hung trophies of arms of all sorts--a bewildering array of spiky stars like the monstrous decorations on the breast of a Brobdingnagian diplomatist, of guns and pistols of all ages and nationalities, of halberds, pikes, and partisans, of curved scimitars, great two-handed swords, and long, glittering rapiers, with precious hilts. There, too, were coats of chain mail and great iron gauntlets, and rows of dented helmets formed a cornice round the gallery.

It was Dick's sanctuary, where, according to family tradition, he was supposed to be immune from domestic attacks. Anyone, it is true, could open the door and worry him from the threshold, but no one entered without his invitation. Here he was master. Here he spent solitary hours

dreaming dreams, wrestling with devils, tying trout-flies, making up medicines for his dogs, and polishing and arranging and rearranging his armour and weapons. Until the furies got hold of him he was a simple soul, content with simple things. The happiest times of his life had been passed here among the inanimate objects which he loved, and here he was now spending the hours of his greatest agony.

The words he had just heard from Austin rang like a crazy, deafening chime through his ears. He sat in one of the old leather chairs, gripping his coarse hair. It was unthinkable, and yet it was true. Viviette had told Austin the thing that glowed sacred at the bottom of his soul. The scene danced vividly before his eyes: the two bright creatures making a mock of him and his love, laughing merrily at the trick they had played him, pitying him contemptuously. There was a flame at his heart, a burning lump in his throat. Mechanically he drew from a little cupboard near by a bottle of whiskey, a syphon, and a glass. The drink he mixed and swallowed contained little soda. It increased the fire in his heart and throat. He paced the long room in crazy indignation. Every nerve in his body quivered with a sense of unforgivable insult and deadly outrage. Austin's face loomed before him like that of a mocking devil. He had hell in his throat, and again he tossed down a dose of whiskey, and threw himself into the arm-chair. The daily paper lay on a stool at his hand. He took it up and tried to read, but the print swam into thin, black smudges. He dashed the paper to the ground, and gave himself up to his madness.

After a while he remembered his appointment with Katherine at three o'clock. He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to the hour, and, beyond a cleaning yesterday afternoon, no preparations were made. In an automatic way he unlocked some cases and drew out his treasures, wiped the sword-blades tenderly with chamois leather, and laid them on the long, baize-covered table. Here and there from the cornice he selected a helmet. The great mace used by his ecclesiastical ancestor he unhooked from the wall. Soon the table was covered with weapons, selected in a dazed way, he knew not why. A helmet fell from his hands on the floor with a ring of steel. Its visor grinned at him--the fool, the tricked, the supplanted. He kicked it, with a silly laugh. Then he pulled himself together, picked it up, and examined it in great fear lest harm should have happened to it. He put it on the table, and in order to steady his nerves drank another large whiskey and small soda.

He scanned the table, perplexed. Some accustomed and important exhibit was not in its place. What was it? He clasped his head in his hands and strove to clear his mind for a moment from obsession. It was something historical, something unique, something he had but lately mentioned to Katherine. Something intimately connected with this very room. At last memory responded. He placed a chair between the two suits of armour that stood against the screen and the end of the long table, and, mounting, took a mahogany case from a shelf. Then he sat on the chair, put the case on the table, and opened it by means of a small, ornamental key. It contained a brace of old-fashioned duelling pistols, such as were used at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were long-barrelled, ivory-handled, business-like weapons, provided with miniature ramrods.

The velvet-lined interior of the case was divided into various compartments, two for the pistols, one for powder-flask, one for bullets, one for percussion-caps, and one for wads. In his dull, automatic way, his mind whirling madly in other spheres, he cleaned the pistols, shook the powder-flask to make certain that powder was still there--he loved to pour out a few grains into his hand and show the powder that had remained in the flask for generations, ever since the pistols were last used--counted the caps, which he had counted many times before, looked stupidly into the only empty compartment, only to remember that there never had been any wads, and, finally, grasping one of the pistols, took aim at a bulb on his writing-desk at the end of the room.

He had been tricked, and robbed, and mocked. He could see the scene when she had told Austin. He could hear Austin's pitiless laughter. He could picture her mimicking his rough speech. He could picture them, faithless, heartless, looking into each other's eyes.... Suddenly he passed his hand over his forehead. Was he going mad? Hitherto he had heard their voices in the dimness of imagination. Now he heard them loud in vibrating sound. Was it real or imaginary? He drew deep, panting breaths.

"Dick's not here," said Viviette's voice from the terrace. "He has forgotten."

"Really, my dear, I don't very much care," Austin replied. "Where you are, I am happy."

"I wish that telegram would come. It's quite time. Don't you think we had better tell Dick to-day?"

"No, no. To-morrow."

"After all, what is the good of hiding it from him?"

A laugh from Austin. "You think we ought to put him out of his misery at once?"

It was real! Those two were talking in flesh and blood on the terrace. They were talking of him. His misery! That had but one meaning. And the devil laughed! Unconsciously his grip tightened on the butt of the pistol. He listened.

"Yes," said Viviette. "It would be kinder."

"I stick to the birthday idea. It would be more dramatic."

"The damned villain!" Dick muttered.

"I want to-day," said Viviette.

"And I want to-morrow."

"You speak as if you were my lord and master," said Viviette, in the mocking tones Dick knew so well.

"No other man shall be if I can help it."

The clear, young masterful voice rang down the gallery. Dick slid his chair noiselessly to the side of the screen which hid him from the terrace-window, and, bending down low, peered round the edge. He saw them laughing, flushed, silhouetted against the green, distant trees. Austin was looking at her with the light of passion in his eyes. She looked up at him, radiant, elusive, triumphant, with parted lips.

"Please to remember we were talking of Dick."

"Confound Dick! In this he doesn't count. I matter. And I'll show you."

He showed her in the one and only way. She struggled for a second in his arms, and received his kiss with a little laugh. They had moved to the far lintel of the door. Dick's world reeled red before his eyes. He stood up and held the pistol pointed. Damn him! Damn him! He would kill him. Kill him like a dog.

Some reflex motion of the brain prompted action. Feverishly he rammed a charge of powder down the pistol. Wads? A bit of the newspaper lying on the floor. Then a bullet. Then a wad rammed home. Then the cap. It was done at lightning speed. Murder, red, horrible murder blazed in his soul. Damn him! He would kill him. He started into the middle of the room, just as they walked away, and he sprang to the door and levelled the pistol.

Then reaction came. No. Not like a dog. He couldn't shoot his brother like a dog. His arm fell helplessly at his side. He turned back again into the room, staggering and knocking himself against the cases by the walls, like a drunken man. The sweat rolled down his face. He put the pistol beside the other on the table. For some moments he stood a hulking statue, shaken as though stricken with earthquake, white-faced, white-lipped, staring, with crossed, blue eyes, at nothing. At last he recovered power of motion, drank another whiskey, and replaced bottle, syphon, and glass in the cupboard.

He found himself suddenly clear-headed, able to think. He was not in the least degree drunk. To test himself he took up a sword from the table, and, getting the right spot, balanced it on his finger. He could speak, too, as well as anybody. He turned to a long Moorish musket inlaid with gems and mother-of-pearl, and began to describe it. He was quite fluent and sensible, although his voice sounded remote in his own ears. He was satisfied. He had his nerves under control. He would go through the next hour without anyone suspecting the madness that was in his mind. He was absolutely sober and self-collected. He walked along a seam of the matting that ran the whole length of the gallery, and did not deviate from it one hair's breadth. Now he was ready. Perfectly prepared to deliver his lecture. He sat down and picked up the newspaper, and the print was clear. "The weather still continues to be

fine over the British Islands. The anti-cyclone has not yet passed away from the Bay of Biscay...." He read the jargon through to the end. But it seemed as if it were not he who was reading, but someone else--a quiet, placid gentleman, deeply versed in the harmless science of meteorology. Where his real self was he did not know, so he toyed with the illusion.

A voice broke on his ear, coming, it seemed, from another world.

"Dick, may we come in?"

He rose, saw Katherine, Austin, and Viviette on the threshold. He invited them to enter, and shook Katherine by the hand, as if he had not met her for a long time.

Viviette danced down to the table. "Now, Dick, we're all here. Put on your most learned, and antiquarian mariner. Ladies and gentlemen, I call on Mr. Richard Ware to deliver his interesting lecture on the ingenious instruments men have devised for butchering each other."

Dick put his hand to his head in a confused way. His real self was beginning to merge itself into that of the quiet gentleman, and there was a curious red mist before his eyes.

"Come on," cried Viviette. "Look at Katherine. Her mouth is watering for tales of bloodshed."

Dick could not remember his usual starting-point. He stared stupidly at the table for a moment; then picked up a weapon at random, and made a great effort.

"This is a Toledo sixteenth-century sword--reported to have belonged to Cosmo de Medici. You see here the '_palle_', the Medici emblem. The one next to it is a sword of the same period, only used by a meaner person. I should prefer it, if there were any killing to be done."

He described one or two other weapons. Then, glancing over his shoulder at Austin and Viviette, who were talking in low, confidential tones a little way off, he stood stock still, and the beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. Katherine's voice recalled his wandering wits.

"This is a cross-bow, isn't it? The thing the Ancient Mariner shot the Albatross with."

"A cross-bow," said Dick. "The iron loop at the end was to put one's foot into when one wanted to load it."

"And this," said Katherine, pointing to a long steel thing with a great knob adorned with cruel spikes, "is the family mace, I suppose. I've seen it before, I remember."

"Yes, that's the mace."

"What a blood-thirsty set of people you must have been!"

Austin came up with a laugh. "There's a legend among us that once mother was left alone in the house and insisted on having this mace near her bed so as to defend herself against burglars. But why do you leave me to tell the story, Dick?"

Dick clenched his fists, and, muttering something, turned and ascended the gallery above the screen. Viviette followed him.

"You're not doing it at all nicely. I don't think you want to."

"Can you wonder at that?" he said hoarsely.

Viviette played deliciously with the fire.

"Why, aren't we intelligent enough for you?" she asked with childish innocence.

"You know what I mean."

"I haven't the faintest idea. All I know is that you may as well be polite, at any rate."

He laughed. Ordinarily he had little sense of humour; but now he had the flames in his heart and the hell in his throat, and red mist before his eyes.

"Oh, I'll be polite," he growled. "By God, I'll be polite! One may be suffering the tortures of the damned, but one must smirk and be polite!"

He snatched up the first thing to hand, a helmet that stood on a case, and brought it down below the screen.

"Katherine, Viviette says I'm not delivering my lecture properly. I beg your pardon. I'm rather shy at first, but I get warmed up to my subject. What would you like to hear about?"

Katherine exchanged a glance with Austin.

"Don't you think we might put off the rest till another day?"

"Yes, old chap. Put it off till to-morrow. It's your birthday, you know."

"Birthday? What's that got to do with it? Who knows what may happen between then and now? No--no. I'm all right," he cried wildly. "You're here, and you've got to listen. I'll get into fine form presently. Look!" he said, pointing to the helmet he was holding. "Here is a Cromwellian morion. It was picked up by an ancestor at Naseby. It has a clean cut in it. That's where an honest gentleman's sword found its way into the knave's skull--the puritanical, priggish, canting knave."

He threw the helmet with a clatter on to the table as if it had been the knave's canting head. He caught up a weapon.

"This is a partisan. All you had to do when you got it inside a man was to turn it round a bit, and the wound gaped and tore. This tassel is for catching the blood and preventing it from greasing the handle. Here's a beauty," he went on, taking a sword from the row he had laid out for display, and holding it out for Katherine's inspection. "One of the pets of the collection. A French duelling sword of the middle of the eighteenth century." He gave a fencer's flourish. "Responsive to the hilts, eh? Ah! It must have been good to live in those days, when you could whip this from your side at a wrong done and have the life of the man that wronged you. The sweet morning air, the patch of green turf, shoes off--in shirt and breeches--with the eyes of the man you hate in front of you, and this glittering, beautiful, snaky thing thirsting for his heart's blood. And then--"--he stood in tierce, left hand curved, holding in tense fierceness the eyes of an imaginary opponent--"and then a little clitter-clatter of steel, and, suddenly--ha!--the blade disappears up to the hilt, and a great red stain comes on the shirt, and the man throws up his arms, and falls, and you've killed him. He's dead! dead! dead! Ha! what a time to live in!"

Katherine uttered a little cry of fear, and grew pale. Viviette clapped her hands.

"Bravo, Dick!"

"Bravo, Dick!" cried Austin. "Most dramatically done."

"I never knew you were such an actor," said Viviette.

Dick stood panting, his hand on the hilt of the sword, the point on the floor.

"I really do think I've had enough," said Katherine.

"No, not yet," he said in a thick voice. "I've not shown you half yet. I've something much more interesting."

"But, Dick--"

Viviette interrupted her. "You must stay. It's only beginning to be exciting. If you only do the rest as beautifully as you did that, Dick, I'll stay here all day."

Dick, with a curious outward calm, contrasting with the fury of his mock encounter, put down the sword and went to the end of the table, where the case of pistols lay.

"At any rate, I must show you," said he, "the famous duelling pistols."

"They were the very pistols in the duel between his great-grandfather and Lord Estcombe," said Viviette.

"They've not been used from that day--he killed Lord Estcombe, by the by--till this. The case is just as it was left. I was going to tell you the story yesterday."

"I remember," said Katherine, by way of civility. "But Mrs. Ware stopped you."

She was a mild-natured woman, and the realistic conjuring up of gore-dripping tassels and bloody shirts upset her, and she desired to get away. She also saw that Dick was abnormally excited, and suspected that he had been drinking. Her delicate senses shrank from drunkenness.

"You must tell the story," cried Viviette. "It's so romantic. You like romantic things, Katherine. The great-grandfather was a Dick Ware too--Wild Dick Ware they used to call him. Go on, Dick."

Dick paused for a moment. He had a curious, dull, befogged sensation of being compelled to do things independently of volition. Presently he spoke.

"It happened in this very room, a hundred years ago. Lord Estcombe and my great-grandfather were friends--intimate friends from boyhood. Wild Dick Ware was madly in love with a girl who had more or less become engaged to him. Now, it came to his knowledge that Lord Estcombe had been using blackguard means to win away the girl's affections. And one day they were here"--he moved a pace or two to one side--"just as Austin and I are now. And the girl over there--"

Viviette, with a gay laugh, took up her position on the spot to which he pointed.

"Just in this identical place. I know the story--it's lovely!"

"An old Peninsula comrade of Wild Dick Ware's was here too--a man called Hawkins--"

"Katherine shall be Hawkins," cried Viviette.

"And in his presence," Dick continued, "Wild Dick Ware told the girl that he was mad for love of her, but that he would not force her choice; yet one of those two, himself or Lord Estcombe, she must choose, for good and all. She could not speak for shame or confusion. He said, 'Throw your handkerchief to whichever of us you love.' And they stood side by side--like this"--he ranged himself by Austin's side--"opposite the girl."

"And she threw the handkerchief!" cried Viviette.

"Throw yours!" said Dick. He looked at her with fierce intensity beneath rugged brows; Austin with laughing challenge. She knew that she was the object of each man's desire, and her sex's triumph thrilled through her from head to foot. She knew that this jesting choice would have serious

import. For some seconds the three remained stock still. She glanced flatteringly from one man to the other. Which should she choose? Her heart beat wildly. Choose one or the other she must. Outside that room no man lived whom she would marry. Each second strained the situation further. At last her spirit rose in feminine revolt against the trap which Dick had set for her, and, with a malicious look, she threw the handkerchief at Austin's feet. He picked it up and gallantly put it to his lips.

"In the story," exclaimed Viviette, "she threw it to Lord Estcombe. Austin is Lord Estcombe."

"And I'm Dick Ware," cried Dick, in a strangled voice. "Wild Dick Ware. And this is what he did. He dragged the girl out of the room first."

He took Viviette by the arm and roughly thrust her past the screen.

"Then--that case was on the table. And without a word Wild Dick Ware comes up to Lord Estcombe so--and says, 'Choose.'"

He gripped the pistols by the barrels, crossed them, and presented the butts to Austin. Austin waved them away with a deprecatory gesture and a smile.

"Really, old man, I can't enter into the spirit of it, like that. You're splendid. But if I took a hand, it would be tomfoolery."

"Oh, do, do," cried Viviette. "Let us go through with it and see just how the duel was fought. It will be thrilling. You'll have to fall dead like Lord Estcombe, and I'll burst into the room and tear my hair over your poor corpse. Do, Austin, for my sake."

He yielded. Any foolishness for her sake. He took a pistol.

"You'll have to be Major Hawkins, Katherine," he said lightly, as if inviting her to condescend to some child's game.

But Katherine put her hands before her face and shrank back. "No, no, no. I couldn't. I don't like it."

"Then I'll be Major Hawkins," said Viviette.

"You will?" Dick laughed harshly. "Then be it so."

"I know just what they did."

She placed the men back to back, so that Austin faced the further end of the room and Dick the open French window. They were to take three paces, count one, two, three, and, at the end of the third pace, they were to turn and fire.

Dick felt the touch of Austin's shoulder against his, and the flame at his heart grew fiercer and the hell in his throat more burning, and the

universe whirled round in a red mist. Viviette moved to the weapon-laden table.

"Now. One--two--three!"

[Illustration: Dick glared at him]

They paced and turned. Dick levelled his pistol instantly at Austin, with murderous hate in his eyes, and drew the trigger. The pistol clicked harmlessly. Austin, self-conscious, did not raise his pistol. But Dick, broadening his chest, glared at him and shouted, wildly, madly:

"Fire, damn you! Fire! Why the devil don't you fire?"

The cry was real, vibrant with fury and despair. Austin looked at him for an amazed moment; then, throwing his pistol on to one of the arm-chairs, he came up to him.

"What fool's game are you playing, Dick? Are you drunk?"

Katherine, with a low cry, flung herself between them, and, clinging to Dick's arm, took the pistol from his hand.

"No more of this--no more. The duel has been too much like reality already."

Dick staggered to a straight-backed chair by the wall, and, sitting down, wiped his forehead. He had grown deathly white. The flames had been suddenly quenched within him, and he felt cold and sick. Viviette, in alarm, ran to his side. What was the matter? Was he faint? Let her take him into the fresh air. Austin came up. But at his approach Dick rose and shrank away, glancing at him furtively out of bloodshot eyes.

"Yes. The heat has oppressed me. I'm not well. I'll go out."

He stumbled blindly towards the French window. Viviette followed him, but he turned on her rudely and thrust her back.

"I'm not well, I tell you. I don't want your help. Let me alone."

He passed through the French window on to the terrace. The sky had clouded over, and a drizzle had begun to fall.

Viviette felt curiously frightened, but she put on an air of bravado as she came down the gallery.

"Have you all been rehearsing this little comedy?"

No mirthful response lit either face. She read condemnation in both pairs of eyes. For the first time in her life she felt daunted, humiliated. She knew nothing more beyond the fact that in deliberate coquetry she had pitted brother against brother, and that something

cruel and tragical had happened for which she was being judged. Neither spoke. She summoned her outer dignity, tossed her pretty head, and went out by the end door which Austin in cold politeness held open for her. Then she mounted to her bedroom, and, throwing herself on her bed, burst into a passion of meaningless weeping.

Katherine handed Austin the pistol which she had taken from Dick's hand.

"Now you'll believe what I told you."

"I believe it," said Austin gravely.

"That duel was not all play-acting."

"That," said he, "was absurd. Dick Has been drinking. It was a silly farce. Viviette egged him on until he seemed to take it seriously."

"He did take it seriously, Austin. He's in a dangerous mood. If I were you I should be careful. Take a woman's warning."

He stood for a moment in deep thought, his gaze absently fixed on the weapon he held in his hand. Suddenly a glint of something strange caught his eye. He started, but recovered himself quickly.

"I'll take your warning, Katherine. Here's my hand upon it."

A moment later, when he was alone, he uncocked the pistol--Dick's pistol. The glint had not been imaginary. It was a percussion cap. With trembling fingers he picked it off the nipple. He passed his hand across his damp forehead, for he felt faint with dread. But the task had to be accomplished. He unscrewed the ramrod and picked out the wad, a piece of white paper which dropped on the floor. From the barrel held downward a bullet dropped with a dead, fateful thud on the floor. More paper wad--a slithering shower of gunpowder. He put the pistol down, and took up the one he himself had used from the chair where he had thrown it. It was unloaded. His eye fell on the bits of white paper. He picked them up and unfolded them. The daily newspaper lay by the stove, with the corner torn accusingly.

Then he understood. He sank into a chair, paralysed with horror. It was Dick's pistol that was loaded. Dick had meant to murder him. By the grace of God the pistol had missed fire. But Dick, his own brother, had meant to murder him. An hour later he walked out of the room, the case of pistols under his arm, with the drawn face of an old man.

It was not until Dick had stumbled five or six miles through the drenching downpour that the thought reached his dulled brain that he had left the pistols loose for anyone to examine. The thought was like a great stone hitting him on the side of the head. He turned and began to run homewards, like a hunted man in desperate flight.

CHAPTER V

A CRISIS

Viviette having repaired the disorder caused by her tears went down to tea. Mrs. Ware, Katherine, and a curate deliberately calling or taking shelter from the rain were in the drawing-room. Austin, to his mother's mild astonishment, had sent down a message to the effect that he was busy. On ordinary occasions Viviette would have flirted monstrously with the clerical youth, and sent him away undecided whether to offer to share his lodgings and hundred pounds a year with her, or to turn Catholic and become a monk. But now she had no mind to flirtation. She left him to the undisturbing wiles of Mrs. Ware, and petted and surreptitiously fed Dick's Irish terrier, whose brown eyes looked pathetic inquiry as to his master's whereabouts. She was sobered by the uncomprehended scene in the armoury--sobered by Dick's violence and by Austin's final coldness. A choice had been put before her in deadly earnest; she had refused to make one. But the choice would have to be made very soon, unless she sent both her lovers packing, a step which she did not for a moment contemplate.

"You must promise to marry one or the other and end this tension," said Katherine, a little later, after the curate had gone with Mrs. Ware to look at her greenhouses.

"I wish to goodness I could marry them both," said Viviette. "Have a month with each, turn and turn about. It would be ideal."

"It would be altogether horrid!" exclaimed Katherine. "How could such a thought enter your head?"

"I suppose it must have entered every woman's head who has two men she's fond of in love with her at once. I said yesterday that it was great fun being a woman. I find it's a d.d.d.d. imposition!"

"For heaven's sake, child, make up your mind quickly," said Katherine.

Viviette sighed. Which should it be? Dick, with his great love and rough tenderness and big, protecting arms, or Austin with his conquering ways, his wit, his charm, his perception? Austin could give her the luxury that her sensuous nature delighted in, social position, the brilliant life of London. What could Dick give her? It would always be a joy to dress herself for Austin. Dick would be content if she went about in raiment made of dusters and bath towels. In return, what could she give each of these men? She put the question to herself. She was not mercenary or heartless. She gave of herself freely and loved the giving. What could she give to Austin? What could she give to Dick? These questions, in her sober mood, weighed the others down.

When the rain ceased and a pale sun had dried the gravel, she went out into the grounds by herself and faced the problem. She sighed

again--many times. If only they would let her have her fun out and give her answer six months hence!

Her meditations were cut short by the arrival of a telegraph boy on his bicycle at the front gate. He gave her the telegram. It was for Austin. Her heart beat. She went into the house with the yellow envelope containing Dick's destiny and mounted to the little room off the first landing which had been Austin's private study since his boyhood. She knocked. Austin's voice bade her enter. He rose from the desk where, pen in hand, he had been sitting before a blank sheet of paper, and without a word took the telegram. She noticed with a shock that he had curiously changed. The quick, brisk manner had gone. His face was grey.

"It is _the_ telegram, isn't it?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes," said he, handing it to her. "It's from Lord Overton."

She read: "The very man. Send him along to me early to-morrow. Hope he can start immediately."

"Oh, how splendid!" she exclaimed with a little gasp of happiness. "How utterly splendid! Thank heaven!"

"Yes. Thank heaven," Austin acquiesced gravely. "I forgot to mention to you that Lord Overton knows Dick personally," he added, after a pause. "They met at my house the last time Dick was in London."

"This _is_ good news," said Viviette. "At last I can give him a birthday present worth having."

"He will not be here for his birthday," said Austin, in cold, even tones. "He must catch the mail to-night."

Viviette echoed: "To-night?"

"And in all probability he will sail for Vancouver in a day or two. It won't be worth his while to come back here."

She laid a hand on her heart, which fluttered painfully.

"Then--then--we'll never see him again?"

"Probably not."

"I didn't think it would be so sudden," she said, a little wildly.

"Neither did I. But it's for the best."

"But supposing he wants some time to look about him?"

"I'll see to everything," said Austin.

"Anyhow, I must be the first to tell him," said Viviette.

"You will do me a very great favour if you will let me have that privilege," said Austin. "I make a particular point of it. I have some serious business to discuss with him before dinner, and that will be the time for me to break the news."

He was no longer the fairy godmother's devoted and humble factotum. He spoke with a cold air of authority that chilled the fairy godmotherdom in Viviette's bosom. Her pretty little scheme dwindled into childishness before the dark, incomprehended thing that had happened. She assented with unusual meekness.

"But I'm desperately disappointed," she said.

"My dear Viviette," he answered more kindly, and looking at her with some wistfulness, "the pleasures and even the joy of life have to give way to the sober, business side of existence. It isn't very gay, I know, but we can't alter it."

He held out his hand. Instinctively she gave him hers. He raised it to his lips and held the door open for her. She went out scarcely knowing that she had been dismissed. Austin closed the door, stood unsteadily for a moment like a man stricken with great pain, and then, sitting down at his desk again, put his elbows on the table, rested his head in his hands, and stared at the white piece of paper. When would Dick come home? He had given orders that Dick should be asked to go to him as soon as he arrived. Would Dick ever come home again? It was quite possible that some misfortune might have happened. Tragedy is apt to engender tragedy. He shuddered, hearing in his fancy the tramp of men, and seeing a shrouded thing they carried across the hall. He bitterly accused himself for not having sought Dick far and wide as soon as he had made his ghastly discovery. But he had required time to recover his balance. The horrible suddenness had stunned him. Attempted fratricide is not a common happening in gentle families. He had to accustom himself to the atmosphere of the abnormal, so as to state the psychological case in its numberless ramifications. This he had done. His head was clear. His unalterable decision made. Now the minutes dragged with leaden feet until Dick should come.

Viviette was the first to see him. She had dressed early for dinner, and, as the late June afternoon had turned out fine, was taking her problem out to air on the terrace when she came upon him standing at the door of his armoury. His hair was wet and matted, his eyes bloodshot, his clothes dripping, and he himself splashed with mud from head to foot. He trembled all over, shaken by a great terror. The case of pistols had gone. Who had taken them? Had the loaded pistol been discovered?

As Viviette appeared, robed in deep blue chiffon that seemed torn from the deep blue evening sky, and looking, in the man's maddened eyes, magically beautiful, he held out imploring hands.

"Come in for a moment. For the love of God come in for a moment."

He stepped back invitingly. She hesitated for a second on the threshold, and then followed him down the dim gallery, past the screen where all the swords and helmets lay scattered on the table. He looked at her haggardly, and she met his gaze with kind eyes in which there was no mockery. No. Nothing had happened, he told himself; otherwise she would shrink from him as from something accursed.

"My God, if you knew how I love you!" he said hoarsely. "My God, if you only knew!"

His suffering racked her heart. All her pity melted over him. She laid her caressing fingers on his arm.

"Oh, my poor Dick!" she said.

[Illustration: He held out imploring hands.]

The touch, the choke in her voice, brought about Viviette's downfall. Perhaps she meant it to do so. Who can tell? What woman ever knows? In a flash his arms were around her and his kisses, a wild, primitive man's kisses, were on her lips, her eyes, her cheeks. Her face was crushed against the rough wet tweed of his coat, and its odour, raw and coarse, was in her nostrils. She drooped, intoxicated, gasping for breath in his unheeding giant's grip, but she made no effort to escape. As he held her a thrill, agonising and delicious, swept through her, and she raised her lips involuntarily to his and closed her eyes. At last he released her, mangled, tousled, her very self a draggled piece of chiffon like the night-blue frock, soiled with wet and mud.

"Forgive me," he said, "I had no right. Least of all now. God knows what is to become of me. But whatever happens, you know that I love you."

She had her hands clasped before her face. She could not look at him.

"Yes, I know," she murmured.

In another moment he had gone, leaving Viviette, who had entered the room a girl, transformed into a woman with the first shiver of passion in her veins.

Dick, vaguely conscious of damp and dirt, went up to his bedroom. The sight of his evening things spread out on the bed reminded him that it was nearly dinner-time. Mechanically he washed and dressed. As he was buckling on his ready-made white tie--his clumsy fingers, in spite of many lessons from Viviette, had never learned the trick of tying a bow--a maid brought him a message. Mr. Austin's compliments and would he see Mr. Austin for a few moments in Mr. Austin's room. The words were like the dreaded tap on the shoulder of the hunted criminal.

"I'll come at once," he said.

He found Austin sitting on the chair by his desk, resting his chin on

his elbow. He did not stir as Dick entered.

"You want to speak to me?"

"Yes," said Austin. "Will you sit down?"

"I'll stand," said Dick impatiently. "What have you to say to me?"

"I believe you have expressed your desire to leave England and earn your living in a new country. Is that so?"

The brothers' eyes met. Dick saw that the loaded pistol had been discovered, and read no love, no pity, only condemnation in the hard gaze. Austin was pronouncing sentence.

"Yes," he replied sullenly.

"I happen," said Austin, "to know of an excellent opportunity. Lord Overton, whom you have met, wants a man to take charge of his timber forests in Vancouver. The salary is £700 a year. I wired to Lord Overton asking for the appointment on your behalf. This is his answer."

Dick took the telegram and read it with muddled head. Austin had lost no time.

"You see, it fits in admirably. You can start by the night mail. Your sudden departure needs no other explanation to the household than this telegram. I hope you understand."

"I understand," said Dick bitterly. A sudden memory of words that Viviette had used the day before occurred to him. "I understand. This is to get me out of the way. 'David put Uriah in the forefront of the battle.' Vancouver is the forefront."

"Don't you think we had better avoid all unprofitable discussion?" Austin rose and confronted him. "I expect you to accept this offer and my conditions."

"And if I refuse?" asked Dick, with rising anger. "What dare you threaten me with?"

Austin raised a deprecatory hand.

"Do you suppose I'm going to threaten you? I simply expect you not to refuse. Your conscience must tell you that I have the right to do so. Doesn't it?"

Dick glowered sullenly at the wall and tugged his great moustache.

"You force me to touch on things I should have liked to keep hidden," said Austin. "Very well." He took a scrap of crumpled paper from the desk. "Do you recognise this? It formed the wad of the pistol that was in your hand."

Dick started back a pace. "You're wrong," he gasped. "It was _your_ pistol that was loaded."

"No. Yours. The cap missed fire, or I should have been a dead man--murdered by my brother."

"Stop," cried Dick. "Not murdered. No, no, not murdered. It was in fair fight. I gave you the choice. When I thought I had the unloaded one I called on you to fire. Why the devil didn't you? I wanted you to fire. I was mad for you to fire. I wanted to be killed there and then. No one can say I shirked it. I gave you your chance."

"That's nothing to do with it," said Austin sternly. "When you fired you meant murder. Your face meant killing. And supposing I had fired--and killed you! Good God! I would sooner you had killed me than burdened my soul with your death. It would have been less cowardly. Yes, cowardly. The conditions were not even. To me it was trivial fooling. To you, deadly earnest. Are you not man enough to see that I have the right to exact some penalty?"

Dick remained silent for a few moments, while the powers of light and darkness struggled together in his soul. At last he said in a low voice, hanging his head:

"I'll accept your terms."

"You leave by the night mail for Witherby."

"Very well."

"There's another point," said Austin. "The most important point of all. You will not speak alone to Viviette before you start."

Dick turned with an angry flash,

"What?"

"You will not speak to Viviette alone. When you are gone--for there is no need for you to come back here before you sail--you will not write to her. You will go absolutely and utterly out of her life."

Dick broke into harsh, furious laughter.

"And leave her to you? I might have known that the lawyer would have had me in the trap. But this time you've over-reached yourself. I'll never give her up. Do you hear me? Never--never--never! I would go through the horror of to-day a thousand times--day by day until I die, rather than give her up to you. You shall not take this last thing from me--this hope of winning her--as you have taken everything else. You have supplanted me since first you learned to speak. It has been Esau and Jacob--"

"Or Cain and Abel," said Austin.

"You can taunt me if you like," cried Dick, goaded to fury, and the whole bitterness of a lifetime surging up in passionate speech. "I have got past feeling it. Your life has been one continual taunt of me. You have thought me a dull, good-natured boor, delighted to have a word thrown at him now and again by the elegant gentleman, and rather honoured than otherwise to be ridden over roughshod, or kicked into the mud when it pleased the elegant gentleman to ride by. No, listen to me," he thundered, as Austin was about to protest. "By God, you shall listen this time. You've made me your butt, your fool, your doer of trivial offices. I've wondered sometimes why you haven't addressed me as 'my good fellow,' and asked me to touch my cap to you. I've borne it all these years without complaining--but do you know what it is to eat your heart out and remain silent? I have borne it for my mother's sake--in spite of her dislike of me--and for your sake, because I loved you. Yes. If ever one man has loved another I've loved you. But you took no heed. What was my affection worth? I was only the stupid, dull boor ... but I suffered it all till you came between me and her. I had spent the whole passion of my life upon her. She was the only thing left in the world for which I felt fiercely. I hungered for her, thirsted for her, my brain throbbed at the thought of her, the blood rushed through my veins at the sight of her. And you came between us. And if I have damned my soul, by God! the damnation is your doing. Do you think, while I live, that I'll give her up to you? I'll get my soul's worth, anyhow."

He smote his palm with his clenched fist and strode about the little room. Austin sat for a while dumb with astonishment and dismay. His cherished, lifelong conception of "dear old Dick" lay shattered. A new Dick appeared to him, a personality stronger, deeper than he could have imagined. A new respect for him, also a new pity that was generous and not contemptuous, crept into his heart.

"Listen, Dick," said he, using the familiar name for the first time. "Do I understand that you accuse me of sending you out to Vancouver and hastening your departure so as to gain my own ends with Viviette?"

"Yes," returned Dick. "I do. You have laid this trap for me."

"Have you ever heard me lie to you?"

"No," said Dick.

"Then I tell you, as man to man, that until this afternoon I had no suspicion that your feelings towards Viviette were deeper than those of an elder brother."

Dick laughed bitterly. "You couldn't conceive a clod like me falling in love. Well?"

"That's beside the question," said Austin. "I did not behave dishonourably towards you. I came down. I fell in love with Viviette. How could I help it? How could I help loving her? How could I help

telling her so? But she is young and innocent, and her heart is her own yet. Tell me--man to man--dare you say that you have won it or that I have won it?"

"What's the good of talking?" said Dick, relapsing into his sullen mood. "If I go she is yours. But I won't go."

Austin rose again and laid his hand on his brother's arm.

"Dick. If I give her up, will you obey my conditions?"

"You give her up voluntarily? Why should you?"

"A damnable thing was done this afternoon," said Austin. "I see I had my share in it, and I as well as you have to make reparation. Man alive! You are my brother," he cried with an outburst of feeling. "The nearest thing in the world to me. Do you think I could rest happy with the knowledge that a murderous devil is always in your heart, and that it's in my power to--to exorcise it? Do you think the cost matters? Come. Shall we make this bargain? Yes or no?"

"It's easy for you to promise," said Dick. "But when I am gone, how can you resist?"

Austin hesitated for a moment, biting his lips. Then, with the air of a man who makes an irrevocable step in life, he crossed the room and rang the bell.

"Ask Mrs. Holroyd if she will have the kindness to come here for a minute," he said to the servant.

Dick regarded him wonderingly. "What has Mrs. Holroyd to do with our affairs?"

"You'll see," said Austin, and there was silence between them till Katherine came.

She looked from one joyless face to the other, and sat without a word on the chair that Austin placed for her. Her woman's intuition divined a sequel to the afternoon's drama. Some of it she had already learned. For, going earlier into Viviette's room, she had found her white and shaken, still disordered in hair and dress as Dick had left her; and Viviette had sobbed on her bosom and told her with some incoherence that the monkey had at last hit the lyddite shell in the wrong place, and that it was all over with the monkey. So, before Austin spoke, she half divined why he had summoned her.

Her heart throbbed painfully.

"Dick and I," said Austin, "have been talking of serious matters, and we need your help."

She smiled wanly. "I'll do whatever I can, Austin."

"You said this afternoon you would do anything I asked you. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I said so--and I meant it."

"You said it in reply to my question whether you would accept me if I asked you to marry me."

Dick started from the sullen stupor into which he had fallen and listened with perplexed interest.

"You are not quite right in your tenses, Austin," she remarked. "You said: Would I have accepted you if you had asked me?"

"I want to change the tense into the present," he replied.

She met his glance calmly. "You ask me to marry you in spite of what you told me this afternoon?"

"In spite of it and because of it," he said, drawing up a chair near to her. "A great crisis has arisen in our lives that must make you forget other words I spoke this afternoon. Those other words and everything connected with them I blot out of my memory forever. I want you to do me an infinite service. If there had been no deep affection between us I should not dare to ask you. I want you to be my wife, to take me into your keeping, to trust me as an upright man to devote my life to your happiness. I swear I'll never give you a moment's cause for regret."

She plucked for a while at her gown. It was a strange wooing. But in her sweet way she had given him her woman's aftermath of love. It was a gentle, mellow gift, far removed from the summer blaze of passion, and it had suffered little harm from the sadness of the day. She saw that he was in great stress. She knew him to be a loyal gentleman.

"Is this the result of that scene in the armoury?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," said Austin.

"I was right then. It was a matter of life and death."

"It was," said he. "So is this."

She looked again from one face to the other, rose, hesitated for a moment--and then held out her hand. "I am willing to trust you, Austin," she said.

He touched her hand with his lips and said gravely: "I will not fail your trust."

As soon as she had gone he went to the chair where Dick sat in gloomy remorse and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Well?" said he.

"I agree," Dick groaned, without looking up. "I have no alternative. I appreciate your generosity."

Then Austin spoke of the appointment in Vancouver. He explained how the idea had occurred to him; how Viviette had come late the night before to tell him of what he had never before suspected--Dick's desire to go abroad; how they had conspired to give him a birthday surprise; how they had driven over to Witherby to send the telegram to Lord Overton. And as he spoke, Dick looked at him with a new ghastliness on his face.

"This afternoon--in the dining-room--when you said that Viviette had told you everything--?"

"About your wish to go to the Colonies. What else?"

"And what I overheard in the armoury--about a telegram--telling me--putting me out of my misery?"

"Only whether we should tell you to-night or to-morrow about the appointment. Dick--Dick," said Austin, deeply moved by the great fellow's collapse, "if I have wronged you all these years, it was through want of insight, not want of affection. If I have taunted you, as you say, it was merely a lifelong habit of jesting which you never seemed to resent. I was unconscious of hurting you. For my blindness and carelessness I beg your forgiveness. With regard to Viviette--I ought to have seen, but I didn't. I don't say you had no cause for jealousy--but as God hears me--all the little conspiracy to-day was lovingly meant--all to give you pleasure. I swear it."

Dick rose and stumbled about among the furniture. The setting sun fell just below the top of the casement window, and its direct rays flooded the little room and showed Dick in a strange, unearthly light.

"I wronged you," he said bitterly. "Even in my passions I'm a dull fool. I thought you a damned cad, and I got more and more furious, and I drank--I was drunk all this afternoon--and madness came, and when I saw you kiss her--yes, I saw you, I was peeping from behind the screen--things went red before my eyes, and it was then that I loaded the pistol to shoot you on the spot. God forgive me! May God have mercy upon me."

He leant his arms on the sill and buried his face.

"I can't ask your forgiveness," he went on, after a moment. "It would be a mockery." He laughed mirthlessly. "How can I say. 'I'm sorry I meant to murder you--please don't think anything about it?'" He turned with a fierce gesture. "Oh, you must take it all as said, man! Now, have you finished with me? I can't stand it much longer, I agree to all your terms. I'll drive over to Witherby now and wait for the train--and you'll be free of me."

He turned again and moodily looked out of the window in the full flood of the sunset.

"We must play the game, Dick," said Austin gently, "and go through the horrible farce of dinner--for mother's sake."

Dick heard him vaguely. Below, on the terrace, Viviette was walking, and she filled his universe. She had changed the bedraggled frock for the green one she had worn the night before. Presently she raised her eyes and saw him leaning out of the window.

"Have they told you that dinner is not till a quarter past eight?" she cried, looking deliciously upwards, with a dainty hand to her cheek. "Lord Banstead sent a message to mother that he was unexpectedly detained, and mother has put back dinner. Isn't it impudence?"

But Dick was far too crushed with misery to respond. He nodded dejectedly. She remained staring up at him for a while and then ran into the house.

Dick listlessly mentioned the postponement of dinner.

"I'm sorry I asked the little brute, but I couldn't avoid it."

"What does it matter?" said Austin. He was silent for a moment. Then he came close to Dick.

"Dick," said he. "Let us end this awful scene as friends and brothers. As Heaven hears me, there is no bitterness in my heart. Only deep sorrow--and love, Dick. Shake hands."

Dick took his hand and broke down utterly, and said such things of himself as other men do not like to hear. Presently there was a light rap of knuckles at the door. Austin opened it and beheld Viviette.

"I won't disturb you," she said; "I only want to give this note to Dick."

"I will hand it to him," said Austin.

She thanked him and departed. He closed the door and gave Dick the note. Dick opened it, read, and with a great cry of "Viviette!" rushed to the door. Austin interposed, grasped him by the wrist:

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to her," shouted Dick wildly, wrenching himself free. "Read this." He held up the note before Austin's eyes, with shaking fingers. Austin read:

"I can't bear to see the misery on your face, when I can make you happy. I love you, dear, better than anything on earth. I know it now, and I'll go out with you to Vancouver."

"She loves me. She'll marry me. She'll go out to Vancouver!" cried Dick.
"It changes everything. I must go to her."

"You shall not go," said Austin.

"Shall not? Who dares prevent me?"

"I do. I hold you to your word."

"But, man alive! she loves me--don't you see? The bargain is dissolved. This is none of my seeking. She comes of her own free will. I am going to her."

Austin put both his hands affectionately on the big man's shoulders and forced him into a chair.

"Listen to me just for one minute, Dick. Dick, you dare not marry. Don't drive me to tell you the reason. Can't you see for yourself why I've imposed this condition on you all along?"

"I know no reason," said Dick. "She loves me, and that is enough."

The greyness deepened over Austin's face and the pain in his eyes.

"I must speak, then, in plain terms. That horrible murder impulse is the reason. Today, in a fit of frenzied jealousy, you would have killed me, your brother. Is there any guarantee that, in another fit of frenzied jealousy, you might not--?"

A shudder ran through Dick's great frame. He stretched out his hand.
"For God's sake--don't."

"I must--until you see this ghastly business in its true aspect. Look at the lighter side of Viviette's character. She is gay, fond of admiration, childishly fond of teasing, a bright creature of bewildering moods. Would she be safe in your hands? Might you not one day again see things red before your eyes and again go mad?"

"Don't say any more," Dick said in a choking voice. "I can't stand it."

"Heaven knows, I didn't want to say as much."

Dick shuddered again. "Yes, you are right. I am a man with a curse. I can't marry her. I daren't."

CHAPTER VI

VIVIETTE TAKES THE RISK

Presently Dick raised the face of Cain when he told the Lord that his punishment was greater than he could bear. Tears leaped to Austin's eyes, but he turned his head away lest Dick should see them. He would have given years of his life to spare Dick--everything he had in the world--save his deep convictions of right and wrong. He was responsible for Viviette. That risk of horror he could not let her run. He had hoped, with a great agony of hope, that Dick would have seen it for himself. To formulate it had been torture. But he could not weaken. The barrier between Dick and Viviette was not of his making. It was composed of the grim psychological laws that govern the abnormal. To have disregarded it would have been a crime from which his soul shrank. All the despair in Dick's face, though it wrung his heart, could not move him. It was terrible to be chosen in this way to be the arbiter of Destiny. But there was the decree, written in letters of blood and flame. And Dick had bowed to it.

"What's to become of her?" he groaned.

"This will be her home, as it always has been," said Austin.

"I don't mean that--but between us we shall break her heart. She has given it to me just in time for me to do it. My luck!"

Austin tried to comfort him. A girl's heart was not easily broken. Her pride would suffer most. Pain was inevitable. But Time healed many wounds. In this uncertain world nothing was ever so good as we hoped, and nothing ever so bad as we feared. Dick paid little heed to the platitudes.

"She must be told!"

"Not what happened this afternoon," cried Austin quickly. "That we bury forever from all human knowledge."

"Yes," said Dick, staring in front of him and speaking in a dull, even voice. "We must hide that. It's not a pretty thing to spread before a girl's eyes. It will be always before my own--until I die. But she must be told that I can't marry her. I can't ride away and leave her in doubt and wonder forever and ever."

"Let us face this horrible night as best we can," said Austin. "Avoid seeing her alone. You'll be with mother or packing most of the evening. Slip away to Witherby an hour or so before your time. When you're gone I'll arrange matters. Leave it to me."

He made one of his old, self-confident gestures. But now Dick felt no resentment. His spirit in its deep abasement saw in Austin the better, wiser, stronger man.

At a quarter-past eight they went slowly downstairs to what promised to be a nightmare kind of meal. There would be four persons, Viviette, Katherine, and themselves, in a state of suppressed eruption, and two,

Mrs. Ware and the unspeakable Banstead, complacently unaware of volcanic forces around them, who might by any chance word bring about disaster. There was danger, too--and the greatest--from Viviette, ignorant of Destiny. Austin dreaded the ordeal; but despair and remorse had benumbed Dick's faculties; he had passed the stage at which men fear. With his hand on the knob of the drawing-room door Austin paused and looked at him.

"Pull yourself together, man. Play your part. For God's sake, try to look cheerful."

Dick tried. Austin shivered.

"For God's sake, don't," he said.

They entered the drawing-room, expecting to find the three ladies, and possibly Lord Banstead, assembled for dinner. To Austin's discomfiture, Viviette was alone in the room. She rose, made a step or two to meet them, then stopped.

"What a pair of faces! One would think it were the eve of Dick's execution, and you were the hangman measuring him for the noose."

"Dick," said Austin, "is leaving us to-night--possibly for many years."

"I don't see that he is so very greatly to be pitied," said Viviette, trying in vain to meet Dick's eyes. She drew him a pace or two aside.

"Did you read my note--or did you tear it up like the other one?"

"I read it," he said, looking askance at the floor.

"Then why are you so woe-begone?"

He replied in a helpless way that he was not woe-begone. Viviette was puzzled, hurt, somewhat humiliated. She had made woman's great surrender which is usually followed by a flourish of trumpets very gratifying to hear. In fact, to most women the surrender is worth the flourish. But the recognition of this surrender appeared to find its celebration in a funeral march with muffled drums. A condemned man being fitted for the noose, as she had suggested, a mute conscientiously mourning at his own funeral, a man who had lost a stately demesne in Paradise and had been ironically compensated by the gift of a bit of foreshore of the Styx could not have worn a less joyous expression than he on whom she had conferred the boon of his heart's desire.

"You're not only woe-begone," she said, with spirit, "but you're utterly miserable. I think I have a right to know the reason. Tell me, what is it?"

She tapped a small, impatient foot.

"We haven't told my mother yet," Austin explained, "and Dick is rather

nervous as to the way in which she will take the news."

"Yes," said Dick, with lame huskiness. "It's on mother's account."

Viviette laughed somewhat scornfully.

"I am not a child, my dear Austin. No man wears a face like that on account of his mother--least of all when he meets the woman who has promised to be his wife."

She flashed a challenging glance at Austin, but not a muscle of his grey face responded. Her natural expectations were baffled. There was no start of amazement, no fierce movement of anger, no indignant look of reproach. She was thrown back on herself. She said:

"I don't think you quite understand. Dick had two aims in life--one to obtain a colonial appointment, the other--so he led me to suppose--to marry me. He has the appointment, and I have promised to marry him."

"I know," said Austin, "but you must make allowances."

"If that's all you can say on behalf of your client," retorted Viviette, "I rather wonder at your success as a barrister."

"Don't you think, my dear," said Austin gently, "that we are treading on delicate ground?"

"Delicate ground!" she scoffed. "We seem to have been treading on a volcano all the afternoon. I'm tired of it." She faced the two men with uplifted head. "I want an explanation."

"Of what?" Austin asked.

"Of Dick's attitude. What has he got to be miserable about? Tell me."

"But I'm not miserable, my dear Viviette," said poor Dick, vainly forcing a smile. "I'm really quite happy."

Her woman's intuition rejected the protest with contumely. All the afternoon he had been mad with jealousy of Austin. An hour ago he had whirled her out of her senses in savage passion. But a few minutes before she had given him all a woman has to give. Now he met her with hang-dog visage, apologies from Austin, and milk-and-water asseveration of a lover's rapture. The most closely-folded rosebud miss of Early Victorian times could not have faced the situation without showing something of the Eve that lurked in the heart of the petals. So much the less could Viviette, child of a freer, franker day, hide her just indignation under the rose-leaves of maidenly modesty.

"Happy!" she echoed. "I've known you since I was a child of three. I know the meaning of every light and every shadow that passes over your face--except this shadow now. What does it mean?"

She asked the question imperiously, no longer the elfin changeling, the fairy of bewildering moods of Austin's imagination, no longer the laughing coquette of Katherine's less picturesque fancy, but a modern young woman of character, considerably angered and very much in earnest. Austin bit his lip in perplexity. Dick looked around like a hunted animal seeking a bolting-hole.

"Dick is anxious," said Austin, at length, seeing that some explanation must be given, "that there should be no engagement between you before he goes out to Vancouver."

"Indeed?" said Viviette. "May I ask why? As this concerns Dick and myself, perhaps you will leave us alone for a moment so that Dick may tell me."

"No, no," Dick muttered hurriedly. "Don't leave us, Austin. We can't talk of such a thing now."

Again she tapped her foot impatiently.

"Yes, now. I'm going to hear the reason now, whatever it is."

The brothers exchanged glances. Dick turned to the window, and stared at the mellow evening sky.

Austin again was spokesman.

"Dick finds he has made a terrible and cruel mistake. One that concerns you intimately."

"Whatever Dick may have done with regard to me," replied Viviette, "I forgave him for it beforehand. When once I give a thing I don't take it back. I have given him my love and my promise."

"My dear," said Austin, gravely and kindly. "Here are two men who have loved you all your life. Don't think hardly of us. You must be brave and bear a great shock. Dick can't marry you."

She looked at him incredulously.

"Can't marry me? Why not?"

"It would be better not to ask."

She moved swiftly to Dick, and with her light touch swung him round to face the room.

"I don't understand. Is it because you're going out into the wilds? That doesn't matter. I told you I would go to Vancouver with you. I want to go. My happiness is with you."

Dick groaned. "Don't make it harder for me."

"What are you keeping from me?" she asked. "Is it anything you don't think fit for my ears? If so, speak. I'm no longer a child. Is there another woman in the case?"

She met Austin's eyes full. He said: "No, thank God! Nothing of that sort." And as her eyes did not waver, he made the bold stroke. "He finds that he doesn't love you as much as he thought. There's the whole tragedy in a few words."

She reeled back as if struck. "Dick doesn't love me?" Then the announcement seemed so grotesque in its improbability that she began to laugh, a trifle hysterically.

"Is this true?"

"It's quite true," said poor Dick.

"You see, my dear," said Austin, "what it costs him--what it costs us both--to tell you this."

"But I don't understand. I don't understand!" she cried, with sudden piteousness. "What did you mean, then--a little while ago--in the armoury?"

Austin, who did not see the allusion, had to allow Dick to speak for himself.

"I was drunk," said Dick desperately. "I've been drinking heavily of late--and not accountable for my actions. I oughtn't to have done what I did."

"And so, you see," continued Austin, with some eagerness, "when he became confronted with the great change in his life--Vancouver--he looked at things soberly. He found that his feelings towards you were not of the order that would warrant his making you his wife."

Before Viviette could reply the door opened, and Mrs. Ware and Katherine entered the room. Mrs. Ware, ignorant of tension, went smilingly to Austin, and, drawing down his shapely head with both hands, kissed him.

"My dear, dear boy, I'm so glad, so truly glad. Katherine has just told me."

"Told you what, mother?" asked Viviette quickly, with a new sharpness in her voice.

Mrs. Ware turned a beaming face. "Can't you guess, darling? Oh, Austin, there's no living woman whom I would sooner call my daughter. You've made me so happy."

The facile tears came, and she sat down and dried them on her little wisp of handkerchief.

"I thought it for the best to tell your mother, Austin," said Katherine, somewhat apologetically. "We were speaking of you--and--I couldn't keep it back."

Viviette, white-lipped and dazed, looked at Austin, Katherine, and Dick in turns. She said, in the high-pitched voice, to Austin:

"Have you asked Katherine to marry you?"

"Yes," he replied, not quite so confidently, and avoiding her glance--"and she has done me the honour of accepting me."

Katherine held out a conciliatory hand to Viviette. "Won't you congratulate me, dear?"

"And Austin, too," said Mrs. Ware.

But Viviette lost control of herself. "I'll congratulate nobody," she cried shrilly. She burned with a sense of intolerable outrage. Only a few hours before she had been befooled into believing herself to be the mistress of the destinies of two men. Both had offered her their love. Both had kissed her. The memory lashed her into fury. Now one of them avowed that she had been merely the object of a drunken passion, and the other came before her as the affianced husband of the woman who called herself her dearest friend.

Katherine, in deep distress, laid her hand on the girl's arm. "Why not, dear? I thought that you and Dick--in fact--I understood--"

Viviette freed herself from Katherine's touch.

"Oh, no, you didn't. You didn't understand anything. You didn't try to. You are all lying. The three of you. You have all lied, and lied, and lied to me. I tell you to your faces you have lied to me." She swung passionately to each in turn. "'Austin can never be anything to me but a friend'--how often have you said that to me? Ah--Saint Nitouche! And you"--to Austin--"How dared you insult me this morning? And you--how have you dared to insult me all the time? You've lied--the whole lot of you--and I hate you all!"

Mrs. Ware had risen, scared and trembling.

"What does the girl mean? I've never heard such unladylike words in a drawing-room in my life."

Dick blundered in: "It's all my fault, mother--"

"I've not the slightest doubt of that," returned the old lady with asperity. "But what Austin and Katherine have to do with it I can't imagine."

The servant opened the door.

"Lord Banstead."

He entered a cold, strange silence. Everyone had forgotten him. He must have attributed the ungenial atmosphere to his own lateness--it was half-past eight--for he made penitent apology to Mrs. Ware. Austin greeted him coldly. Dick nodded absently from the other side of the room. Viviette, with a sweeping glance of defiance at the assembled family, held herself very erect, and with hard eyes and quivering lips came straight to the young fellow.

"Lord Banstead," she said. "You have asked me four times to marry you. Did you mean it, or were you lying, too?"

Banstead's pallid cheeks flushed. He was overcome with confusion.

"Of course I mean it--meant to ask you again to-day--ask you now."

"Then I will marry you."

Dick strode forward, and, catching her by the wrist, swung her away from Banstead, his face aflame with sudden passion.

"No, by God, you shan't!"

Banstead retreated a few paces, scared out of his life. Mrs. Ware sought Austin's protecting arm.

"What does all this mean? I don't understand it."

Austin led her to the door. "I'll see nothing unpleasant happens, dear. You had better go and tell them to keep back dinner yet a few minutes."

His voice and authority soothed her, and she left the room, casting a terrified glance at Dick, standing threateningly over Lord Banstead, who had muttered something about Viviette being free to do as she liked.

"She can do what she likes, but, by God! she shan't marry you."

"I'm of age," declared Viviette fiercely. "I marry whom I choose."

"Of course she can," said Banstead. "Are you taking leave of your senses?"

"How dare you ask a pure girl to marry you?" cried Dick furiously. "You, who have come straight here from--"

Banstead found some spirit. "Shut up, Ware," he interrupted. "Play the game. You've no right to say that."

"I have the right," cried Dick.

"Hush!" said Austin, interposing.

"There's no need to prolong this painful discussion. To-morrow--as Viviette's guardian--"

"To-morrow?" Dick shouted. "Where shall I be to-morrow? Away from here--unable to defend her--unable to say a word."

"If you said a thousand words," said Viviette, "they wouldn't make an atom of difference. Lord Banstead has asked me to marry him. I have accepted him openly. What dare you say to it?"

"Yes," said Banstead. "She has made no bones about it. I've asked her five times. Now she accepts me. What have you to say to it?"

"I say she shan't marry you," said Dick, glaring at the other.

"Steady, steady, Dick," said Austin warningly. But Dick shook his warning angrily aside, and Austin saw that, once again that day, Dick was desperate.

"Not while I live shall she marry you. Don't I know your infernal beastly life?"

"Now, look here," said Banstead, at bay. "What the deuce have you got to do with my affairs?"

"Everything. Do you think she loves you, cares for you, honours you, respects you?"

Viviette faced him with blazing eyes.

"I do," she said defiantly.

"It's a lie," cried Dick. "It's you that are lying now. Heaven and earth! I've suffered enough to-day--I thought I had been through hell--but it's nothing to this. She loves me--do you hear me?--me--me--me--and I can't marry her--and I don't care a damn who knows the reason."

"Stop, man," said Austin.

"Let me be. She shall know the truth. Everyone shall know the truth. At any rate, it will save her from this."

"I will do it quietly, later, Dick."

"Let me be, I tell you," said Dick, with great, clumsy, passionate gesture. "Let's have no more lies." He turned to Viviette. "You wrote me a letter. You said you loved me--would marry me--come out to Vancouver--the words made me drunk with happiness--at first. You saw me. I refused your love and your offer. I said I didn't love you. I lied. I said I couldn't marry you. It was the truth. I can't. I can't. But love you! Oh, my God! My God! There were flames of hell in my heart--but

couldn't you see the love shining through?"

"Don't, Dick, don't," cried Katherine.

"I will," he exclaimed wildly. "I'll tell her why I can't marry any woman. I tried to murder Austin this afternoon!"

Katherine closed her eyes. She had guessed it. But Viviette, with parted lips and white cheeks, groped her way backwards to a chair, without shifting her terror-stricken gaze from Dick; and sitting, she gripped the arms of the chair.

There was a moment of tense silence. Banstead at last relieved his feelings with a gasping, "Well, I'm damned!"

Dick continued:

"It was jealousy--mad jealousy--this afternoon--in the armoury--the mock duel--one of the pistols was loaded. I loaded it--first, in order to kill him out of hand--then I thought of the duel--he would have his chance--either he would kill me or I would kill him. Mine happened to be loaded. It missed fire. It was only the infinite mercy of God that I didn't kill him. He found it out. He has forgiven me. He's worth fifty millions of me. But my hands are red with his blood, and I can't touch your pure garments. They would stain them red--and I should see red again before my eyes some day. A man like me is not fit to marry any woman. A murderer is beyond the pale. So I said I didn't love her to save her from the knowledge of this horror. And now I'm going to the other side of the world to work out my salvation--but she shall know that a man loves her with all his soul, and would go through any torment and renunciation for her sake--and, knowing that, she can't go and throw herself away on a man unworthy of her. After what I've told you, will you marry this man?"

Still looking at him, motionless, she whispered, "No."

"I say!" exclaimed Banstead. "I think--"

Austin checked further speech. Dick looked haggardly round the room.

"There. Now you all know. I'm not fit to be under the same roof with you. Good-bye."

He slouched in his heavy way to the door, but Viviette sprang from her chair and planted herself in his path.

"No. You shan't go. Do you think I have nothing to say?"

"Say what you like," said Dick sadly. "Nothing is too black for me. Curse me, if you will."

She laughed, and shook her head. "Do you think a woman curses the man who would commit murder for the love of her?" she cried, with a strange

exultation in her voice. "If I loved you before--don't you think I love you now a million times more?"

Dick fell back, thrilled with amazement.

"You love me still?" he gasped. "You don't shrink--"

"Excuse me," interrupted Banstead, crossing the room. "Does this mean that you chuck me, Miss Hastings?"

"You must release me from my promise, Lord Banstead," she said gently.

"I scarcely knew what I was doing. I'm very sorry. I've not behaved well to you."

"You've treated me damned badly," said Banstead, turning on his heel.

"Good-bye, everybody."

Austin, moved by compunction, tried to conciliate the angry youth, but he refused comfort. He had been made a fool of, and would stand that from nobody. He would not stay for dinner, and would not put his foot inside the house again.

"At any rate," said Austin, bidding him good-bye, "I can rely on you not to breathe a word to anyone of what you've heard this evening?"

Banstead fingered his underfed moustache.

"I may be pretty rotten, but I'm not that kind of cad," said he. And he went, not without a certain dignity.

Dick took Viviette's hand and kissed it tenderly.

"God bless you, dear. I'll remember what you've said all my life. I can go away almost happy."

"You can go away quite happy, if you like," said Viviette. "Take me with you."

"To Vancouver?"

Austin joined them. "It is impossible, dear," said he.

"I go with him to Vancouver," she said.

Dick wrung his hands. "But I daren't marry you, Viviette, I daren't, I daren't."

"Don't you see that it's impossible, Viviette?" said Austin.

"Why?"

"I've explained it to Dick. He has hinted it to you. You're scarcely old enough to understand, my dear. It is the risk you run."

"Such men as I can't marry," said Dick loyally. "You don't understand. Austin is right. The risk is too great."

She laughed in superb contempt.

"The risk? Do you think I'm such a fool as not to understand? Do you think, after what I've said, that I'm a child? Risk? What is life or love worth without risk? When a woman loves a fierce man she takes the risk of his fierceness. It's her joy. I'll take the risk, and it will be a bond between us."

Austin implored her to listen to reason. She swept his arguments aside.

"God forbid. I'll listen to love," she cried. "And if ever a man wanted love, it's Dick. Reason! Come, Dick, let us leave this god and goddess of reason alone. I've got something to say which only you can hear."

She dragged him in a bewildered state of mind to the door, which she held open. She was absolute mistress of the situation. She motioned to Dick to precede her, and he obeyed, like a man in a dream. On the threshold she paused, and flashed defiance at Austin, who appeared to her splendid scorn but a small, narrow-natured man.

[Illustration: "I want you to love me forever and ever."]

"You can say and think what you like, you two. You are civilised people--and I suppose you love in a civilised way according to reason. I'm a primitive woman, and Dick's a primitive man--and, thank God! we understand each other, and love each other as primitive people do."

She slammed the door, and in another moment was caught in Dick's great arms.

"What do you want to say that only I can hear?" he asked after a while.

"This," she said. "I want you to love me strongly and fiercely for ever and ever--and I'll be a great wife to you--and, if I fail--if I am ever wanton, as I have been to-day--for I have been wanton--and all that has happened has been my fault--if ever I play fast and loose with your love again--I want you to kill me. Promise!"

She looked at him with glowing eyes. All the big man's heart melted into adoring pity. He took her face in both his hands as tenderly as he would have touched a prize rose bloom.

"Thank God, you're still a child, dear," he said.

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