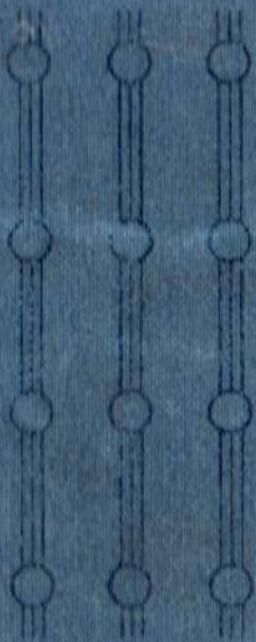


THE
ALIAS



ALEXANDER
CRAWFORD

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BY

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THE ALIAS.

CHAPTER I.

"OH, but, Mr Wishart, do please come in."

The young man paused irresolutely, with one hand on the half-open door, and the other nervously adjusting his tie.

"If you are sure . . ." he began.

"Sure? Of course I'm sure," laughed the girl who had spoken. She stood up stiffly as if she were tired, and pressed the fingers of her right hand over a pair of very weary eyes. "Besides," she went on, "you ought to assert your rights. You ought to tell me, kindly but firmly, that I have no business to make a nuisance of myself in the droning-room." The intonation of the last words, accompanied by a loud sniff, effected such a masterly mimicry of the slatternly servant who waited on them, that young Wishart threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"No, but honestly," he protested, "am I in the way?"

"Of course not, silly man," she replied. "I'm supposed to do my typing in my own room and not to keep people out of here with my incessant clatter. The fire tempted me, and there seemed to be no one about."

"Well, don't let me interrupt you. I don't mind the machine a bit. Can't I help you, Miss Dittany? Couldn't

I read out your manuscript, or something of that sort, don't you know?"

He advanced into the room as he spoke, and crossed rather shyly over to the little fire which blinked pessimistically in the bricked-up grate. The girl's dark-blue eyes softened with a look of gratitude for a sympathy to which she had long been a stranger. They lingered, too, compellingly, with something of admiration in them, over the tall athletic figure, and came to rest at last with a gaze of complete friendliness on the clear-cut features, the straight nose, and strongly moulded chin. The eager boyish eyes brought an answering smile into her own.

"You're awfully good," she said, shaking her head; "but, to use the vernacular of this establishment, I'm going to chuck it. I'm tired."

She banged down the lid of her instrument with a determined clang and, sorting her papers, drew an arm-chair close to the flickering blaze. Wishart remained standing till she had taken her seat, and then followed her example on the opposite side of the fender.

"It's rotten for a girl to have to work so hard," he said.

She smiled her thanks again, but said nothing. Her glance fell from his face, and passed rapidly over his clothes. With the flashing intuition of a woman she read a pitiful story in their shining surfaces and threadbare seams. Though they hung on him with the faultless cut of Bond Street, and were brushed with all the care of needy fastidiousness, there were tell-tale darns here and there, and the split boots were already beginning to steam with the heat of the fire. Her glance must have rested too long on the fender, for he drew in his feet awkwardly under his chair. The action reproved her. With a stab of compassion she realised that he too needed sympathy—a sympathy which tact would not allow her to give. After a pause she took up his last remark.

"It's no worse for a woman than a man," she said. Then with a quick change of mood she flung convention

to the winds. "What are you doing in a place like this?" she asked.

Wishart glanced over at her with a quick start at the suddenness of the question.

"And why not?"

"Because you're too good for . . . for this sordid sort of existence. You're not like the other men here. It suits them, but it grates on you. Do you think I can't see it?"

"One can get used . . . it doesn't seem sordid now."

"Please don't pay stupid compliments." She almost snapped the words. Her eyes were aglow, and a slight patch of colour had mounted to her pale cheeks.

Wishart dropped into her serious mood. He glanced at her curiously for an instant, and then gazed moodily into the fire.

"I suppose it's because I'm a bit of a waster," he said at last. "I wasn't brought up to business, you see, and I believe I've made a mess of things. But what about you? It's no more pleasant here for you than it is for me."

It was the girl's turn to be silent. He leant forward in his chair with clasped hands, looking searchingly into her face. He had known her for two months, and he had never before seen her like this. Hitherto he had admired her for her beauty; for the glorious eyes that seemed to range in colour from a brilliant violet to a deep glowing black; for the contrast between her raven hair and the paleness of her cheeks; for the exquisite poise of her well-shaped head, and the full rich curves of her rounded throat. Above all, he had wondered at her refinement, and the exotic grace with which she moved in her tawdry surroundings. Yet there had been an aloofness about her which had held him distant. To-night the ice of her reserve seemed to have broken up. Her lips were fuller, and they had lost their suppression. Once or twice as he watched they twitched weakly, as if some deep emotion were pulling the strings. As he watched, too, he learnt the mystery of the changing eyes. While she fixed her gaze on

the flickering flames he saw the great dark pupils dwindle away into pin-points, and when, conscious of his stare, she raised them quickly, they were darkly blue and soft, with great swimming depths in them that held him spellbound. She must have seen something of the tenderness in his own, for she stirred uneasily in her chair, and the colour in her cheeks grew brighter.

"You haven't answered my question," she said.

"I don't know what answer to give," he said. "When a chap's on the rocks he expects to have to rough it a bit."

"That's what I don't understand. When a man is on the rocks, as you call it, it's usually . . ."

Miss Dittany stopped quickly as the door opened. The newcomer was a short, thick-set man, who exuded an overpowering aroma of cheerfulness. His features were at once pure Grecian and very insignificant; his fair hair was plastered straight back and heavily oiled, and he wore a thick, blond, immaculate moustache. As he took up his stand with his back to the fire, shutting out what little warmth it was giving to the others, Wishart nodded casually to him, with a shade of annoyance on his face. Miss Dittany bowed frigidly.

"'Av ing a little *tête-à-tête*, eh what? 'Ope I don't intrude."

He addressed his question with an artful leer to the girl on his left, and stuck his thumbs under the arms of his embroidered waistcoat.

"The room's quite public, Mr Venables," she said quietly.

"But two's company, three's none, what?"

Mr Venables chuckled at his own jocularity, but finding his banter not received in the same spirit in which it was offered, commiserated with some splashes of mud on his glacé boots, and changed the subject.

"Beast of a day," he remarked; "no one 'ud think it was May. Rainin' like the very dooce outside. Goin' for my 'olidays, too, end of the month; makes a chap shiver to think of it. You don't seem to mind it

though, ole feller ;" he turned to Wishart. "Saw you trampin' up the Camberwell New Road to-day as if it was the middle of summer."

The girl bit her lip. "Where are you spending your holidays?" she asked quickly.

Mr Venables had thought of a bicycle tour, which he pronounced "tower," and had got a good "rowte" fixed up. "Nothin' like a bicycle tower for shakin' up your liver," he said. "By the bye, Miss, I 'ear your father's goin' to join us. That right?"

"Yes; next week, Mr Venables."

"You don't 'arf keep things dark. Never knoo you 'ad a father; none of us didn't. Bin away, 'as 'e?"

"Yes."

"Abroad, p'raps?"

"Part of the time. Will you excuse me, Mr Wishart?"

The younger man rose and opened the door for her. Venables surveyed him contemptuously.

"That sort o' thing's a great mistake, ole friend. Weak, I call it. Wait on females, and they trample on you. Treat 'em like dirt, and they come crawlin' after you."

Wishart looked down on the speaker with ill-concealed disgust.

"Venables," he said, "you're an insufferable little bounder."

Mr Venables took it at first as a subtle tribute to his manliness, and showed no signs of resentment until the other had left the room. But on consideration the remark rankled. "'Im too," he muttered, "and 'e ain't got one penny to rub against another." The thought seemed to mollify him, for he jingled his own loose change loudly in his pocket, and puffed with evident relish at his threepenny Flor de Cuba.

Wishart had no further heart for the amenities of the "droring-room," and retired to a dingy apartment which was dignified by the name of the "library." Here he produced a long printed form, a note-book, and a fountain pen. There was a pathetic sameness in the particulars he filled in between the parallel columns of

the schedule. "Called on Henry Jenkins. Not decided yet. To call again in a week. Hooper & Trent. Mr Hooper out. Called on Unity Cement Co. Manager too busy to see me, but left proposal forms."

There were some twenty entries, all to the same effect, and when he had finished his task, Wishart perused the result ruefully. "I'm not cut out for this insurance business; that's what it is," he commented. He sealed the envelope, stamped it, and then peered thoughtfully into the recesses of his pouch. "Only enough for the morning," he pondered. "Well, sufficient for the day . . . here goes." He lit up his pipe, and, slamming the door behind him, puffed his way vigorously through the rain. "There's one thing," he comforted himself by saying, "there's no smoke so delicious as the last one a man's got."

Yet, in spite of the extremity of his despair, he was conscious of an unwonted glow of hope and resolution as he mounted the three flights of stairs to his garret at the top of the house. The mental picture of Miss Dittany coloured all his thoughts. Their conversation had been disjointed and interrupted, but he remembered every word of it. The sympathy she had expressed, more with the eye than the tongue, had infused new grit into him.

As he turned up the light he caught sight of an envelope placed conspicuously on his mantelshelf. It was addressed in a woman's writing to Neil Wishart, Esq. He frowned slightly as he opened it. He remembered that he owed Mrs Duke two weeks' rent, and he supposed this to be the inevitable notice. With a heightened colour he gradually realised his mistake.

"DEAR MR WISHART" (it said),—"I don't know what you will think of my brazen impudence, but I have had two tickets given to me for the Brixton Empire for to-morrow night, and not a solitary soul to take me. I ask you, because every other man in the house would misunderstand me. Will you act the Good Samaritan? I am so tired of being boxed-up indoors. —Yours sincerely,

ANNE DITTANY."

CHAPTER II.

ALTHOUGH it was still early morning, there was a great stir and bustle just inside the ponderous gates of Shropbury Gaol. Two constables without helmets stood at the side of a stout inspector who sat at a desk signing writs of Habeas Corpus and other formal documents with no more interest or concern than a carrier's man would show in taking leave of a brown paper parcel. "Thou hast the body. . . ." Ay, and the soul too, Mr Inspector, if you had not grown too callous to realise it. And in nine cases out of every ten it is only the body you are able to release.

A second batch of prisoners had arrived. One by one, in obedience to a sharp word of command, they stood up with extended arms while one officer went through their pockets, calling out a description of the articles extracted to another who made a schedule of them. One by one they marched silently and hopelessly to the waiting-room to be stripped and medically examined, handled like swine in the hands of a vet., thence to a bath, of which the want of privacy was a shame to the decent-minded.

A tall, bearded man of apparently early middle age, dressed in the khaki uniform of a convict, stood a little apart, under the charge of a young warder. He seemed to be of a different calibre from those who came and went before him. But for his clothes, one would have said he was a curious stranger, absorbed with the interest of the proceedings. From time to time a smile of keen amusement flitted over his tightly shut lips.

His sense of humour was stirred by the quaint remarks of an old "timer" to a first batch of neophytes who were beginning to emerge from the bath. The man's history was well known to him, and added piquancy to the situation. He was serving the last years of a long term for manslaughter, and he had been promoted for good conduct to the position of *Maitre d'Hôtel*. His appearance was benevolent. With his little goatee and his horn-rimmed spectacles he might have been the elder of a Scotch kirk. At last the bearded man who watched him laughed outright. One of the newcomers was wandering forlornly up and down a long row of shapeless shoes.

"Now, what's the matter, my lord? Can't find a pair to fit, can't you? Lumme! 'ow long are you in for? Fourteen days! Any one 'ud think you was in for fourteen years to see the frills you puts on. I believe some of you on'y comes in for a wash and brush-up. Come on; 'ere's your drop. Take 'em. Take 'em, I'm tellin' you."

As the man limped off muttering, the bearded man heard his name called, and straightened his back instinctively. Overhead in the long-railed corridors doors were beginning to clang on their new occupants, the rattle of keys sounded here and there, and somewhere in the vast hollow distance a bell was echoing dismally. They were familiar enough sounds to a man who had heard his own name for the first time for eight months, and he seemed to shake them out of his recollection with an involuntary shudder of his spine.

"206A Edward Charles Bevington," repeated the inspector, running his fat forefinger down a printed list. "You are Edward Charles Bevington?"

"I am."

"You will sign here. Full name."

The man signed.

"Schedule of articles in pocket at time of arrest." The monotonous voice droned on. "Check articles as I read them. One silver cigar-case marked E.C.B.; one silver match-box; bunch of keys; one silk handkerchief

marked E.C.B.; two pounds in gold, eighteen shillings in silver, and threepence in copper; pearl-handled pocket-knife with three blades and cigar-cutter. Right? Sign here."

"There were five cigars."

"Cigars destroyed according to regulations. There is owing to you for work done the sum of seventeen shillings and one penny. Sign here."

"Clothing. Articles as specified in schedule. Check as I read." The even voice went on, finishing with the inevitable "sign here." With a staccato query of "Any complaints?" to which no answer was awaited, the examination was ended, and tucking his parcels of clothes and belongings under his arm, Edward Charles Bevington marched away under the charge of the young warder to don the livery of freedom.

A few stereotyped commonplaces from the chaplain, and the man stepped out through the grim portals. A gentle rain was falling outside, but the discharged prisoner bared his head to it, and drew a deep breath. Then mounting a tram, he rioted in liberty until he had placed miles between him and the nightmare he had escaped.

In the city which he presently reached he seemed a little less at ease. He strode along erect with the defiance of shame. Now and then a man would nod distantly to him with a mingled expression of curiosity and pity; some that he knew crossed the road before he came up with them. Yet all the time he kept to the main thoroughfares as though brazening it out. The mood could not last. It was growing near midday. Up the steps of a great exchange silk-hatted men were beginning to swarm. He watched them for a minute, then, crushing his hat over his eyes, hurried into the station. In an obscure buffet, on a side platform, he loitered with the keenest relish over the insipid half of a cold fowl and a bottle of sour wine. He had not yet got the taste of the tin pannikins out of his mouth, or of the villainous bread, or the cocoa swimming in grease. Here was no one to order him to stand with his face to

the wall, or bully him for rolling his blanket untidily. He could smoke, too ; he remembered that with a throb, and filled his cigar case with the best they could give him. The train for Euston left at 2.30 they told him. He tried to realise it as he sat dreamily smoking. It meant that before seven he would be in London : London the omnivorous, the swallower of shame and notoriety, the sucker-up of men's pasts. London, where men can begin over again if they have brains and courage.

Chiefly, as he sat there, he thought of his daughter Nan. He pictured her reduced to typing for an existence. He saw her again as she was. One picture especially recurred again and again. She was walking slowly towards him—God ! how the girl could walk—and she came up step by step through the princely conservatories. Orchids and priceless exotics were about her on every hand ; yet all she carried in her hand was a bunch of wild violets. "Here, dad," she had said, "these live in the rain, which is more than your stupid blooms will do." And she sprayed the drops over him.

Seated there now, with his wreathing smoke and his ineffable comfort, he was sure there was a parable somewhere in that incident. A choke in the throat, and some unaccustomed moisture in his eyes, convinced him that he was not wholly bad. He loved his little daughter. That at least would be placed to his credit when the Great Account came to be audited. And Nan should be reinstated. Nothing would be too good for her.

He was comforted to think that his nature was really a beautiful one in core. He rather cherished the tears that welled to his eyes. He did not think that a business man need be ashamed at a tendency to see romantic parables.

"How lucky for me she thought of taking her mother's name," he pondered, coming by degrees into a less sentimental strain. And this was the perpetually recurring thought during his four hours in the train. He was student enough of human nature to know that shame sits very lightly in the breast that can hide it.

CHAPTER III.

THE meal of breakfast at No. 10 Alabaster Gardens, Kennington, taken as a general thing, was a dispirited function. It was served in the dining-room, and was seldom graced with the portly presence of Mrs Duke, who took a proper pride in never appearing in curlers. The little drudge of a "general," rejoicing in the name of Monica, would bring the plates and dishes up in relays as the individual members of the boarding establishment straggled down at different times; and might be seen at any time pausing outside the door to wipe the dirty finger-marks from the edge of each successive plate with an equally dirty apron.

Mr Levi, the manager of Isaac & Solomon's cigar divan round the corner, was usually the first down, as he had to open the shop at eight. He devoured his breakfast in solitary apathy, and had no racial antipathy to bacon. Mr Venables would generally appear in time to nod him a curt good-morning. The latter was not at his best on these occasions. He always read '*The Financial News*,' with the title showing ostentatiously, and responded in short monosyllables to the flagrant love-making of Miss Montrevor, who always came in ten minutes after him. Miss Montrevor was a trapeze artiste, now resting, and she made love from a weary instinct to every man within reach. Then there was a saturnine actor who went by the name of Hilary St Quentin, who called Mr Venables "laddie," and talked for hours in a horrible technical jargon to Miss Montrevor; and an uncouth red-headed youth from the North, who never talked at all.

Such was the dingy framework that went to enhance the rarity of Miss Dittany's presence. The sordid setting would have detracted from most women, even from those of culture and refinement; but there was that in the girl's nature which kept her aloof without priggishness, and refined without prudery. Neil Wishart had watched her for some time with a steadily growing admiration; the rest were just a little afraid of her, and reserved their criticisms until she was out of hearing.

On the morning after receiving the note, Wishart came down to his morning meal in a medley of conflicting emotions. By that time he knew the wording of the missive by rote. Yet the reiteration of her last sentence kept him steady. She was sure, she had said, that he would not misunderstand her. It did not prevent his heart from beating a trifle more quickly when he entered the room, but he realised the extent of his excitement only when he saw she was not there. He glanced up anxiously every time the door opened, but, though he dawdled over his tasteless meal until he had jeopardised his first business appointment for the day, her chair remained empty.

He was rather inclined to resent her absence. She ought to have known, he told himself, that in such a house of Paul Prys it was out of the question for him to ask for her pointedly. Yet without seeing her how was he to know at what time and where they were to meet? He decided to write a note, and went into the library with that intention. And there he saw her. She was seated alone at the writing-table when he entered, but seeing who it was, she rose quickly to her feet and crumpled a sheet of paper in her hand. There was a bright colour on her cheeks, and for the first time since he had known her he beheld her nervous. "I was just writing you a note," she began in some confusion.

"But why?" he asked. "You knew I should wait to see you." His well-bred tact rose to the occasion, smothering a fierce delight that had begun to surge through his veins, and urging him to the one task of

putting her at her ease. She met the friendliness of his glance with a full gaze.

"I thought I had done a very brazen thing," she said frankly, "and I was having the good grace to be heartily ashamed of myself. To tell you the truth, I tried to get my note back last night, but you went to bed so early that Monica couldn't get there in time for me."

"Then you *did* think I should misunderstand you?"

"No, . . . well, perhaps I did a little. I don't know." She looked up at him with a mingling of perplexity and defiance.

"It was wrong of you if you did," he said gravely. "I thought it was awfully decent of you. If you regret it . . . if you want your note back . . ."

"Oh no, unless you think it was fast of me."

"That's surely not a word any one could ever associate with you, Miss Dittany; but your sensitiveness makes it tremendously difficult for me to have to say that I'm afraid I shan't be able to come. You'll think, I know . . ."

"I quite understand," she said hurriedly. A biting of her lip and a flash of mortified pride in her eye eloquently gave the lie to her spoken word.

"No, you don't," he answered firmly. There was a quiet masterfulness in his tone that conquered her. She glanced up at him expectantly. "You understand so little that, however hard it is for me to say it, I'm going to tell you. I'm down on my luck, Miss Dittany. The suit I'm wearing is the last I have in the world, and it's not fit for a man to be seen in with you. It's below the standard of Kennington even. My boots are split, as you've probably noticed, and my hat . . ."

She waited for him to finish, but when he paused she looked up with a smile.

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"Not nearly. I'm not exactly the Gospel according to St Paquin myself."

"Oh, but . . ."

"Then what time will you be ready? The tickets are for the first house."

"Will a quarter past six do?"

"Quite well. We had better not go out of here together. Say Kennington Church."

"And you're sure you don't mind being seen with me?"

"You're the only one in this house I would care to be seen with."

The day passed for Wishart with the slowness of eternity. He had excused himself hurriedly from the girl, telling her that he was already due at New Cross. From the window she could see him race down the road and board a south-bound tram. Then, without remembering she had missed her breakfast, she mounted the stairs tremulously, and quickly slipping on her hat and coat she darted out of the house. Very guiltily, with one eye fixed on the corner round which Neil Wishart had disappeared, she waited for a Brixton car. She took a penny ticket, and when she alighted she still looked round her nervously as if fearing pursuit. There was reason for her anxiety, for she read Wishart's character well enough to know that what she was doing would never have been forgiven by him. She hurried into the box office, the doors of which were just opening. "I want two stalls for first house to-night," she said.

"18 and 19, third row. Three shillings."

She glanced at the tickets, and slipped them into her bag with a sigh of relief. There was nothing on them to show they had been vulgarly purchased.

All day long Anne Dittany wondered at herself. She marvelled at her excitement, and had moments of deep self-abasement for what she called her "cheek." "Whatever must he think of me?" was her constant question. Gradually it became borne in upon her that what Neil Wishart thought of her was becoming of paramount importance. That, properly speaking, if she failed to put a severe check upon herself, it would become the only important thing in her colourless life.

Yet in the end a spirit of recklessness beat down both her pride and her prudence. In less than a week her father would have joined her. The fight would have commenced—the long stern duty of piecing together a broken life. For one wild night she would live. A smile, as near to a sarcastic sneer as her gentle lips could shape themselves, flickered round her mouth as the thought crossed her mind. Live! The Brixton Empire and a penny tram ride “Life”! That she—Nan Dittany—who had queenied it in her time with the best society that a great provincial metropolis has to offer, should have sunk so low as to be content—nay, excited even—at the prospect of a suburban music hall, seemed to her to mark the ebb-tide of respectability. She had not yet come to realise that she was at the flood and not the ebb; that it is the colouring of Love that makes a paradise of poverty. She might have reached the explanation if she had figured in her mind the substitution of, say, Mr Venables for young Wishart; but she was not analytical. It was enough for her to wonder that the crippled hours loitered through a long morning to an interminable afternoon. She could only attribute it to her weary months of drudgery, and that modern scapegoat—nerves.

CHAPTER IV.

NEIL WISHART finished his work early, and put his key in the door as Kennington Church chimed half-past five. Throughout the day he had walked on air. He had met his rebuffs and disappointments with such a cheerful face that his very light-heartedness had brought him actual success in one case, and several hopeful promises. He began to learn the truth that a smile and a brisk step are of more avail than all the dogged plodding in the world.

There was a letter waiting for him in the rack, and it gave him his first set-back. It came from the Secretary of his company, and he read it with more irritation than despondency. "Dear Sir" (it read), "the Directors request me to inform you that they regret the results of your work do not justify them in continuing your allowance for expenses. I therefore enclose, in addition to this week's money, one pound in lieu of the usual week's notice, making two pounds in all. If, however, you care to continue to represent us on a commission basis, we can arrange to allow you an extra 5% on new business and 2½% on renewals."

The climax brought a savage recklessness in its train. He fingered the postal orders with a jubilant feeling that, for this one night at all events, he could play his part. He slipped out quickly and cashed them at the post office. The unaccustomed jingle of gold in his pocket fired him. Suddenly the world had become an easy thing to conquer. In ways different therefore, though curiously similar, he and Nan set out separately

for their secret rendezvous, both imbued with abandonment to the fever of the present moment. The rain had once more set in, but they recked nothing of it.

He was waiting for her when her quick, light footsteps approached. She was dressed plainly in a neat serge costume, and wore a large black hat with a single feather of the same hue. This was the first time he had seen her outside the house, and as she neared him he became aware that she possessed the rare accomplishment of knowing how to walk. She held out her little gloved hand rather timidly.

"Am I late?" she asked. The words came merely from the need of saying something, for the great clock above them stared her in the face.

"Punctual to the minute," he replied. He took the umbrella from her hand, and held it carefully over her. "This flavour of conspiracy is very jolly," he went on as they crossed the road to the tram, "but on my word I don't know why we should pay such a compliment to the opinion of Alabaster Gardens."

"Oh, but think," she answered with a short laugh. "Fancy our reputation in the hands of Mr Venables and Miss Montrevor."

Wishart threw up his free hand with a gesture of despair.

"Don't think I'm complaining," he said. "I don't like to think we're running away from such a crew. That's all. Here's our car."

"Will you take charge of these tickets?" She put an envelope into his hand, and he slipped it into his pocket. Conversation drooped and stopped during their short ride. The curious sense of proximity made their hearts beat faster; each, profoundly conscious of the other's presence, was making an effort to assume a cloak of indifference. It was a difficult task, for the car was crowded, and her elbow rested lightly on his arm, rousing all the magnetism of a newborn love.

What particular items constituted the programme Wishart could not have said. He only knew they laughed consumedly at the feeblest jokes of the com-

edians and the crudest antics of the knockabout turns. Once or twice he was conscious of a flush of indignation at a double-entendre or a more than usually vulgar witticism; but all the time the fever was rising, and their eyes danced with the joy of children out of school. The rain was falling in a steady downpour when they came out and elbowed their way through the crowd that was waiting for the second house; yet they scarcely noticed. She slipped her arm through his.

"Now this is where I come in," he remarked when they had reached the street. "If I remember rightly, there's a little Swiss *café* somewhere about here where they do you really well for Brixton."

Nan Dittany drew back. "Oh no," she protested. "I'm not that sort . . ." He paused inquisitively. "I mean," she went on, "I don't want you to think that you must . . . that you've got to . . ."

"Nonsense!" he shouted boisterously. "I've struck oil to-day. My pockets are simply bulging with gold."

"Oh, but . . ." He felt her weakening, and taking her arm led her towards the door of a brilliantly lighted restaurant. A delicious sense of his mastery of her beat down the prickings of compunction. She who had prided herself on her self-control and independence—who had gloried for so long in her self-sufficiency and her superiority to the weaknesses common to her sex—found herself suddenly in the maelstrom of surrender. At the threshold of the *café* she hung back for one short second, but he refused to relax the pressure of his arm and drew her gently in.

"Just to please me," he said persuasively. "These times come only once or twice in a lifetime."

They found a secluded seat in the corner behind the counter.

"Table d'hôte." Wishart gave his order, wilfully oblivious to the angry shake of the head of the girl opposite him, and took up the wine list. Miss Dittany laid a protesting hand on his sleeve.

"No, not that," she whispered. "I must put some

limit on your extravagance." His grey eyes were twinkling with mischief.

"You're not going to show me up in front of that greasy little waiter," he said. The man came up and began to set the *hors d'œuvres* as he spoke. "Now then, Burgundy, hock, or claret? Rather leave it to me. Well, look here, waiter, bring a bottle of No. 18."

"Yes, sir, nombre 18. Vill you please to give me the money? Ve 'ave no licence."

The girl noticed the sovereign which Wishart placed on the cloth, and it put her a little more at ease, though she rebuked him when the man had gone.

"Do you know I'm very angry with you?" she said severely.

"I hope not."

"You make me feel sorry I asked you to take me. I shall never be able to ask you again."

"Not if I promise this shall be the very last example of riotous living? Come, little girl, don't let us always be tied to sordid care. Let's revel for once in all the magnificence of a two-shilling *table d'hôte*."

She caught the shade of sarcasm, and the inference that perhaps her agitated economy implied an insult.

"It will cost you ten shillings," she said; "and ten shillings is a lot when . . . when you're on the rocks."

"Did I say that?" he asked gaily. "Try some of this potato salad with the fish. It's not at all bad. But, then, I also said I had struck oil."

"Oh, I hope that's really true," she cried earnestly.

He laughed recklessly. "'Unborn To-morrow and dead Yesterday, why fret about them if To-day be sweet?'" He quoted the couplet hilariously.

"You're fond of Omar."

"I ought to be. Old Professor Effington used to say it is the philosophy of the very young and the very happy, and just now I'm both."

She looked up with a troubled eagerness.

"Effington . . . of Cambridge?"

"Yes; you don't know him?"

"We did. Then you were at Cambridge?"

"Yes," he replied. A frown came between his eyes, and he toyed with the crumbs on the cloth. The girl, too, looked down, and a sense of some shameful reticence fell between them. Wishart roused himself with an effort. "Behold Jove's cup-bearer!" he said. The jocularity was palpably forced, and he waited till the man had filled the glasses and departed. He raised his to the level of his lips and looked at his companion over the rim of the glass.

"What is the toast to be?" he asked. "Shall I be gallant after the French manner—'To your eyes, mademoiselle, to your eyes!'—or succinct in the Venabelian style, and say, 'Well, 'ere's to yer'?"

"*A la Venables*," she said, "for preference. It seems more suited to Brixton." She laughed merrily.

"Brixton!" he cried. "Where's Brixton? This is the Savoy, and the Earl of Alabaster pledges the Countess of Kennington in Grand Marnier. True, there is a gentleman over there cleaning up his gravy with a piece of bread, but we ignore him. He is probably nothing but an American millionaire. To your eyes, then, mademoiselle!"

She made him a mock bow of slow stateliness, catching the infection of his high spirits. Yet to neither of them was the farce so far-fetched as to seem ridiculous. Looking across the table at the handsome reckless face, Nan Dittany could hardly bring herself to believe she saw before her the same quiet depressed youth whom she met day by day at the table in Alabaster Gardens. The shabbiness of the threadbare clothes faded into obscurity, and she could see nothing but the refinement and breeding of the face, the strong masculinity of the mouth and chin, and the kindly laughing eyes. And as for Wishart, he was seated with a goddess.

But even two-shilling *tables d'hôte* have an end sometime, and the very best of Swiss *cafés*, rose-tinted though they may be with love, have to close at unromantic hours. It was nearly eleven when they stirred in their seats, and the lights were being turned down. The rain was hissing on the glass skylight. "No, I

didn't have a coat," Wishart said curtly to the waiter.
"Get me a taxi."

Nan Dittany caught the rapid disdainful inspection which the man gave to his customer's clothes, and noted the supercilious smile on his lips as he hurried to the door to whistle a cab. She felt a bitterness of resentment which she was not able to analyse, and could have struck his grinning evil face as he bowed them out.

A sudden swerve of the cab brought her to a consciousness of her surroundings. It threw her against him. He supported her gently with his arm, and she made no offer to move.

"You're quiet, little girl," he said.

"Am I?" she asked. "I think I'm a little tired."

He drew her more closely to his side. Little by little her head fell to his shoulder, and he bent his face to hers till he could feel the soft breath coming from her parted lips. His own heart was thumping furiously. His lips touched hers, and then she tore herself free from his grasp. She sat erect, panting, looking out of the far window.

"This is madness," she cried—"stark raving madness. We are two fools. Oh, it isn't fair."

"Fair?" he echoed. He released the hand he had been holding. "You're quite right," he continued coldly. "I forgot myself."

She turned again to him with uncontrolled emotion.

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I'm always hurting you. It isn't fair of me. You can't understand. I'm not what you think I am. I ought to have thought. It was wrong of me to ask you to come."

She buried her face in her hands, and he tried ineffectually to unclasp them.

"Listen," he said. "Quickly, for we're almost there. You think I have treated you lightly. I want you to believe me . . . to understand. I love you, dear. I know I've no right to tell you . . . my position and all that sort of thing, you know. But if I had you to work for it would be all so different. Nothing would

be impossible. Darling, tell me you know . . . you understand."

"No, no, no. It can't be. It's quite impossible. Here we are. Let me go—oh, please let me go."

The cab had drawn up at the well-known door. He alighted and handed her out, and they went up the steps silently together. Monica was standing at the open door with an expression of anxiety on her stolid face.

"Oh, miss, I'm so glad you've come. Your father's in the drorin'-room. He's bin waitin' these three hours."

CHAPTER V.

NAN DITTANY walked straight to the door of the drawing-room, and, turning the handle, paused with her hand on the knob as the sound of uproarious laughter reached her from within. Wishart left her without saying good-night, and went up the stairs to his own apartment. The girl wanted time to steady herself for the coming ordeal. Her father had arrived so unexpectedly, and she was still panting from the emotion of the experience through which she had just passed. Although it was not her fault that she had been out, she felt a stab of compunction at the thought that she had not been there to welcome him. Her manner to the broken man, and the gentle tactful things she was going to say to him to ease his shame, had been carefully rehearsed ; but she had pictured a quiet meeting at Euston, where she could soften the keen edge of their reunion before acting the part they would be called upon to play,—where she could brace him up before displaying him to the sordid world in which she had cast her lot.

The position now shocked her. Through the crack of the partially opened door she heard his well-known voice, but it was not sad or subdued as she had so often imagined it. The few words she caught were uttered in the tones she knew so well—masterful, a little cynical, and perfectly self-possessed.

In the pause following a roar of laughter she heard him clearly as he raised his voice to quell the din.

"Yes, but wait a minute, gentleman," he was saying, "the point of the joke is this, that she wasn't his wife at all."

A fresh crash of applause burst out, and through it she could hear the raucous voice of Mr Venables with his "Brayvo, brayvo; damned good!"

A sickening intuition made her throw the door wide open. The room was dim with smoke. Her father was standing on the rug with his back to the fire. Lounging round the room with the unmistakable air of sycophants were Mr Venables and the gloomy actor, the manager of the cigar divan, and the red-headed youth from the North; all smoking cigars, and all obviously ready to applaud the lightest word of the man who dominated them. She stood for a second before they noticed her. The foundations of her sympathy were suddenly undermined, and her sense of disillusionment was increased by the alteration which the growth of a beard had made in the appearance of her father. Surely the debonair, smiling man, who stood there before her, was never the man who had been so tortured. She looked for the haunting remorse, for the broken and the contrite heart, and although she had dreaded the sight of them, a momentary illogical anger swept over her that they were not there.

"Father!" she said quietly, when the noise had died down.

"Why, my girl," he said, coming forward.

He embraced her tenderly, and kissed her on the lips.

She was very pale now, and quiet.

"You should have told me you were coming," was all she said.

She felt herself trembling. A wave of indignation surged through her breast at the ill-bred coarseness of her father's audience in making no offer to leave them alone. Indeed, with the exception of Mr St Quentin the actor, not one of them rose to his feet when she entered.

"I thought I would give you a pleasant surprise," her father replied. "But never mind, my dear; these gentlemen have been giving me a most delightful evening."

"Tother way round, miss," ejaculated Venables. "I ain't ever laughed so much in my life. Mr Dittany, sir, I'm proud to meet you, and I 'ope we shall 'ave the pleasure of your company for a long time to come. Mr Dittany, sir, 'ere's to yer."

Nan's scornful glance fell for an instant on the speaker, and took in the bottle of whisky, nearly empty, which stood on the table beside him. From her knowledge of the penurious habits of Alabaster Gardens, she guessed who had provided it, and the big cigars they were all smoking.

"Just a few words, dad," she said. "Come into the writing-room for a minute. We must see if Mrs Duke has your room ready."

"I've fixed all that up, little girl. You'll excuse us, gentlemen, won't you?"

Nan led her father to the smaller room on the first landing, and he opened the door to let her pass in. In the turmoil of her thoughts she had forgotten Neil Wishart, and she drew back with some embarrassment at the sight of him sitting there. The young man sprang to his feet. "I'm just going, Miss Dittany," he said.

With a heightened colour Nan introduced the two men. They were of equal height, and looked each other squarely in the eyes. With a few conventional words Wishart passed out of the room, and left them alone.

The ex-convict signed to his daughter to take a chair, and seated himself on the opposite side of the table.

"I like the look of that boy," he said. "I'm glad you've got at least one gentleman in the place."

Nan was conscious of a keen scrutinising glance searching the obvious confusion in her face. She turned the subject.

"I'm awfully vexed you were left with those dreadful men, dad."

"For your sake, my dear, I had to keep up appearances. Don't think I blame you for being out. I ought to have wired you."

"It was the first time for months."

"With this Mr Wishart, I take it?"

"Yes."

"You're your own mistress, Nan. I quite trust your discretion."

With a complex sensation compounded of chagrin, relief, and mystery, Nan felt her carefully arranged plans slipping from beneath her feet. Her growing maternal instinct, her schemes for the care of a ruined life, and the patching up of a broken heart, seemed somehow ludicrous. She knew in a flash that her father was still master of himself and of her. Why the fact alarmed her she could not even guess, but at the back of her mind was the knowledge that only in remorse would she find any guarantee of a clean straight future.

Believing that contrition must be there, she made one desperate attempt to bring it into light.

"Father," she began timidly, stretching a hand to him across the table.

"What is it, my child?" He smiled at her, and fondled the fingers that gripped him.

"This isn't the sort of meeting I had pictured. You think I am cold . . . that I don't know . . . I don't care . . ."

He patted her hand affectionately.

"Yes, little girl; I quite understand. Come, don't let us have sentiment. Emotion is not for the greater tragedies of life. We have to be brave. Things will all come right again. This wretched business has done me good."

"Oh, if I could think so."

"Of course you can think so. My brain is clearer. I made one mistake, and I shall never make another of the same kind. I have left all that behind me with the name of Bevington. I'm not beaten yet, Nan. I'll tell you all my plans to-morrow. You're tired and upset to-night. It was a grand move of yours to take your mother's name. It shall be mine now. Here in London no one will know us. The only possible danger will come from that rascal, Roger Tregarth."

She looked at him with a little frown of doubt. In his strong virile features she could read pride and deter-

mination, and his eyes were clear and strong ; but as yet she had seen no sign of shame. It was a "mistake" he had made. That was the word he had used, and she bit her lip at the sound of it.

"Is Tregarth out ?" she asked.

"Next week," he replied. "But he can't possibly trace me, with all his damnable cleverness. I managed to exchange a few words with him in chapel one day, and I told him we were going to America."

"Does it matter so very much whether he finds us or not ?"

"It *will* matter very considerably."

Nan puzzled over this, and could reach only one conclusion.

"Has he a grievance, dad ? You didn't do him an injury ?"

"On the contrary, my dear, I did all I could to save him, and you see the result."

"Then I don't understand. Dad, what was really the truth of that matter ? Does it hurt you to talk about it ?"

"Hurt me, my dear ? Of course not. Why should it ? My conscience is clear. But didn't you read my defence ?"

"Oh, I tried to, but I couldn't take it in. It was so complicated, and I was too ill. I only understood . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished, and the shudder that he noticed seemed to anger him.

"It was clear enough. *You* at least should have tried to master the details of my defence, and found the excuse ?"

"Excuse, dad ? Excuse ? I love you. Why use such a word as excuse ?"

"Then you ought to have known me well enough to be sure I would never do such a thing as to cook a public balance-sheet."

"Forgive me, dad. At the bottom of my heart I did know it, but . . ."

"I'm not quite such a fool. It was bound to be found out."

The look of eagerness which had lighted up her face faded away, and a heavy sigh shook her.

Her father noticed it petulantly, but he went on with his recital.

"Tregarth cooked it. I had too many irons in the fire, and as secretary I trusted him too implicitly."

"But they say you must have known it."

"As a matter of fact I detected the fraud just half an hour before the Board meeting. Think of the alternatives. On the one hand certain bankruptcy, on the other a bare chance of smuggling the thing through, and pulling the concern round afterwards. The bare chance didn't come off; that was all."

Nan looked at him piteously. "I don't understand these things," she said.

"Of course you don't. And there's another aspect of it. Our opponents were an unscrupulous gang of thieves. They forced our stock down with lying reports. But friend Bevington was too much for them." He spoke with a laugh. "When the crash came they were the only sufferers."

"The only sufferers?"

"Of the creditors, I mean. They found themselves dished."

Nan sat for awhile in silence, drumming her fingers on the table. Her tacit rebuke was slowly rousing her father's wrath.

"Then why do you fear Tregarth?" she asked.

"I didn't say I feared him, but he may be a dangerous element when I have established myself again."

"In what way?"

"As a blackmailer. I don't imagine he will stick at that if he finds me. He comes out quite penniless. Look here, Nan. These matters are quite beyond you. You only annoy me by referring to them. Back your father up. There is going to be a social side to my scheme, and you will shine there, as you always did. If you go in for the tears and sighs you can merely hinder me. I could weep on your neck and beg you to forgive me for the wrong I have done you, but what good would

it do? I've made a mistake. Granted. Then I will be a man, and get on my feet again. Good lord, girl, what would you have me do? Sit with a Bible before me, and sigh for my lost reputation? I'm a fighter, Nan. I've made money before—honestly too—and I can do it again. Come, it's too late to sit arguing. To-morrow I'll tell you all I have planned, and there's a lot of typing I want you to do."

She left her seat and, coming round to his side, slipped an arm about his neck. He patted her hand mechanically, and rose to go.

"To-morrow, then," he said. "And, by the bye, I've told the woman here that I'm taking you away. Now, not a word. It's no sort of place for a daughter of mine"

CHAPTER VI.

ALTHOUGH in the course of his brief greeting Neil Wishart had kept his end up with the courteous Mr Dittany, he had been very glad to escape. There was something in the smiling penetration of the older man's glance that gave him a feeling of detection. He was already mentally kicking himself for losing his head in the cab, but apart from that he was very conscious of the same depth and mystery in the father's eyes that he had seen in the daughter's, yet without their sympathy. There was a mocking cynical light in them which left him angry and abashed. As he went up the stairs he wondered whether he had shown up well before the girl he loved, or if he had looked the fool he felt.

The madness of the whole escapade came vividly before him. He knew that it was only the common-sense of Nan herself that had saved him from the consequences of his folly. In the half minute that it took him to reach his bedroom he touched the lowest depths of humiliation. He had not played the game. The money he had swaggered with in front of Miss Dittany was not his own. It should have been paid to Mrs Duke for his arrears of rent. He even thought of that. He particularly cursed himself for his indiscretion in driving the girl right up to the door. He knew that by this time the news was all over the boarding establishment. Mrs Duke herself would know it, and would probably show him up publicly when the time came for him to make the shameful confession that he had come to the end of his tether.

His mind flashed to another point of danger, namely, that matter of Professor Effington—a man known to the Dittanys, and a man who could tell them something about himself, false certainly, but utterly damning.

When the morning came he had made up his mind to have it out with Mrs Duke at once, and leave. He had enough left in his pocket to pay her all but five shillings of the two weeks owing. What he was going to do afterwards he was too fevered to think.

There was a full complement of boarders at the breakfast-table when he descended for his last miserable meal, and he was immediately conscious of an atmosphere charged with electricity. Miss Montrevor whispered eagerly to Mr St Quentin, and Venables winked solemnly to the red-headed youth at the far end. The Dittanys came down a minute after him. The father nodded over to him in perfect friendliness, and Nan bowed with a bright smile.

The first rumble of the coming storm was the terrifying portent of the appearance of Mrs Duke in person. She sailed into the room grimly, and took her seat at the head of the table with an aggressive silence. The trapeze artiste gushed over her enthusiastically.

"Well, to think of that now, dear!" she cried. "This is an honour! Mr Dittany ought to feel flattered, I'm sure."

She had been already ogling the newcomer, and turned a languishing glance in his direction as she spoke. But Mrs Duke was proof against her blandishments.

"Let them be pleased as likes to be," she remarked oracularly.

"Got a 'eadache, dear?" inquired Miss Montrevor anxiously.

"My 'ead was never better in my life." The landlady stirred her cup venomously, and the meal went on in silence for a minute.

"I trust you slept well, sir?" Mrs Duke addressed her question to the new boarder, with an expression on her face which signified a savage hope that he had done nothing of the kind.

"Like the dead, madam," replied Mr Dittany. He

seemed to be finding some quiet amusement in the situation.

"Well, it ain't the fault o' some people." She glowered at Wishart, and although he took no direct notice of her, he showed his annoyance by an obvious self-consciousness. Mrs Duke was the sort of person who preferred to talk at a boarder rather than to him. Her censorious remarks were boomerangs which took all kinds of oblique curves before striking her victims.

"I can't wonder at it," she went on, speaking generally, "that some people gives notice as soon as ever they sets foot inside the blessed door."

"What's the matter, dear?" asked Miss Montrevor, who knew the value of a timely fillip to her landlady's indignation. She had finished her breakfast, but she was enjoying the prospect of a scandal too keenly to leave the table, and pushed up her cup for more tea.

"Matter? Oh, nothing's the matter. I suppose I'm too partikler, that's what it is. I suppose I ought to shut my eyes and not know nothing about the goings on of people. I suppose when people goes drinking bottles of wine and eating French dinners which they can't afford, along with young ladies what slips out of the 'ouse unbeknowns, when they ought to be at 'ome to meet their pa's, not to speak of cabs and suchlike things—I suppose I didn't ought to say nothing."

"You're upset, dearie," said Miss Montrevor unnecessarily.

"Oh no, I ain't. I ain't upset. I'm enjoying it. It suits me to 'ave disagreeables in my 'ouse. I like 'aving a gentleman what *is* a gentleman come all the way from America to find his daughter out and give me notice on the spot. I ain't upset, my dear. Ho, no."

The effect of this torrential outburst on the boarders round the table was marked and varied. Miss Montrevor shook with delight. Mr Venables and the actor winked at each other, and the youth at the far end of the room watched the proceedings open-mouthed, and cracked his knuckles with nervous trepidation. Nan Dittany sat white and trembling with indignation. The

amusement had faded from her father's face; his eyes narrowed dangerously, and his lips twisted in sarcastic contempt.

Wishart looked up with a vivid flush on his cheeks.

"If you are referring to me, Mrs Duke," he said, "please to have the decency to say what you have to say in private."

The angry virago abandoned her flanking operations, and projected a frontal attack.

"I dessay, young man. But *I ain't* ashamed of anything I've got to say, if you are. Open and above board *I am*. You comes to me with your la-de-da apologies about keeping me waiting two weeks for my rent, and all the time you're taking a lady, what ought to be at home waiting for her pa, to French caffies, with wine and cabs and suchlike extravagances, as if you'd got the wealth o' Cæsar."

"Would you mind leaving my daughter out of the matter?"

Mrs Duke blazed round to the new enemy, but something in his face cowed her. Nan rose hurriedly to her feet and fled from the room.

"I wasn't blaming 'er, Mr Dittany; 'ow was she to know what 'e was?"

"I fancy you have shown us pretty accurately what you are, madam. If you will let me have your bill, I will settle at once. One week for each of us, I believe, in lieu of notice."

Wishart went up to his room two stairs at a time, and began packing his box with a feverishness that did not allow him to calculate that he would not be permitted to take it away. With a mighty wrench he broke the cord, and stood with the fragment in his hand, biting his lip in an agony of shame and anger. Curiously enough Mrs Duke and her vulgar tirade had momentarily faded from his mind; he remembered only the look he had seen on the face of Nan Dittany. While he wondered what course of reparation and apology he ought to pursue, he heard a knock on his door, and in

answer to his query came the pleasant and cultured voice of Mr Dittany, asking if he could come in.

"Packing, of course," he remarked genially. "No one could put up with a damned insult like that." He sat himself on the unmade bed, and offered the other a cigarette. "I came up," he went on, "because it occurred to me that perhaps you would be blaming yourself for this unfortunate contretemps."

"And don't you think I ought to?"

"By no means. My daughter has told me all about it, and if any one is to blame, she is. But that isn't all I wanted to say. How are you placed for work to-day? I want to have a serious word with you. Can you meet me in town?"

"Easily. As a matter of fact I'm sacked."

Mr Dittany nodded pleasantly. "That makes your desperate adventure of last night explicable. Meet me at one o'clock outside Simpson's in the Strand. Don't take it as a promise, but it's possible I may be able to put something in your way."

"Really? But why should you, sir?"

"Because I've taken a fancy to you, and because I am under an obligation to you for introducing a little pleasure into my girl's monotonous life. I never forget that sort of thing, Mr Wishart. Now, not a word. One o'clock outside Simpson's."

Neil Wishart saw no more that morning of Miss Dittany, nor did he make any attempt to intercept her. By intuition he knew that she was furiously angry with him, and although her father's words had soothed his wounded feelings to some extent, he still knew she had every reason to be. His only anxiety was to escape the house.

He guessed by the frantic stampede of the slatternly Monica from the basement to the hall directly he opened the front door that she had been deputed to watch lest he should escape with his few belongings; but he found himself quite indifferent to the insult. The sunshine of a glorious May morning filled him with hope. He felt the unaccustomed weight of loose silver in his pocket,

and some instinct told him that the bad times were nearing their close. There had been something about Mr Dittany that made him trust the man's half promise more than he would another's solemn oath. He told himself that such a man must have something definite in view for him to have spoken at all.

He walked into town; he had three hours to waste before he was due in the Strand. As he strode along he thought a good deal of the man he was going to meet. He had already arrived at a state of mind nearly approaching hero-worship. The look he had seen in Mr Dittany's eyes—so much like Nan's—half-tender and half-mocking, would have been quite enough to win him over; and there was a kindness, a culture, and a fascination in his voice which brought him enthusiastically to his knees as an ardent worshipper. The bare fact that the man was the father of such a girl was enough to invest him in Neil's eyes with the attributes of a god.

CHAPTER VII.

THE hours passed like an eternity, and weeks seemed to have gone by before, standing where the brilliant sunshine did not show up too acutely the shabbiness of his clothes, he saw Mr Dittany's tall, lounging figure making its way across the road to him.

"I'm not quite punctual, I'm afraid," said Nan's father as he grasped the other's hand; "but I've had a frantically busy morning. Now we'll have a little lunch—and suchlike extravagances, as if we had the wealth o' Cæsar. Are you game, my boy?"

Wishart had to smile, though he winced a little at the reminiscence of Mrs Duke's outburst, and murmured some thanks and apologies as he followed his host through the swing doors into the grill-room.

"You have left Alabaster Gardens?" he asked, when they were seated.

"Well, naturally. I had no idea my poor little girl had been roughing it in a place like that. You wonder why, probably. The fact is, Mr Wishart, I have been abroad. A year ago I met with some reverses in business. She's got a heart of gold, that little girl, and she jumped to the conclusion it was necessary to economise."

Mr Dittany scrutinised his companion's face to see the effect of his explanation, but there was no need for his anxiety. To the lad's unsuspicious mind, whatever the Dittanys did was sure to be right and honourable.

"It's just the sort of thing she would do," he said enthusiastically.

"Ah, you've found that out? But that's all over now. I have just taken a little furnished flat at the back of the Abbey—small but convenient—you must come and see us when we have shaken down. Now what are we going to have? Something simple for me. A nice underdone steak and a foaming tankard of bitter with beaded bubbles winking at the brim, and, waiter, take this sixpence to the chef with my compliments." He turned to Wishart. "But don't accept my plebeian tastes as an example necessarily to be followed."

"No, really, Mr Dittany, I much prefer it."

"Right then. Two steaks, waiter. Now, Mr Wishart, I gather from what you said to me this morning that you are open to accept a congenial post. I am starting in business in London, and I want a private secretary. Will you give me a trial?"

The boy's face lit up excitedly, and his reply came stumbling.

"It's awfully decent of you, Mr Dittany . . . but really . . . you don't know anything about me, you see."

"When I have talked to a man for ten minutes, Mr Wishart, I know all that matters about him. Now look here. The post isn't a good one at first; it depends on you what you make of it afterwards. I offer you plenty of hard and varied work. Your time will never be your own. There are no office hours. And the salary to start with will be only fifteen pounds a month."

"But references, Mr Dittany?"

"Never mind about references, my boy. I take it you have done something to bring you into your present position. What is it?"

Wishart coloured deeply, keeping his eyes on the table. "I was sent down from Cambridge," he faltered.

"For what reason?"

"Because I was accused of stealing . . . taking money from a man's room."

"And it was false?"

"Before God, it was false."

He raised his head, and met the older man's gaze with flashing eyes.

"I'm going to believe you," said Mr Dittany. "It was rough luck."

He stretched his delicate hand across the table, and at the sympathetic pressure the lad's eyes filled with tears.

"Come; don't be upset." Mr Dittany went on. "I'm going to show my confidence in you by placing you in charge of great responsibilities. By the bye, here's my new address in case of accident. And now I'm going to give you your first month's salary in advance."

"No, but really . . ."

"Not a word. You must settle up with that wretched Duke woman—my daughter's honour, you understand—and you must present an appearance suitable to my employment. I mean no offence. Count these notes and see that they are right. No; I want no receipt. If I didn't trust you implicitly all the receipts in the world wouldn't do me any good. I'm willing to back my confidence to the extent of a trifle like that."

To Neil Wishart's inexperienced mind it seemed that his benefactor was rambling on from the generous motive of putting him at his ease, and the notion sent up his admiration and respect to fever heat. He could hardly be blamed for failing to see that with an unerring reading of his character Mr Dittany was riveting fetters on the devotion of his service with every word that he spoke; congratulating himself all the while that Fate should have thrown in his way such an unsuspecting young fool whose breeding and presence could be purchased at a price so much below the market value of those rare commodities. With the vanity of youth in love he ascribed his good fortune to Nan's liking (he dared not as yet call it by a stronger name) for him, and to Nan's influence over her father; and his heart was bursting with gratitude.

Mr Dittany was an excellent talker, and when he

talked for effect, as he was doing now, he was irresistible. The worldly wisdom of his conversation, tinged with cynicism, yet on occasion righteously indignant with rougery and sharp practice, and interlarded with subtle compliments, gave the lad an impression of a monarch among men, of a leader a man might be proud to follow to the death.

When they had ended their meal they rose to go. Wishart inquired about the commencement of his new duties. He was burning with eagerness to make a start. He was in the state of mind when he would have gladly addressed envelopes, run errands, or done the most menial task it had pleased his employer to set him. Mr Dittany smiled approval at his zeal. "I can see," he said with a laugh, "that you'll keep me awake at nights cudgelling my ingenuity to find something for you to do next. But we must walk before we can run. In the campaign I am beginning I have to get a capable and devoted staff round me. Now that I have made such an excellent start in securing a chief the rest will be easy. No, my boy, there's nothing more we can do to-day. Run down to Kennington and settle up there, and then get yourself a new outfit. You'll have to find fresh quarters, too—this side of the river, if you don't mind, somewhere about Bloomsbury way for preference. That will keep you busy for the rest of the day, and you can meet me to-morrow morning at ten—outside the Post Office at Charing Cross, the one opposite the station, you know."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Mr Dittany had left Wishart, he went straight to Charing Cross Station to meet Nan by appointment. She was walking to and fro beneath the clock, and although her father was barely three minutes late, she had already glanced anxiously at the dial a dozen times. Her face lightened when she saw him coming, but she looked at him nervously.

So far he had given her no chance of exercising that care over him which she had rehearsed during the tedious months of his imprisonment. On the contrary, he had ordered her comings and goings with a higher hand than ever. Up till now neither of them had even hinted at money matters; she from a delicacy of perception, and he, probably, from mere carelessness. Yet money would have to be hinted at, and quickly, at the pace he was setting. Two weeks' board absolutely thrown away, and quite unnecessary cab fares—these were luxuries that must be nipped in the bud at once if they would avoid total disaster. Nan could hardly help feeling a glow of pride and satisfaction at her father's prompt revenge for Mrs Duke's insult, but she was compelled to tell herself that it was dearly bought. She had expected every minute he would ask her for money, and that was to be the occasion of her gentle protest and warning. She could not believe he had much. As far as she knew, every penny had gone in the tragic crash. She understood prisoners earned a little, but there had been his railway fare from the North, which must have absorbed the greater part of that. Yet she had seen

him leap into a cab at Kennington with all his old insouciance, and with the same frolicsome wave of the hand that she had seen hundreds of times in the old days when he had mounted his own car in his own carriage drive.

"Here are the cloak-room tickets, dad. All the boxes are there."

"No trouble, Nan?"

"A little scene with the penitent Mrs Duke. Where are we going now?"

"Victoria, my dear. I've fixed everything up beautifully. You shall come and see."

"Pimlico, dad? Isn't it rather expensive?"

"Pimlico, child? Good lord, no. Close to the Park. You'll like it."

"But I don't understand. We can't afford to live near the Park. What are you paying?"

He squeezed her arm affectionately as they went slowly out into the station yard. He had an impulse to hail the first cab, but he had insight enough to see that she would have taken alarm at the very outset.

"We'll get a Number 11 'bus here that will take us almost to the door."

While they were rattling down Whitehall she turned to him.

"Dad," she said quietly, "I have saved just twenty pounds. You can have it, of course, but what are we going to do when it is gone?"

"Twenty pounds, Nan?" he smiled. "Why, that will last you quite a long time."

She had an uneasy consciousness that he was making fun of her. If he had known what it had cost her in drudgery and self-denial to make the nest-egg that he seemed to find so ludicrous, he would have realised what a stab the twinkle in his eye had given her. For once the man who could read the souls of people like open books was dense. At that moment he was thinking in thousands and dreaming in millions, and twenty pounds . . . he had treble that in his pocket-book at the moment. His smile was for the pleasant surprise he

was going to give the devoted girl when he broke the glorious news to her.

A boyish habit of springing surprises on people had Mr Dittany; and while Fortune had smiled on him, his trick of inventing practical jokes, which were all to the advantage of the victim, had sat lightly and gracefully on him. Bank-notes under breakfast plates, rushings up to London on delirious visits at twenty minutes' notice, unexpected reappearances when he had been away on business trips—all these lay fondly in Nan's recollection, and she had loved him for them. But now they seemed quite different—out of place, and in questionable taste. His incorrigibility had been shown by his surprise appearance at Alabaster Gardens, which had brought such an unpleasant sequel in its train. Now she seemed to know that he was preparing another of the same kind. What it was she could not imagine, but her heart was heavy with anxiety.

They left the 'bus by the Army and Navy Stores, and she followed him with a quickened pulse up the drive of a large block of mansions. Dittany watched the girl with a smile. "We have just one little call to make here, dear," he said, "and then we'll go and see the new shanty."

She laughed at herself for her fears. The idea that had come into her head would have been too preposterous, but it was the measure of her dread that she had even thought of such a thing.

A caretaker in gorgeous uniform came out from a little office, and saluting Mr Dittany with great respect, took a key from a peg, and led them up the magnificent carpeted staircase to a suite of rooms on the first floor. When he had unlocked the door he stood aside for them to enter, and Nan went in followed by her father. "What does it mean?" she asked wonderingly. "Whose place is this?"

Mr Dittany took her by the hand, and led her in. "Dearest girl," he said, "welcome to your new home."

"But, dad . . ."

She remembered the caretaker, and remained silent. Like a ghost she followed the two men round the luxurious apartments, pallid and quiet, taking outward note, and making audible comment on the things they pointed out to her, but inwardly stunned and confused, as if it were some disagreeable dream. She heard the arrangements her father was making. She heard the caretaker tell him that a Mr Nivens would be in his office at five, and that the lease would be all ready for signature ; she heard him ask him if he would like to take possession at once, and she took a dazed note of his reply that they were staying that night at Horrex's Hotel, and would come in the next day. An instinct warned her that though her father was doing this mad thing, she must not expose him before a stranger ; that she must pull her wits together and find some method of getting him away before this Mr Nivens came at five o'clock with the lease that was all ready for signature.

But when, presently, the man left them with the suggestion that perhaps they would prefer to wait there till Mr Nivens arrived, she sat herself stiffly on the edge of a Louis Quinze settee, and, fixing her eyes on his face, waited for her father to begin.

Mr Dittany, for his part, seemed troubled and annoyed. It was a remarkable thing in a man who was notorious for his swift, uncanny penetration of human beings and their motives, that his own daughter should be the only one who eluded his instinctive judgment. He had expected her to dance with delight. It had not entered his mind that she would be tossed about between the two alternatives of madness and criminality. Her pale face visibly annoyed him. The exciting of sudden delight was his great hobby, and he hated to be thwarted in it.

"Well?" he began impatiently. "You don't seem to be pleased with the place."

"I am waiting for an explanation," she replied. "I don't understand."

"Really, Nan, you might enter a little into my feelings. I have been building on this day ever since I

went away from you. I had a right to think you would be pleased."

"It seems to me like a mad nightmare. Where is the money coming from to pay even two weeks' rent of a place like this?"

Mr Dittany laughed easily. "What an economical little soul it is," he chuckled. "Look at this."

She took the piece of stamped paper which he held out to her, and she read it in utter bewilderment. "Received," it said, "the sum of £81, 18s.,—being the rental for one quarter in advance of No. 15 Flat, Palmyra Mansions, Westminster."

"But, father . . . you've no right . . . where did you get this money?"

"Really, child, why do you want to bother your head about business? It ought to be enough for you that the money is there—plenty of it."

"Then, father, let me say at once that it isn't enough. I want a full explanation."

She had risen to her feet while she spoke, and fronted him with set lips, and a frown between the eyes.

"And if I refuse to enlighten you . . . ?"

"If you refuse to enlighten me, I leave you, and go back to my typing and a boarding-house in the slums."

He looked at her for a moment in perplexity.

"Sit down, child, and be rational," he said at last. "What is it you don't understand?"

"Doubtless my woman's density. I don't understand how a bankrupt who owes his creditors thirty thousand pounds can afford to live in a place like this."

Her sarcastic intonation bit into him like acid, but he kept his temper with an effort.

"It simply means, my dear," he replied, "that, although I made one big mistake in life, I'm not necessarily a fool. It means that when I saw the crash coming I was wise enough to make a sensible provision for both of us. It means that I liquidated all the assets I could lay my hands on, and prepared for the day when I should be free."

"But it's not honest; the money isn't ours. Oh, dad,

I thought we had left all that sort of thing behind us. You've taken mother's name; you surely will pause before you . . . ”

He waited coldly for her to finish. “ Well ? ” he said.

“ Before you stain it as you stained your own.”

“ Thank you, Nan,” he said with concentrated quietness. “ Whatever the world said, I never thought I should live to hear it from my own daughter.”

She threw herself on him with fury. “ Don't cry to me for pity,” she said, blazing. “ I'm no longer a girl; I'm a hardened woman. If you had been in trouble or poverty, the rack would not have dragged out of me what I have just said. God knows that no word of reproach would ever have passed my lips. But you make a mock of my love and sympathy. You show me that what you did was no mistake, no slip ; that it is in you to do the same thing over again. Father, can't you see what it means to me ? Things are bad enough as it is, but how can I ever lift my head again when I know that you have learnt nothing, altered nothing ? ”

So far from suffering the access of rage which had threatened him when the girl began speaking, Mr Dittany entirely recovered his composure during the fevered outburst.

“ My dear,” he said at last calmly ; “ let's argue the matter.”

“ What argument can there be ? ”

“ Several. There are two sides to every question. In the first place, what are the alternatives ? This money I have put by. I gather that your idea is I ought to return it to Vance, Capper, & Co., who are practically my only creditors. Never mind the trifling fact that it was their swindling that brought about the whole miserable business. Very well, I send it back to them. It won't be one half of what I owe them ; but say I do. What then ? How am I going to live ? ”

Nan maintained a stubborn silence, and tapped her foot incessantly on the floor.

"No one is going to employ a man of fifty without references. I might sell matches or bootlaces . . ."

"There are many things you could do with your ability."

". . . Or I might live on you. In either case the end would be the same. The case is common enough to form an infallible rule. I should get despondent and shabby. I should wander from pub to pub borrowing half-crowns from any one fool enough to lend them to me. My self-respect would be gone."

Nan gazed up wonderingly. Gradually it was being borne in upon her that her father was a mystery. One glance was enough to show her that there was no conscious hypocrisy in his reference to self-respect. He stood before her proud and inflexible as ever, his handsome head thrown a little back and a rebellious wave of hair, a little grizzled now, falling in a boyish curl aslant his broad and open brow. Thoroughly as she thought she knew him, she now tried vainly to penetrate the secret of his character. Surely never since the world began was dishonesty cloaked in such a guise. She looked long and earnestly into the frank grey eyes. She marked their high intelligence and their kindness; she noted the full firmness of the lips, and the square determination of a chin which no beard could hide. A momentary doubt shot through her that she must be mistaken. He was quick to detect it, and pressed his advantage.

"The other point of view, Nan, is this. I have no wish to brag, but I can say without any fear of contradiction that I am a man who can make money if I have money. I don't say that at my age I could rise from the ground, but with a little capital anything is possible to me. My judgment has always been sound, and my abilities are as keen as ever. You may take my word for it that if the world is to forgive me, if you are to forgive me, and if I am to forgive myself, I must become rich again. Pity will kill me. You have shown signs of offering it to me, but I tell you once for all I will not

accept it from your hands. It's as well to understand each other at the outset. This is by the way. What I want to say is that I can make money, and when I have made money, I can pay back what I owe—not the fraction I could pay now, but all. Do you understand? All."

She clutched eagerly at the bait.

"And you will, dad? You promise me?"

"I shall do it without any promise, Nan."

The agitated girl failed to notice any possibility of evasion in the form of his reply. The colour came quickly back to her face, and she clasped his hand with emotion. He rose to the altered mood.

"I want your confidence, girlie. Without your support I shall be crippled and useless. I've only one aim in life: to reinstate ourselves in the world, so that we can once more lift up our heads; to pay off all I legally owe—that . . ."

"Only legally, dad?"

"It includes everything; I admit no moral debt to any one. That I say is my one care from this time forward. Above all, dear, I want to make you once more proud of your father. I want never again to hear you talk of a name stained . . ."

"Oh, don't."

"Then, my love, kiss me, and say that you will help me."

He was watching her face anxiously to see the effect of his words. They had been ardent enough to convince even himself, and he took it amiss that she did not at once fall into his arms with a cry for forgiveness. Much as she had hurt him he knew in his own heart that he was great-spirited enough to forgive her without a trace of grudging. She angered him with her incredible hesitation. She gave her cheek to him coldly.

"I want time to think," she said.

"I'm rather disappointed in you, Nan," he said after a pause. "Where am I to look for help and sympathy if not to you? I wonder if you know how lonely I really am."

He had touched the right chord at last. Loving and impulsive as she was, she had not analysed what it was she needed. The man, strong in himself, fighting with his back to the wall, asking no pity and giving none, had left her cold. But the cry of desolation which seemed to be wrung from his heart moved her beyond words. With a little consoling exclamation she flung herself into his arms.

Mr Dittany had the unconscious gift of superb artistry. The pathos of his simple phrase stirred him to the depths. Looking up into his face, Nan was surprised and profoundly shocked at the sight of his smiling eyes swimming in tears. She clutched feverishly at the lapels of his coat.

"Don't, dad, don't," she whispered.

"That's my little girl again," he said soothingly.

They talked commonplaces for awhile, waiting for the summons to see Mr Nivens. Mr Dittany brought her round tactfully and by easy stages to take an interest in her novel surroundings. With consummate art he succeeded in touching the woman in her. The suite, as he had told Wishart, was small but delightfully convenient, and was furnished with a perfect combination of art and comfort.

"It's a service flat," he told her. "No meals to bother about, or servants to drive you mad. You ring a bell, and—hey presto—your genius of the ring brings anything you wish, from an aldermanic banquet to a safety-pin. One small maid to answer callers and to see to your personal wants and your wardrobe is all the expense we shall incur on that score. We'll take up our quarters to-morrow, and begin our great task. You shall be the architect, dear, and I the builder. Now, let's come down and see if the great Nivens has returned."

She went down the stairs with hope and excitement beating in her breast. The great Nivens had just returned, and welcomed them into the office with all the enthusiasm due to a man who paid a

quarter's rent in advance. She sat silent through the interview.

But her heart sank as the old crushing doubt returned, for she heard her father tell the estate agent three circumstantial lies, and there was neither shame nor confusion on his face as he uttered them.

CHAPTER IX.

MR DITTANY gave a glance of quiet approval at the gentlemanly appearance of his new secretary. He described him from the far side of the road, and paused for a second or two in order to mark the general effect before he crossed over and made his presence known. He wanted to get an idea of the way the lad would shape in the eyes of others whose opinion was likely to be of importance. His scrutiny, therefore, was that of a fastidious stage manager, or a finicky window dresser.

His approval was justified. In his new "ready-for-wear" overcoat and his new hat and boots, Neil Wishart seemed to have gained in height and in presence. The devil of shame had gone out of him, and he stood more squarely on his feet, with less of an air of perpetually trying to hide his boots away out of sight. Mr Dittany's taste, too, was satisfied in another direction. He had rather feared that the youngster, misreading his hinted instructions, might have felt it his duty to appear in all the glory of a frock-coat and a silk hat. In Shropbury, where he came from, such things constituted the livery of shoddy vulgarity as a general rule, and his knowledge of London had never yet succeeded in driving the prejudice from his mind.

Mr Dittany himself was not a dressy man. He gave one at first sight something of the impression of a well-to-do Colonial. His boots were substantial and square in the toe. His suit of quiet grey tweed hung on him easily—almost loosely; and the brim of his soft felt hat

was unfashionably wide. Yet there was a bigness, and air of substance combined with character and originality, that fitted the man. His height and the sturdy breadth of his shoulders carried off the negligent impression of his lounge suit; while the hat, which would have looked theatrical over a weaker face, gave a fitting touch to the wide, penetrating eyes, the big straight nose, and the powerful chin only half concealed by his black pointed beard. Taken altogether, Mr Dittany was a man one would turn to look after in the street.

Wishart caught sight of him as he crossed the road, and was fired with admiration at the appearance of his new chief. He marked the slow strength of his stride, and the fearless way in which, in spite of the press of traffic, he lounged over the road for all the world as if the Strand were some quiet country lane.

Mr Dittany might have given his secretary the impression of an easy berth when he had discussed matters so casually on the previous day, but now he was an altered man, prompt, commanding, and full of business.

"I've taken temporary offices at Malvern House on the Viaduct," he began. "A man's coming about the fitting up at eleven, so that we have time to walk, and we can talk as we go along. Take these papers, please. When you leave me, I want you to get me two or three estimates from different printers. Mind—you're not to leave them. If a man can't tell you by looking at them what they will cost, he doesn't know his business. There are three separate documents. I shall want proofs on Friday.

"Now, here's an advertisement for a Ledger Clerk. One insertion will be plenty. I offer 30s. a week, and we shall get about three thousand replies for that, and probably not one worth his salt. Here's another for an Office Boy. I shall leave the selection there to you. By the bye, d'you know anything of Company Law? No? Remind me to lend you a Manual on the subject. It's one of the many things you'll have to work up. I'm going to make a sound business man of you, Wishart."

"I can see already, sir, I'm under good tuition."

"No one better—although I say it."

Mr Dittany rattled off his instructions and comments with such rapidity and precision that Wishart had begun to feel confused by the time they had reached Holborn Viaduct, and welcomed the respite. At first sight the new offices did not impress him. They were on the third floor, and seemed with their bare boards and darkened windows small and depressing. But before he had time to look round, Mr Dittany was hard at work, reaching here and stooping there, yard measure in hand, trampling with a hollow tread over the carpetless floor.

"Take down these measurements, please," he said curtly.

Wishart scrambled for his note-book, and copied down the items that quickly followed. He began to have a sensation that he would feel himself of more importance if he had some insight into the business that his employer was contemplating. He did not even know the name of the firm. The glamour he had found in the word "secretary" was rapidly wearing off. Yet, though there was a masterfulness in this strange man who had come so queerly into his life, and had taken such complete possession of him, the velvet glove covered the fist of mail; the orders might be peremptory but they were courteous, and if they were brusque they were also kindly. He could not take offence as one would at a bully—could not feel it even; all he could do was to feel very young and very insignificant. And, if there is anything in the world that makes the second of these sensations additionally painful, it is the first. He gathered what little consolation he could from the fact that he was to interview the office boys, and, with this thought in his head, he set out to get the printing estimates.

As he went along he glanced casually at the manuscripts. He was not sure if he were supposed to read them, but in any case he would have had no time to master the contents of the quire or so of closely cramped

writing. He caught sight of headings, such as "Memorandum and Articles of Association," followed by paragraphs sub-headed under letters and numerals, with ruled spaces at the end for signatures and addresses.

When he returned after a couple of hours of conscientious industry, he was amazed at the alteration. Mr Dittany was standing with the air of an Egyptian taskmaster in the middle of a throng of perspiring workmen. Carpets in two of the rooms, and linoleum in the third, were being laid down with all the care of a proposition in geometry. Joiners were hammering on a mahogany counter just inside the door, as if their lives depended on the speed with which they finished the job. Brass-railed desks were piled up against the walls waiting to be placed in position. A man was laboriously painting a name on the door in heavy black letters.

It was the latter that first arrested Wishart's attention. The lettering was not quite complete, but the chalk marking showed him the name of the firm for which he was working. It was called by the resounding title of "THE LONDON AND PROVINCIAL INDUSTRIAL DEBENTURE CORPORATION, LTD.," and gave the information that office hours were to be from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. on week-days, and to 2 P.M. on Saturdays.

He picked his way into the middle of the turmoil, and showed Mr Dittany the estimates he had obtained. He could not help being struck by the altered appearance of his chief. His coat was off, and his hands were smeared with dirt, while a black smudge across his brow spoke of a hurried wiping off of sweat. But the light of battle was dancing in his eyes, and his usually pale cheeks glowed with more of the fever of excitement than of physical exertion. Everything that was done he superintended, down to the smallest tack. Wishart could see plainly that subtle something in him which makes one a leader of men. He never raised his voice nor raved as many would have done. All his orders were framed with a "please" or "if you don't mind," and he was quick to put his own shoulders to any

over-heavy piece of furniture. Yet the workmen raced through their tasks with one anxious eye on him to see if he were pleased. In spite of trades unionism, a french polisher might be seen driving in tacks, or a carpenter struggling under a roll of linoleum.

Wishart had very little time to observe him, for he was thrown into the maelstrom directly Mr Dittany had glanced at his information. "Off with your coat, my boy," cried the latter gaily. "Give them a hand with that desk. I want it against the wall there, exactly half-way between the door and that cupboard. Don't trust to your eye; measure it."

And so they went on, until in an hour the chaos was subdued into a semblance of order. Much, of course, remained to be done; but when the furniture men had shouldered their bags and gone, leaving only one behind to fix the heavy brass rails, Mr Dittany looked at his watch. "Two o'clock, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "I thought I felt hungry. Let's clean ourselves and go and have a snack. We can discuss the printing while we feed."

Wishart found himself entering into the spirit of all this excitement, but there was still something lacking which he could not define. If he had been able to analyse it, he would have known that he had himself too much of the leader of men in his veins to surrender himself so completely to a subordinate position. It raised no resentment in his mind against Dittany, but it left him with a galling sense of inferiority and impotence. He did not see any way of avoiding it, or of improving the stand he felt it was due to him to make. The inferiority and impotence were much too real. His want of experience in business and his ignorance of the world suddenly struck him with the force of a blow.

But the feeling left him entirely while they lunched. Certainly, if Mr Dittany's culinary tastes were simple, he "did" himself well after his manner, and that such economy as arose from the plainness of his chop or steak was not due to mere miserly cheeseparing was evident from the fact that sometimes—as on this occasion—he

would hail a cab to take him to some grill-room that suited him. Just now they drove to the Holborn Restaurant. His manner dropped for awhile from the white-hot tensity of his business hours, and he fell back into the friendly, lounging, dilettante style that was his especial charm.

"It's an extravagance, Wishart," he said, slightly drawling the words; "but on this special occasion we must drink to the success of the new firm. The world is our oyster, boy, and you and I will open it."

He ordered a bottle of Veuve Clicquot.

The fire was in their blood—the fire of wine, of ambition, of a day long planned and hoped for on the one side, and on the other of a nightmare wiped out, of the dawning of a day bright with all the glory of work that a man may do, and of love to which he may attain.

Wishart talked freely. The unaccustomed strength of the wine had loosened his tongue. It was the first time he had really felt at ease with Nan's father. If he had been a little less unsuspecting, a little less honest, a little less of a hero-worshipper, he might have observed behind the deep apparent interest which the older man was showing in his conversation a light that was not wholly generous, a light that was perhaps cynical and mocking, and even at times a little cruel.

But Neil Wishart recked nothing of danger. He talked on and on gaily until Dittany, glancing at his watch, gave him a tactful warning not to overstep the bounds. He thought afterwards a little shamefacedly of his garrulity. He had been led by insensible encouragement to talk on the subject of his "people." He knew, of course, in his own mind that there was no trace of vanity in thus enlarging on his aristocratic connections; but he felt that to Mr Dittany it must have seemed uncommonly like bragging. He had stumbled on with his history from the sheer joy of finding at last a man who sympathised with him—from an overflowing gratitude to one who had raised him from the Slough of Despair, who, above all, was the father of Nan.

But Mr Dittany was either too courteous or too sin-

cerely interested to show any impatience. "I'm very loth to go," he said with kindness; "but there is so much to do. Come round and dine with us at the flat to-night, and let us hear the rest of it. Nan will be delighted to see you."

Neil looked down ruefully at his clothes. "My new things won't be ready till Saturday," he explained. "Can you put it off till then?"

"Say Saturday evening then. I shan't breathe a word to Nan till you come. We will watch the surprise on her face when she learns who is the new secretary we are expecting. Now, I must get back to the office. Put these proofs in hand with the printers at once, and come back as soon as you can."

CHAPTER X.

A FEW days of warm sunshine, following the heavy rains of the past fortnight, had burst the remaining fetters of a late spring, and the parks had broken into the full green glory of early summer. Nor were the opulence of the flowers or the lusty growth of young leaves rioting from their sheaths the only tokens of the coming of the most beautiful time of the year. The season had opened under the brilliant auspices of a Coronation year: furs and macintoshes and all the drab apparel of winter had been laid aside, and the toilettes of luxurious women gleamed dazzlingly through the trees, framed bewitchingly against the emerald turf. The Row was filled once more with riders, and the rails festooned with men and women who watched the kaleidoscope of colour and animation. Dainty gloved hands patted the glossy necks of exquisitely groomed horses, while those who stretched them over the rail made fluttering love or rippling laughter with men who, craving love and flattery more than the steeds that bore them, curbed the impatience of the latter with a tight rein. Even those who knew no one, and from shabbiness could make not even a pretence of acquaintanceship with any of those who claimed the world as their own, looked on without envy or malice. With Nature caressing as she did, even the sourest of Socialists could have felt nothing but the very cream of the milk of human kindness.

Yet one might have noticed two—a man and a woman—in whose faces were passions that were not good to

see. Curiously alike—brother and sister undoubtedly—they walked straight ahead, engrossed entirely in themselves and their talk, taking but little notice of the crowd, yet apparently unwilling to leave it, turning whenever they reached The Albert Gate at one end of their mechanical promenade and the Achilles Statue at the other. Taking but little notice, we have said, though the man shot furtive glances from side to side at those who passed, and the woman's eye dwelt critically now and then on some toilette more than usually startling.

They were both handsome, in the dark swarthy type. Their olive skins, oval features, and black hair and eyes seemed to indicate a foreign extraction, though any one who chanced to catch a low word or two of their incessant stream of talk would have known they were English. The woman was smartly, but not extravagantly, dressed in a neat walking costume of perfect cut, and a large black hat trimmed with amber roses. The hands and feet, beautifully gloved and shod, were no larger than a child's; and these, together with a certain exotic way of walking, and with her slender and yet rounded figure, invested her with a kind of *chic* Parisian charm, of which those who knew her best asserted that she made the most. Although well preserved, she was not altogether in the first bloom of youth, and a decided hardness in her expression went far to undo the strenuous efforts of the beauty doctors. Yet, seen at her best moments as she was now, men would have called her attractive and women smart.

Her escort was not worthy of her in the matter of dress. There was a general seediness over him. His hat was dilapidated, his clothes badly creased and out of shape, and his boots run down at the heels; while the fidgety care with which he continually adjusted the hang of his coat, or tried nervously to pull down the creases from his vest, pointed eloquently to poverty rather than to carelessness.

The sister's face bore the look of one with a grievance, the brother's that of a man who has suffered a spell of nagging—she violently angry, he morose and fuming.

"For God's sake, Hilda, let's get out of this beastly crowd," he was saying. He had said it a dozen times in the course of the morning, and each time had received a similar reply.

"We'll stop here," she answered firmly. "One is much less likely to be noticed in a crowd. Besides," she went on with a sneering laugh, "I have to notice the frocks. I must combine business with pleasure, my dear Roger."

The emphasis she laid on the word "pleasure" seemed to sting the man from sullenness into fury.

"You women," he said with an oath, "must chew a thing over. The job's done, why can't you let it rest?"

"I let it rest? I want nothing better. It's you who won't let it rest. I've not asked to see you again. I don't want to see you. You make an absolute fool of yourself—let a man like Bevington use you for a cat's-paw to snatch his chestnuts from the fire, and as soon as you come out of prison you begin to prowl round my business place and run the risk of ruining me too. I tell you I won't have it, Roger." She stood facing him in a blaze of sudden wrath which made passers-by turn round to look, and stamped her foot.

"Well, don't make a scene here," he muttered. He glanced round quickly with a scared look in his eyes, and they walked on in silence for a few minutes.

"I tell you I'm desperate," said Roger. "I haven't a sou."

"And I tell you, for the fiftieth time, you'll get no more out of me."

"Haven't you a spark of pity?"

"Not one. What pity did you have for me? What pity did you show when you got that last three hundred out of me with your lying tales of good investments and thirty per cent? All I had saved, practically, and you would have bled me to the last penny if I had been fool enough to let you. You knew when you asked me for it what sort of condition your affairs were in. You knew . . ."

"I've told you a dozen times, Hilda, I didn't know."

"You knew, I tell you. I've had enough of it. Find Bevington and blackmail *him* till he hands you over his share. Don't attempt to blackmail me, Roger. I don't fear you. I work hard enough for my money, and I won't be swindled any more by a man despicable enough to want to live on a woman's earnings."

He stood at bay at last, some faint lingering spark of manhood perhaps, or maybe merely rage overpowering necessity, fanned into flame by her taunt. He turned to go.

"Stop!" she cried. He wheeled round again, and waited for her to speak.

"Just this," she said; "that if you try to interfere with me, or do me any harm at business, I shall stop at nothing—nothing, do you hear? The money you had from me was for a specified investment. I have all your letters. You said . . ."

"I did invest it."

"No doubt—with Roger Tregarth, Limited. You kept it, and I can send you to prison again if I speak the word." She was now panting with excitement, with passion slipped for the first time from its leash. He looked surprised at her vehemence and a little afraid.

"You needn't get a crowd round you," he sneered. "I wash my hands of you. You're no sister of mine. I spent money on you when I had it—plenty of it. All you are to-day you owe to me. If you choose to forget it, I can forget too."

He turned again, and this time he went, leaving the gravel path and faltering across the turf with uneven steps. There was a broken look about him which appeared to touch some hidden spring of pity in the woman, for when he had gone a little way she started to follow him, not boldly and openly, but shrinking behind trees whenever he seemed about to look round.

All the passionate anger had died from her face. There was nothing expressed there now but fear and anxiety, though whether for him or for herself no one could have said.

He made at first as if he would go towards the Marble

Arch, but turned suddenly to the left. Keeping a safe distance behind, but always in sight, she tracked his erratic wanderings past the band-stand, round the tea gardens, and on and on in the direction of the Bayswater Road; then suddenly wheeling round, he hurried back to the Serpentine, and she quickened her steps into a run when she saw him gazing moodily into the ruffled water of the lake.

Woman of the world though she was, and with all her illusions about her brother vanished into thin air, she never suspected that he knew she was following him; that it was all a piece of acting to bring her dramatically to her senses; that he was laughing quietly to himself at the success of his sensational antics.

But before she reached him she stopped dead and drew back from the path she was about to cross. A big bearded man, with coat flying loose and a broad-brimmed hat of soft felt, came lounging along with great easy strides. He was smiling pleasantly to himself, and looked neither to the right nor left. Hilda Tregarth held her breath till he was well past, and then she rushed forward to her brother's side and shook him violently by the arm.

"Roger! Roger!" she cried in a hoarse whisper.
"Look! Quick! There's Edward Bevington."

"No—where?" The studied gloom and despair into which he had carefully composed his features as if signifying a reckless resolution to do away with himself gave place to a startled gleam of excitement and vindictive hope. His sister clutched his arm hard and pointed in the direction of the tall retreating figure.

"We've got him this time," said Roger. "Let's follow him up."

CHAPTER XI

MR DITTANY gave a half-smothered exclamation as if he had been stabbed, and the paper he had been reading dropped to the floor; then remembering himself, he stooped to pick it up, and forced a cough to cover, if he could, the sound he had made.

But it was too late. Nan, seated at the Erard Grand in the recess, paused suddenly in the middle of the *scherzo* she was playing and wheeled round on her stool to front him. Her nerves were ragged and acute, and his inarticulate voice sounding to her distracted mind like a troubled groan, smote her with a vague dread. She rose quickly from her seat and came to his side.

“What’s the matter, dad?”

“Nothing, child.”

“But you called out.”

“Did I?” He had recovered his composure, and smiled at her indulgently. “I’m afraid, if you want to know the truth, my dear, I swore.”

“Something wrong?”

“An important thing I had forgotten to do. Nothing that need trouble you. Go on with your playing. You’re terribly out of practice. Now you’ve got a decent instrument you must work hard and get back your old touch. Give me some Beethoven.”

She did not fail to notice that his hand was trembling, or that, enlightened critic though he was, he had not been listening to what she was playing. She fell to her knees at the side of his chair.

“That was Beethoven, dad; but I can’t play any more.

He terrifies me. Let me talk. Won't you take me into your confidence and tell me what you are doing—what's going on? Dear, I don't want to say unkind things; but you know what I feel and what I fear."

"There's nothing to fear."

"Oh, but there is. You wouldn't have cried out as you did if everything had been right."

Mr Dittany smoothed the girl's dark hair with a fondling caress and looked half-humorously, half-thoughtfully, into her glowing eyes. Apart from her very doubtful approval of his plans, and her equally doubtful comprehension of them, he was essentially a man who mastered women, and he had all the pitying contempt of his kind for the understanding and the ethical standpoint of the sex. He could have proved with infallible logic that honesty is merely relative, a question of a point of view. Success, and the use one made of it, was the touchstone, the criterion of morality. However obtained, it carried with it duties, and these were the justification. The very British Empire, he would tell you, was the outcome of continual and glaring thefts; but inasmuch as his country ruled her subject provinces well and justly, the thefts were on a high pinnacle of morality. Hence, in one aspect of the matter, magnitude was one of the qualifying essentials. A rich man was potentially a good citizen: his wealth enabled him to lift his head high among his fellow-men, to become a good husband and a good father, and a beneficent centre for the distribution of fertilising investments and assuaging charities. He would have argued all this to a man, and have argued it convincingly to any one not too prejudiced to listen; but women were impossible, with their early Victorian prepossessions. His love for Nan, and his desire to atone to her for his tragic mistake of the past, made him deal tenderly with her; but he had begun to feel that she was an irritating thorn in his side, and a constant impediment to his new schemes for recovering the ground he had lost. He had the same pitying contempt for her scruples that he would have felt for one of those righteous fanatics who argue from

a scriptural text that it is wrong to put money out at interest, or that if a man takes your coat you should give him your cloak also. They were straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. In a complex state of society, where the strictest Sabbatarian reads his Monday paper and no man can earn a living without depriving some unfortunate being of a situation, such inconsistent scruples must go by the board. If you had any logic in you, Mr Dittany could prove the absurdity of your position in less than no time. But women had no logic in them, and he was not a man to waste breath in the useless attempt to reason with them.

On this occasion, however, a quick intuitive weighing of advantages and disadvantages decided him to tell her the truth.

"I see I can't keep anything from you, dear," he said. "I am rather worried."

"Yes?" He smiled down at the sudden stiffening of her attitude. He looked upon it as the result of feminine curiosity, not reading her well enough to discern that the trembling dread whether she was going to hear lies from his lips had become habitual to her.

"I was walking across the Park to-day, and I saw that ruffian Tregarth with his sister."

"Did they see you?"

"Unfortunately they did, though of course I gave no sign that I had recognised them. They followed me out of the Park."

"And then?"

"Well, what do you think of me, dear? I gave them the slip, naturally."

"You are sure?"

"Quite. I strolled quietly along till I reached the Café Royal. I guessed they wouldn't suspect me of being on my guard, so I hurried through to Glasshouse Street and jumped into a taxi."

Nan bit her lip and rose slowly to her feet, the colour mounting to her cheeks.

"It's annoying, of course," he went on, "because now

they will know we haven't gone abroad. But London's a big place after all."

"I wasn't thinking of that," answered the girl. She turned her back on him, and walked to the window for a moment. When she came back her hands were clenched.

"But the shame of it!" she cried. "Haven't you thought of that? To be hunted down like a criminal; to have to dodge people through public-houses like a footpad; oh, it's dreadful, dad. How long will this misery last? When shall we be able to lift up our heads again? To go through life under an *alias* even, our very name not to be breathed. It's awful."

"You annoy me beyond measure, Nan. You seem to do your best to throw obstacles in the way of my getting on. What does the name matter to you? You'll be married one of these days. You can get a name of your own, and forget your father."

"Married?" She spoke with quiet scorn. "What sort of man would I dare to marry with the shame of exposure hanging over my head? Oh, forgive me, I think I'm mad. Won't you understand me? Will you always treat my wretchedness with your quiet sneers. Dad," she dropped again to her knees, "God knows I want to be a dutiful daughter to you. I want to help you, and believe in you. I wouldn't mind if I saw some little trace—I won't say of shame, but of chafing against the necessity of hiding. It's because you seem to glory in your cleverness that I tremble for the future."

He looked at her pensively for a time before replying. He had his seething indignation with her under perfect outward control.

"It's wrong of you to say I sneer at you, child," he said at last. "If I don't argue with you it's owing to our totally different points of view. You can't attack temperament with reasons, but my silence isn't a sneer. To a certain extent, making allowance for your ignorance of the world, I understand your feelings and sympathise with them. I even look up to your goodness

like a moth for the star—what's the quotation ? Nan, I want you to try to understand mine. Business is War with a capital W, and a man can't play at it with kid gloves on. Like the world, you think I'm bad because I've been found out. I tell you, Nan, there's not a successful man in England to-day, or elsewhere for the matter of that, who has got to where he is with clean hands—what *you* would call clean."

"Then I don't believe it, dad ; and I'm ashamed to hear you say so."

"Ashamed because I'm not a humbug—because I don't spout platitudes about honesty. The sternest moralist of an old-fashioned city merchant who never misses his Sunday sermon would send a poor struggling devil to destruction as long as he was in competition with him. I can claim without conceit that I am better than most in that respect. At least I don't hit the paupers. When I cross swords with a man it is with one who can afford to lose, and generally deserves to lose. A man nowadays climbs with his hands, and they get soiled. Can you swear you ever met an honest man ?"

The shock of the sudden question startled her and brought a flush to her face. It seemed to have divined the secret of the inner sanctuary of her thoughts, whether intentionally or not she could not have said. She felt that it had laid its clammy fingers on a half-felt comparison between her plausible father and a youth for whose honesty she would have wagered her life. Mr Dittany's straight gaze found the confusion in her face, and routed it to a welter of blushes. She had a sensation of fear at the uncanniness of his penetration.

"I suppose you're thinking of Wishart," he said cynically. "He's too young to have lost his innocence yet, but assuming he's as honest as you imagine, what has it done for him ? And even he . . ."

"Don't be uncharitable, dad. What do you know about Mr Wishart ?"

Mr Dittany had paused in his sentence. In his

anxiety to make good his case—an anxiety more keen than he would have cared to acknowledge—he had nearly overrun his discretion, had been almost on the point of blurting out about the Cambridge episode.

"We're wandering from the point," he said, quickly changing the subject. "I was speaking of the Tregarths. What else would you have had me do? The past is done with as far as I can contrive to put it behind. What purpose should I serve by allowing them to make me a subject of their blackmailing proceedings? I'm not ashamed of avoiding them, and I'm not going to pretend to be even for the sake of earning your good opinion."

Nan sighed helplessly, and, rising to her feet, went back to the piano where she stood idly turning over the leaves of the music. He followed her across the room and put his arm about her waist.

"Come, Nan dear," he said tenderly. "Be my own little girl once again, and for mercy's sake leave things to me. I won't disgrace you. I promise you that. Give me a little time, and I will undertake to make you as proud of me as ever you were. If only I can escape the past till I have time to pay off my debts there will be nothing left to fear. We can take our own name again. No more blackmailing then, no more concealment. One more year of probation and we shall be able to look everyone in the face."

He raised her face, and kissed the hot salt tear that trickled slowly down her cheek. She threw her arms round his neck, and gripped him in a vain endeavour to choke down the sobs that were strangling her. He stood caressing her till she had recovered, then, leading her to the settee, he lovingly adjusted the soft cushions and pressed her down till her face rested on them. He went to a cupboard in the lobby, and she heard the clink of glasses and bottles, and presently the loud popping of a cork. When he came back he carried in his hand a glass filled to the brim with champagne. "Drink this down, little one," he said. She obeyed without question. "Better now? That's right. It was

cruel of me to upset you, but it shan't happen again. In future, Nan, I'm going to tell you absolutely everything."

She smiled up at him wanly through her tears.

"You must get up your spirits for to-morrow evening, girlie. I'm going to bring my new secretary home to dinner, and I want you to tell me what you think of him."

"A new secretary, dad? Here?"

She frowned her nervous displeasure. Through her mind flashed a recollection of the last secretary—the sinister figure of Tregarth, whom she hated.

Mr Dittany nodded mischievously.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked in resigned tones.

"Nothing, my girl, except to make yourself as agreeable as possible."

"I'll try," she said.

That's good. And now toddle off to bed, Nan. I've got a lot of writing to do, and it'll be dull for you."

CHAPTER XII.

FOR the two days preceding the fateful dinner at which he was to be forcibly exploded into the astonished presence of Nan, Neil Wishart had very little leisure to spend on day-dreams of the delights of the coming meeting. His thoughts and hopes tinged the background of his labours, but he was almost run off his legs with his multifarious duties. True, these were hardly of the nature foreshadowed by Mr Dittany when he promised him that he should be entrusted with heavy responsibilities; but, such as they were, they occupied his attention to the exclusion of everything else. He told himself rather bitterly, once or twice, that any of the office boys he was to interview on the following Monday could have achieved his tasks with distinction. It seemed that all he had to do was to run down to the newspaper offices twice a-day to collect the vast and rapid accumulation of letters that came in answer to their numerous advertisements, and then to spend hours in copying out a stereotyped form of reply to a selected pile of them. Now and then he made an attempt to assert himself with a suggestion, but the effort always left him wondering for half an hour afterwards whether he had been snubbed or not. Mr Dittany seemed to read the lad's chagrin, for once he said kindly enough that he hoped Wishart did not mind putting his hand to menial tasks for a day or two.

" You see how it is, my boy," he exclaimed graciously. " We're both of us hewers of wood and drawers of water for the moment. When we once get our office staff

together, we'll soon shake down. Have those wretched telephone people sent a man yet? Run round to them at once, there's a good chap. You can finish these letters when you get back. You won't mind staying a bit late, will you?"

Of course he didn't mind. The friendly hand on his shoulder, the encouraging smile, and the general air of gratitude touched to the quick by his willing devotion, would have kept him chained to his desk till midnight if it had been required of him.

It was already late when he returned from his errand, and he had dived once more into the pile of correspondence, when the outer door opened and there entered a man of very extraordinary appearance. It was the first caller they had had, and Wishart looked up at him curiously, showing perhaps a rather inexperienced haste in attending to his wants at the counter. The visitor was a little man of middle age, with a thin, eager face, a very red nose, and dark restless eyes which peered through horn-rimmed spectacles inquisitively and critically all about him. He wore a faded silk hat of ancient pattern, and a ridiculously long frock-coat buttoned tightly round his emaciated figure.

His behaviour was as strange as his appearance. He began by rapping the mahogany counter with his bony knuckles, evidently not for the purpose of attracting attention, for Wishart was already standing before him, mutely waiting for his errand, but with the critical touch of a bailiff appraising furniture. This action was followed by a similar investigation with his finger-nails of some brass railing within his reach.

"New, but good," he muttered. "Money no object."

"What is it you want, please?" asked Wishart. He was becoming visibly annoyed at the man's cheek.

The stranger fumbled in his pocket. "Smell of gas," he observed. "Have it seen to. Or is it new paint?"

"Ah, here we are," he continued, triumphantly producing a newspaper cutting. Wishart perused it curiously. It was one of their advertisements, but one he had not seen. "Wanted an accountant," it read, "char-

tered preferred, but must be prepared to give up whole time."

The stranger was fumbling again, and this time produced a card which stated that his name was Mr Peter Maplin, and that he lived at Putney.

Mr Dittany was working in his private room. "Show him in," he said curtly. "And, Wishart—I want you to be present. Sit over at that table and take notes of the interview; any salient particulars, you know."

Mr Maplin sat himself stiffly in the chair that was offered him, and, having a fresh room to examine, proceeded to do so with undisguised interest.

"Just started?" he asked, when Mr Dittany at last gave him his attention.

"Monday," replied Mr Dittany, equally laconic.

The two men sat facing each other for a spell without speaking. At the opposite poles of temperament, they were curiously alike both in their fearlessness and in their expert knowledge of the depths and shoals of financial dishonour. The one peeked up inquisitively through his horn-rimmed glasses; the other glinted through half-shut lids, with a measuring look in his hard bright eyes. Dittany was the first to speak.

"I take it, Mr Maplin, you're applying for this post?"

"Then you take it wrong, sir; I want to know something about you first."

The man had a harsh voice, croaking and metallic. Both the words and the tone in which they were uttered startled Wishart, who glanced quickly over to see if the big man had taken offence. But Dittany only smiled.

"You're quite right, Mr Maplin," he said. "What is it you want to know?"

"What's your business?"

"You might have gathered that from the style of the company. We lend money on debentures."

"Any fool can do that."

"Not quite in the way we shall work."

"Got any money to lend?"

"Enough."

"Um! Not that it's necessary nowadays. Well, what's the idea?"

Mr Dittany rose from his chair and took up a commanding position on the rug. The movement, apparently casual, was carefully studied. It threw his own features in the shade, while it necessitated Mr Maplin's turning to the full light from the window.

"Aren't we going a little too fast?" he said smilingly. "I'm not going to let you in to all my business till I know something about you. Are you a chartered accountant?"

"Chartered be blowed! What do you want with chartered? Wiped off the rolls before you can say Jack Robinson. Tied up hand and foot. Tell you what. I'll give you leave to collect all the chartered accountants in London, and old Pete Maplin'll add 'em up, multiply 'em, and subtract 'em before they know where they are. What's your age, young man?"

Wishart, too much taken by surprise to resent the apparent impudence of the question, answered wonderfully, "twenty-three."

"Twenty-three?" The little man muttered to himself for a few seconds with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. "On your twenty-third birthday you'd lived exactly twelve million, ninety-four thousand, five hundred and sixty minutes. And that's allowing for four leap years, 1900 not counting as such. There's a head for you; there's brains. Put it down on paper and work it out, and I'll give you half a crown for every minute I'm out in my reckoning. I'll guarantee to count up a page o' figures—all three columns at once—while you're doing the pence. Three men I'll do the work of. Now then! What more do you want?"

Mr Dittany chuckled aloud, and glanced over to Wishart with a humorous lift of the brows. The secret sign put the new secretary more at his ease. In some flattering way it gave him the impression of being one of the firm. His resentment at the abruptness of Mr Maplin's manner died away. The old man was obviously an eccentric. He was making sport for the

Philistines, and if that great man, Mr Dittany, could unbend enough to enjoy the fun, surely it was not his place to object to his rudeness.

"You're a phenomenon, Mr Maplin," said Dittany. "But something else besides a head for figures is required. Experience, for instance."

Mr Maplin chuckled with infinite disdain. "Experience?" he croaked. "No man in London with more." He reeled off a list of firms with which he had been connected. Wishart stared in amazement. Even with his inexperienced knowledge of the world of finance, some of the names he mentioned were household words; names that stank with notoriety, famous swindles where the guiding spirits had been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. In his innocence he imagined that such a record would utterly blast any faint chance the applicant might have had of securing the post. He could not know that the astute little man of figures had successfully read the character of the man with whom he was dealing in the first two minutes of his interview; that he knew well that the names he was recording so glibly would be a recommendation and no obstacle.

Mr Maplin finished his recital with the air of one who has placed his reputation on a pinnacle beyond reproach. He washed his hands in invisible water, cracked his big-jointed fingers, and chuckled aloud.

"Now, give and take," he said; "give and take. You've got all you're going to get out of me. What about you? What's your line?"

Mr Dittany thought for a moment, and then proceeded to outline his scheme tersely, with a masterly compression. The details he gave were the first inkling that Wishart had received of the business he had undertaken. Most of it was incomprehensible to him, but a light of excitement and admiration was dawning in Peter Maplin's eager face as he followed each point with rapid comprehension.

"We will assume," Mr Dittany was saying, "we have found a suitable party. He is a small manufacturer—good business and all that sort of thing, but crippled

for capital. That capital we undertake to provide in return for an option over his business. We . . .”

“Stop!” cried Mr Maplin. “You don’t take the option. No! Figurehead, dummy, man of straw. Keep out of it. Tame vendor and all that sort of thing. Go on.”

“Probably. We assure ourselves that there’s enough stock and book debts to cover. If so, we lend up to that on a first mortgage debenture. Say a man wants two hundred working capital—bills falling due and so on. We lend five hundred, and float. Three hundred of it comes back to us in flotation fees. We have the registered office here—at a fee. We keep the secretaryship—at a fee. We do the auditing—at a fee. The man’s at his wits’ end for money, and won’t quibble at any terms as long as we get him out of his mess.”

“What do you offer him personally?”

“An agreement as manager — short as we can make it.”

“Never mind the length. Give him twenty-one years if he wants it. All terminated by liquidation.”

“That’s so. Well, you take my meaning, I see. I needn’t enlarge. We run the thing for a time, and when the creditors become troublesome we foreclose.”

Mr Maplin nodded approval.

“Pretty good,” he chuckled; “pretty good; and well within the law. Keep to the little fish. Worth no one’s while to make a fuss. What capital have you got?”

“Ten thousand on demand. More if I want it.”

“Plenty. Where do I come in?”

“I want a man to audit the books of every applicant.”

“They pay the preliminary fees?”

“Of course.”

“That’ll do for me. I’ll start on Monday.”

“You don’t know my terms yet.”

“I come in on my terms, sir. Don’t want a salary. Half audit fees.”

“Too much.”

“Not a penny less.”

"Sliding scale, then. Half fees up to five pounds a week, twenty-five per cent over."

"That'll do. Come in on Monday. Post me my agreement to-morrow."

Before Wishart could recover from his amazement at the unexpected result of the interview the little man had gone out of the room at a shuffling trot, and the outer door had closed behind him. He was brought to his senses by a word of reproof from his chief—the first he had ever suffered. "I thought I asked you to take notes, Wishart," said Mr Dittany.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know you were taking him seriously."

"Never mind. Write down as much as you can remember. When you get to know me better, my boy, you'll learn that I never waste time with people I don't take seriously."

Without fully accounting for it (for most of the conversation had been so much Greek to him) the interview had left an evil flavour behind it, a sort of suspicion of sharp practice. Something of the kind was in his mind when he said, half apologetically, "He'd been with such rotten firms that I didn't think you could possibly take him on."

Mr Dittany smiled rather pityingly.

"Would you be surprised to hear that I am taking him on on that very account?"

"I should rather."

"But it is so. The men we are going to finance are—eighty per cent of them—shifty rogues, up to all sorts of dodges. Their books will be faked, their stocks grossly over-estimated, and, ten chances to one, there will be some prior lien on their securities which they don't tell us anything about. Now, I think that it will be a very clever rogue indeed who will get the better of our friend Maplin."

Neil Wishart's instructions had been to write down the salient points of the interview. To his perturbed mind the salient points were such phrases as "agreements terminated by liquidation," "well within the

law," and "when the creditors become troublesome." Nevertheless, his wits, if unformed, were acute enough in an emergency, and he contented himself with a schedule of the terms Mr Dittany had agreed, and the names of the firms which had hitherto enjoyed the advantage of Mr Maplin's astuteness and his marvellous head for figures.

He spent rather a broken night in consequence of his bewildering experiences, and when he slept he dreamt that Mr Maplin, with ferocious rapidity, had multiplied his height by his weight, and, after reducing the total to pounds, shillings, and pence, had accused him of robbing Mr Dittany of the least common multiple.

It was the little rift within the lute of his hitherto unwavering confidence in the man who had set him on his feet. The one consolation he found was that on the morrow he would see Nan. The image of the pure, high-minded girl shone through the welter of conflicting doubts like a steady light, without flicker or obscurity. He had that instinct of truth about her that no accumulation of damning evidence in the world would be able to shake. And Dittany was the father of Nan. The father of Nan! Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was with a beating heart that Neil Wishart stood waiting in the gravel carriage-drive of Palmyra Mansions while Mr Dittany discharged the cab in which they had driven down. During the morning he had made many mistakes which his employer graciously overlooked. By an instinct that was at once right and wrong, he seemed to detect in the great man's manner a subtle encouragement in his growing passion for Nan. He was right in assuming that his love was to be suffered to grow unchecked; he was wrong—hopelessly wrong—in flattering himself that it would be permitted to reach the full bloom of possession. Not for the first time in his life Mr Dittany had stooped to make this base use of the girl—a bait for the luring of men over whom he desired to acquire an influence. Most likely he would have been profoundly shocked to have had it pointed out to him in this light. There was nothing in the world, not even his commercial schemes, that could take the place in his heart that was filled by his little daughter. While Fortune had smiled on him, he had been mother and father both to her. Their friends were the merest acquaintances. They had been all in all to each other, wrapped up solely, the one with the other, in all their cares and anxieties, in all their pleasures and vivid interests. No lover could have been more attentive to his divinity than the man who had been the talk of Shropbury for his charming devotion.

With all his penetration in reading others, Edward Dittany (it was proof of it that he had almost forgotten

his real name) had a blind eye for his own character. Probably no man in the world who had ever talked with him, or woman either, knew less of him than he did himself.

For several reasons young Wishart had no idea of the trap that was being laid ; nor could he have been blamed. In the first place, he would not have believed it possible of such a man as Dittany. Secondly, he felt himself a particularly unimportant item of interest to one with such vast schemes in his mind, and he could attribute his own employment to nothing but kindness of heart, or—palpitating thought—a word spoken in his behalf by Nan herself. He would have opened his eyes if, after his confidential lunch with Mr Dittany at the Holborn Restaurant, he had seen that prudent gentleman looking him and his family up in ‘*Debrett*,’ and making careful notes of names and addresses. It would have amazed him to learn that the man whom he thought he had been foolish enough to have bored with family details (“swanked” was the word he used to himself in calling the incident to mind) could have told him with much more accuracy than he himself could have done, the exact age, state of health, and expectations of life, of those members of the family who stood between young Neil and the title. In short, that excellent judge of character had first engaged him because he needed a gentleman, and finding he was well connected was going, after his manner, to run the fact for all it was worth.

And in this scheme he did not scruple to use his daughter.

Neil had a feeling of awe in treading the wide staircase. He itched to remove his hat as if in church, and he would probably have best expressed the sacredness of the place by taking off his boots, like a Mohammedan. But Mr Dittany let him in prosaically with a Yale latch-key, and helped him off with his coat as if the place were an ordinary dwelling-house with no odour of sanctity haunting its apse and aisles.

In a moment he was being ushered into the charmingly furnished drawing-room. He noticed the piano

standing open in the corner, and that the place was full of flowers and fragrance ; but he noticed no more.

For Mr Dittany had gone to the door and called—

“ Nan ! Nan ! Where have you got to ? ”

“ All right, dad ; I’m just coming.”

And then he heard her steps in the passage.

There was only anxiety on Nan’s face as she came in by the open door, but the expression changed into blank amazement when she realised that the well-dressed man who was standing at her father’s side was no other than Neil Wishart. The discovery seemed to paralyse her movements. She remained rooted to the spot, and as she stood silently looking from one to the other, her white face crimsoned with the emotions she would have so gladly hidden. Mr Dittany regarded them gleefully with his hands on his hips and his elbows stuck out. He delighted in arranging these dramatic surprises, and here was a brilliant coup for which he had every reason to congratulate himself. Wishart stepped across the room to greet her, his face the picture of boyish eagerness. The touch of his hand brought her to herself with a strange thrill.

“ I’m so glad to see you,” she said. “ You’ll stay to dinner ? We’ve got some wretched man coming—father’s new secretary—but that won’t make any difference, and we can get rid of him early. Secretaries are such dreadful creatures, Mr Wishart. You’ll see for yourself. He’ll choke himself every five minutes with laughing at dad’s most shocking jokes, and he’ll call him ‘ sir ’ in every sentence. Between ourselves, dad thinks he’s a judge of human nature, but he ought to leave his selection to me. You never saw such a weird set of creatures as he brings down to me to entertain. And they all come. Not the wildest specimen of them can escape an invitation to dinner.”

The words came tumbling out of her lips with delirious excitement, all discretion, and all her cares and anxieties flung to the winds in the joy of the unexpected meeting. She gave him no chance of explaining his new position, and if she had, a significant cough from Mr Dittany

warned him to enter into the humour of the conspiracy of deception.

Nan had crossed over to her father, and made a charming picture as she clung to his arms with both her hands. This was the first time Neil had seen her since he had left Alabaster Gardens, and the change was great over them both. Some wizardry—some genius of enchantment—had touched each of them. The god of mammon and the god of love for once had signed a protocol to make her fair. The plain, eternal serge costumes which were the only garb in which he had known her, had been displaced to make room for an exquisite blouse of white silk, covered with a fine network of lace, of which he knew enough to tell him the extreme value. The former austere high neck-bands had given way to a low “Peter Pan” collar which cried shame on her previous wilful concealment of a throat of such dazzling whiteness and rounded fulness, and gave the full accent to the wonderful poise of her Irish head.

And Neil Wishart also had been transformed in the girl’s eyes. She was perhaps not so surprised as he at the change. Womanlike she had always seen through the threadbare externals to the high-bred quality of the man so incongruously clad. Looking at him now with ill-concealed admiration, she felt that he was only resuming his proper place in the world after his masquerading in the garb of poverty. He had gone, of course, to a good tailor (he knew no others), and had spent half his month’s money as a matter of necessity. His blue serge suit hung on him perfectly, and, in spite of a vague uneasiness at the odour of new cloth, he knew it, and stood talking with an ease and athletic grace as taking as it was unaffected. Nan, hanging there on her father’s arm, marked with admiration his broad shoulders, straight limbs, and the clean wholesome freshness of his clean-cut face.

She turned her face up to her father, and shook him playfully by the arm.

“It’s too bad of you, dad; you’re always playing these tricks on me. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mr Dittany pinched her cheek affectionately, and turned to Wishart.

"What time did you say Venables was coming?"

Nan withdrew her hand in horror. "You don't mean to say . . ." she began; but seeing them both laughing, she shook her father's arm again with a pretence of anger, and tripped laughing out of the room.

"I've forgotten to put the wine down to warm," she cried.

"Keep up the joke, my boy," Mr Dittany said when she had gone. In Wishart's eyes he seemed like a great mischievous schoolboy. He was bubbling over with delight and high spirits, and his dancing eyes followed the girl out of the room with an expression of pride and love that was good to see.

As a matter of fact the mood was not affected. It was the first time since that tragic day some ten months ago that he had seen her as her old blithe self. That the alteration came so obviously from the presence of Wishart did not disturb him in the least. Petty motives never entered into his disposition. He was no more jealous of the lad than he would have been of a bottle of medicine; indeed, it was somewhat in the same light that he regarded him, and when the tonic had been taken, the bottle could be thrown away if he had no further use for it. In this way what a casual observer might have called his nobility of mind in not grudging the boy the effect he was having was really due to a sublime selfishness. Strong, reckless, and virile, with the joy of battle in his heart, gloom on a face came between him and his comfort, and he fought it with what weapons came most readily to his hand. At the sight of Nan's dancing eyes and heightened colour, the old emotions rushed over him like the surge of a wave.

Mr Dittany at work and Mr Dittany at play were the poles apart. Just now there was a romping facetiousness about him that Wishart found delightful. As soon as Nan had gone from the room he seated himself at the piano and rattled off a passage of really brilliant arpeggios, and when, in some surprise at his versatility, Neil

complimented him, he shouted excitedly, "Dat is nodings," and passed his fingers through his hair with a laughable imitation of a German maestro.

He broke off as quickly as he began, and went to the sideboard.

"A sherry and bitters, Mr Wishart?"

He pretended to whisper the words hoarsely, with one finger held up to ensure a mock secrecy, and made a play of being so confused when he saw Nan, who had been standing in the doorway all the time, that the decanter clinked violently against the glasses.

At another time Wishart might have felt a little surprised contempt for such exuberances in a grown man, but the antics were so well done, and the fever of the contagious excitement so leapt in his veins, that he thought it the most excellent fooling he had ever seen. Nan laughed merrily at the scene. "Caught again!" she cried. "Dad, dear, there's a sad-looking man at the door who says he is a waiter, and wants to know if dinner is to be served now. Are we going to wait any longer for this belated secretary? I've just ordered another cover."

"Then cancel the order, my sweet love. He shan't have a crumb if he comes now. I never heard of such a thing. A brand-new secretary who can't keep his first appointment! Wishart, you shall eat his dinner for him."

Nan, still unsuspecting, tripped out again, and presently the two men were summoned to the room where the table had been spread. Neil Wishart could see at a glance that whoever had had the arranging of it was gifted with excellent taste. He preferred to think it was Nan, and the little final touches he detected her making seemed to bear his supposition out. The sad-looking man who had called himself a waiter (he really did look as if he had something on his mind) proved to be justified. He was well trained, and came and went noiselessly.

It was a memorable dinner-party for Neil Wishart. How many times afterwards did his recollection stray

back fondly to that cosy room on that warm June evening; when the windows were opened wide and the perfume of early roses came floating in from the tiny conservatory; when the exquisite blooms that hung so artistically from the silver epergne in the middle of the table were eclipsed by the dark brilliant light of the eyes which laughed through them; when from the great dark outer world murmured the subdued formless muttering of restless strife, like surf beating on the distant shore of his island of love. There are not many such moments in a man's life, and they last but a little spell.

Mr Dittany's presence, and his continued high spirits, broke the perfection of the dream. It is only middle age that can laugh at or with love. To youth it is a sort of sacrilege, and Wishart found himself beginning to chafe against his host's facetiousness. But the older man would not be denied. "Come; let's have a toast!" he cried. "What is it to be?" Nan caught her lover's eyes, and smiled roguishly. The question brought back memories of their last meal together. Neil's glance, dancing with mischief, responded, and as he raised his glass to her lips silently formed the words that were in the minds of both of them, "To your eyes, ma'amselle, to your eyes."

"Well, if you won't, I'll give you one," continued Mr Dittany. "Here's to my new secretary."

"And may he always be punished for his shortcomings as he is now," chimed in Wishart.

Nan frowned. "Oh, bother your secretary," she pouted. "I'll add something to it. May he always treat us as kindly as he has to-night."

"Bravo," shouted her father. "I've only one fault to find with him. I've made five bad jokes at the lowest estimate, and he hasn't choked himself once, while I don't think he has called me 'sir' on a single occasion."

The girl put her glass down slowly, with a light of comprehension coming into her face. Her breast heaved and her cheeks went pale with an emotion

which the lad sitting opposite failed to understand. Her little white hand clenched and unclenched on the cloth, and she sat up stiffly in her chair.

"Dad!" she said, and a sort of terror had come into her voice. "What are you saying? You don't mean . . ."

Mr Dittany waved his hand in the direction of his guest. "Let me introduce you to Mr Neil Wishart, Secretary to the London and Provincial Industrial Debenture Corporation, Limited."

"Oh, dad, no; not that."

"Not that, child? Whatever do you mean?"

A very piteous look had come into her eyes, as if some nameless fear had fastened its clutches on her soul. And Wishart, looking on in stupefied amazement, saw her struggling to swallow down the sobs that seemed to choke her, and to blink away the tears that welled up to overflowing. Before a word more could be said she had risen to her feet and fled from the room.

Not a word was spoken for a minute after she had gone. Neil Wishart fixed on his host a gaze that asked plainly for an explanation, and his face wore a look of embarrassment and displeasure. For the first time in his life he saw Mr Dittany labouring under confusion. He toyed with the crumbs on the tablecloth, and made no attempt to meet the lad's glance. In the profound silence that followed they could catch the distant sound of sobs in the adjoining room.

When Wishart spoke there was a ring in his voice that the other had never noticed before. The hardness of its note brought his eyes up quickly. It seemed to challenge him, and it brought up in his own a blaze of contemptuous defiance.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr Dittany? Why does your daughter object to my employment as your secretary?"

"We will ask her when she returns," answered the other drily.

"I want to know now, before she comes back. I want to hear it from you."

Mr Dittany's manner changed instantly. Instead of the threatened wrath which he suppressed by a strong effort of will, he assumed an air of querulous irritation.

"Don't be a fool, Wishart," he snapped. "How on earth do I know? She's been highly strung for the last week—ever since I came home."

"You must have some idea."

"None whatever. Do you suppose for a moment that if I had any previous knowledge that taking you on would be distasteful to her, I should have sprung it on her suddenly while you were here? Use your common-sense."

The idea seemed rational enough to Neil, though it left him as much puzzled and distressed as ever. The waiter gliding in at that moment with a fresh course made them pull themselves together with an affectation of unconcern, but when he had gone Wishart spoke again.

"Don't you think you had better go to her?" he said.

"Yes; perhaps so, if you'll excuse me. Make a show of eating something while I am gone. We don't want any talk about the place."

It seemed an eternity till he came back, but he was smiling and gracious again. "It's all right," he said reassuringly. "Women are such strange creatures."

"Haven't I a right to know what was the matter?"

"I think you have—especially as it's very flattering to you. It seems—although I had forgotten it—that I told her the other day that I was going to take on a temporary secretary, just to tide me over until I could get settled. She jumped to the conclusion just now that I had inveigled you away from a good berth under false pretences."

Wishart breathed a sigh of relief. "And you told her?"

"I told her it was not temporary. I have said nothing about your being already out of a berth."

"Then I shall tell her myself," cried Wishart generously. "I'm sorry if I was rude just now, sir; but I felt naturally upset over it."

"That's all right, my boy; I always admire spirit in a man. The poor girl's awfully sorry about it. She's coming back in a minute. Say nothing about it till she has had time to recover a little. She's not herself at all. One minute she is bumping her head against the stars, and the next down in the depths. Nerves and all that sort of thing."

Mr Dittany talked on with complete self-possession, and it would have taken a cleverer man than his companion to have detected that he was racking his nimble brains for a satisfactory hypothesis, and dreading some further complication when his daughter returned.

She came back sooner than either of them expected, smiling, or trying to smile, through the vestiges of her tears. The two men, each in his way tactful, vied with each other to put her at her ease, and to smooth over the unfortunate incident; and the girl herself rose bravely to the occasion, and strove to bring back the bloom that had been so rudely rubbed off their short-lived happiness. But there was something indefinitely lacking. Neil tried in vain to understand her new manner. He might have defined it as a sort of hard recklessness. Her former sweet petulance with her father became faintly—ever so faintly—tinged with sarcasm; and though the eyes smiled they had lost their sympathy. He could not help noticing, moreover, that she never by any chance referred to the subject of her sudden emotion. One would have thought that if her father had set her mind at rest on the disturbing subject, she would have made some mention of it; would have laughed away her behaviour with some little joking apology for her foolishness.

The effort could not be maintained for long. A blight had fallen over the little party, and it was with a secret relief to all three that they heard the man come in with the coffee. Even Dittany himself, with all his sangfroid and knowledge of the world, and with all his admirable conversational powers, began to show signs of dejection: while Wishart had become very silent as time went on. An obstinate resolve was

forming in his mind that he would get to the bottom of the mystery before he left the flat. He was hoping that Dittany would give him an opportunity for a *tête-à-tête* with the girl. If not, he had made up his mind to blurt the subject out in front of him, regardless of the consequences, or of the older man's possible displeasure. His resolve went even further. If it transpired that there was really a serious objection to his engagement in her father's service, he would tell Nan straight out that he would resign the position at the end of the month.

Meanwhile, his mind revolved every possible alternative—except the right one. He remembered what she had said when she first saw him standing there; her light chatter about the numerous secretaries he had brought home from time to time. Was there something in it after all? Was he a makeshift only? It would be a disappointment to him, of course; but even if his employment was only to last a month, or a couple of months, to a certain extent it had set him on his feet again at a moment when every prospect seemed to have slipped away from him.

His opportunity came sooner than he expected. When they had adjourned to the drawing-room, Mr Dittany made an apology.

"Fond of good music, Wishart?" he said. "That's right. Nan will play to you while I go and write a few letters."

Neil's alleged fondness for music was not of the discerning kind, but if he had possessed the most yearning of artistic temperaments, an archangel would not have stirred him at that moment. He let her play on for a while, and then he came close to the piano. When she had come to a pause, he touched her arm gently with his hand, and said quietly—

"Stop for a bit," he said. "I want to speak to you."

CHAPTER XIV.

NAN DITTANY seemed at first as if she would take no notice of Neil's appeal, and struck the first few notes of the second movement of the sonata she was playing; but her fingers wandered off into faint, inconsequent modulations, and presently she looked up at him.

"What is it you want to say?" she asked gravely. Her hands still strayed melodiously up and down the keyboard. Wanting all her attention, the sounds appeared to irritate him.

"Won't you leave off for a minute?" he asked again.

The girl folded her hands in her lap, and wheeled round on her seat to face him. The act of obedience was contradicted by a little pout of mute obstinacy which had formed round her lips, a downward curve of inflexibility which he got to know well later, but which as yet he did not realise to be unassailable.

She had quite recovered her self-possession. Looking into her grave, questioning eyes, it was difficult to believe that the tempest of passionate remonstrance that had swept over her so recently could be anything but a dream. Yet Neil felt with a pang that she had lost as much as she had gained. If stronger and more rational, she had banished sympathy with her weakness. The tenderness and the frank comradeship were gone. A spirit of antagonism had risen up in their place. He knew instinctively she was on her guard against him, and he resented it with all the bitterness of a lover who is fighting the nightmare

of some hideous misunderstanding. She waited for him to begin.

"I want to know in what way I upset you just now?"

"You didn't."

"Why were you upset, then? Why do you object to me working for your father?"

"Have I said so?"

"Most eloquently. Why?"

"Father said he would tell you."

"I want to hear it from you."

"I've nothing to add, Mr Wishart."

The coldness and indifference of her tone struck him keenly.

"But why this change in your manner to me?" he persisted. "What have *I* done?"

"You've done nothing."

"Then what excuse have you got?"

He ventured to take her hand and found it trembling. She returned the pressure for a moment with a quick, passionate grip, and then snatched it from his grasp.

"Don't," she whispered. "I can't bear it."

"But I must know, dear. Your father says you think he is going to make a cat's-paw of me—that he has taken me away from a good berth only to throw me over when I have served his purpose. Is that so?"

A look of relief crept into Nan's face. It had been the hopelessness, the utter impossibility of offering any adequate reason for her strange behaviour of an hour ago that had frozen her into such a mockery of indifference. There had seemed to be nothing to do but to brazen it out with an appearance of sullen obstinacy quite foreign to her nature. Here was an explanation near enough to the truth for her to adopt it, and she clutched eagerly at the fragile hope without looking to see whither it was leading her.

"He has told you, then?" she said weakly.

Wishart nodded. "Has he such a heartless reputation?" he asked. The question was not put very

seriously. There was a quizzical smile with it that perceptibly lightened the strain of the situation. Nan rose to the altered mood. She had been trembling at the glimpse of the chasm to the edge of which her uncontrolled emotion had carried her. The colour was coming back to her face, and she answered almost gaily,

"You mustn't ask me to run him down," she protested. "He is a very keen business man, who never gives way to sentiment. As long as you are useful to him he will keep you on, but . . ."

"You dear, silly little girl; I should be the last one to blame him for that. I think Mr Dittany's the finest man I have ever met."

Neil Wishart spoke the words with glowing enthusiasm. Something in the excess of his hero-worship startled her, and instead of showing the pride his devotion should have caused, something of the old terror crept into her wide eyes. But he did not notice it, and continued with hot zeal.

"What's more, he lifted me out of the gutter. I was on my last legs when he came to Kennington. What I was going to do I dread to think. I'm going to deserve his confidence. And if I can't—if he has to get rid of me—well, what harm has it done? Men can't be charitable institutions in business, and he will have given me a fresh start in life. I shall always be grateful to him—and to you."

Nan listened to his rapid outpouring of sincere gratitude in silence. What he was saying, although it gave her a momentary respite from the necessity of offering an excuse, did not touch the wound that was rankling in her breast. She knew only too well the fatal influence of her father over younger and more inexperienced men. In her mind she saw this clean, straight boy, just on the threshold of his life, full of generous enthusiasms, unsuspecting, worshipping,—saw him gradually corrupted, watched him shedding one by one his ideals, and become hard, cunning, and unscrupulous. Her heart cried out that it must not be, that she must save him even at the expense of her own parent.

Yet she hugged the fatal excuse to herself that this was not the time, that she must temporise. She would appeal, she told herself, to her father's better nature, watch her opportunities, wait till she could find a way to save the one without sacrificing the other.

"Let's forget I have been so stupid," she said, forcing a smile.

"I ought to be flattered that you are so interested in my welfare."

The unfortunate remark, though sincerely meant, was clumsily done. It threw the girl back into an impossible position, seeming to claim her favour at the expense of her father's reputation for integrity. She was up in arms again in a moment. To ragged nerves, already flagellated with the torturing thought that she had sacrificed the one she ought to have held most dear for the sake of protecting a comparative stranger, it was like pouring vinegar into the wounds to hear that it had been noticed. To her exaggerated sensitiveness it seemed that he was ascribing with contemptuous confidence her interest in him to love. That it was true only made it worse.

"You needn't be," she answered coldly. "I should have done it for any one."

Wishart coloured, and bit his lip; but before he could make any reply Mr Dittany entered the room. Beneath his smile he darted a quick, anxious glance from one to the other, and it did not seem to reassure him.

"What, left off music?" he cried, with a pretence of gaiety.

"I have been having a talk with Miss Dittany about the matter we were speaking about," said Neil. He had reddened to the roots of his hair.

"That's good," said Mr Dittany cheerfully. "I hope you've satisfied her."

"I thought I had, but now I seem to have put my foot in it again."

"What! Not quarrelling?"

Nan jumped up impetuously, and took her father's arm.

"Oh, bother business, dad," she cried. "Don't let us have it all over again. I've been very stupid, and I've apologised. There's nothing more to be said. We understand each other now, don't we, Mr Wishart? Sing something, dad, and I'll play your accompaniment ever so nicely."

It was gradually being borne in upon Neil that the girl he adored was a complete mystery. He put it down to her vivid Irish temperament and his bewilderment at her sudden changes to his own Saxon denseness. Yet her little gusts of anger and petulance were no sooner over than he worshipped her for them. They had all the beauty for him of storm and sunshine, and the shadows of clouds chasing each other over a landscape of enchanting beauty. Now that her father had returned she was her old self again, excited, voluble, and happy; chaffing Mr Dittany in the richest of Galway brogues, and making impromptu "bulls" of the wildest description.

Neil sat entranced. Everything Nan did or said seemed to him divine. In his infatuation he put down her slightest jokes as the most sublime of wit. He was wrong, however, in thinking she was at last showing her natural self, so long concealed from him by her sordid surroundings. Mr Dittany knew, and sometimes looked grave. He knew that her wild spirits came from a tension that was not far removed from hysteria, and with a rising anger in his heart he knew the cause. He was wondering how long it could last, and he got rid of his guest before the inevitable breakdown.

He himself helped his secretary on with his coat, and both he and Nan went out with him to the top of the staircase when he went. Mr Dittany went back into the flat first, leaving them for a brief moment together. It might have been carelessness, though very few of his actions could be ascribed to that failing. When Nan came back a second or two later her face had gone very white, and he noticed that the rose she had been wearing at her breast was

missing. She seemed nervous of his calm inspection of her, and busied herself by putting away her music.

"I think, Nan," he began presently, "if you don't mind my saying so, you must learn to exercise greater control over your feelings."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking up. She was inclined to fire up at him, thinking of the rose and other things.

"I mean that unless you do, you will some day get me into very serious trouble. My business affairs and the men I choose to employ are matters quite outside your province. Will you please to remember that in future?"

The girl made no reply. The utter selfishness of the only part of the growing tragedy that had any interest for him struck her dumb. Was it nothing to him that her heart was breaking?

CHAPTER XV.

"DEAR ROGER,—I want to see you at seven o'clock to-night. Don't fail me, as it is most important. I have seen Bevington again!"

The note, scratched hurriedly in pencil, with Hilda Tregarth's initials in flourishes at the bottom corner, was found by the man to whom it was addressed lying on his table in the shabby little room his economical sister had taken for him. He had just come in from his customary fruitless search through the West End. He was in a morose and savage temper, and kicked his boots off with an oath before he caught sight of the letter. The man had gone to pieces since his release from gaol. It wants a man of tougher fibre—like Dittany, for example—to withstand the disintegrating effect of a sentence of hard labour. Roger Tregarth before his imprisonment had been a smart, well-dressed man, as active and alive as he was unscrupulous; at the present moment he was clearly on the downward path which leads to wastrelhood. His tendencies were to loaf. In the fortnight that had elapsed since he had seen Bevington, *alias* Dittany, in Hyde Park, he had ceased to care greatly whether he found him or not. But he was dependent on his sister, and Hilda was a hard taskmistress. From her keen wits it seemed impossible to conceal anything, and her tongue was as sharp as her wits. She never spared him, and time after time he was on the point of throwing up the whole business.

But when he read her note his face lit up for a moment. "But where am I to see her?" he muttered. "Isn't that just like a woman? Well, she'll have to come here, that's all. My boots don't go on again for any one. Lord! I didn't know a man could be so tired."

It was little more than a slum garret that his sister had taken for him, with a lean-to roof, worn-out linoleum, and a broken window over which a piece of brown paper had been pasted. A musty smell of cooking came up from the ground-floor, where there was a dirty Italian restaurant in which he had a limited daily account for meals. Nor did Hilda spare him there—coming in once a-week to settle his account instead of letting him have the money.

He sat on the edge of a tiny truckle-bed and rolled a cigarette. He had made a confidential arrangement with Mr Favrola—the oily-looking proprietor of the restaurant below—to supply him with whisky and charge it up as food to his sister,—three meals for a bottle. He didn't want the food, and spirits had become a necessity. He poured out half a tumbler, which he drank nearly neat, and composed himself to sleep.

Although this was early afternoon, he was still snoring heavily when Hilda Tregarth came to find him. "Wake up, you drunken beast," she cried violently, shaking him by the shoulder. "Where have you got your drink from?"

The sleeper rubbed his eyes and sat up yawning.
"Hullo, Hilda. So you've come."

However reprehensible his indolence, she saw at a glance that at least he was sober enough to understand the business in hand.

"Where have you been to-day?" she inquired, taking off her gloves and hat. Roger pulled a grimace at the significant action. Hitherto she had never stayed more than a quarter of an hour at the most, but this looked horribly as if he were in for a night of it.

He gave her a wealth of geographical particulars with all the careful detail of untruth. "Usual round, you

know. Piccadilly, Knightsbridge, Kensington, Notting Hill, Bayswater. I went through the Park twice."

"Slept on the grass, I suppose. Well, never mind. I told you you were on the wrong track. You judge Bevington by yourself. You think because he has got this money he will loaf round the West. Didn't I say to you a week ago that we shall find him in the City? But no. I suppose there isn't enough grass to lie on round the Bank and the Mansion House."

"It was in the Park that we saw him."

"Yes, once. And then we were fools enough to imagine that he didn't notice us; as if anything ever escapes that man. Anyway, he's at work, as we might have expected him to be—and in the City. I saw him to-day in Newgate Street."

"Any one might be there."

"He had no hat on."

"Did you track him?"

"He went into some offices in Cheapside. I was on the top of a 'bus, and by the time I got down he had disappeared, so that I couldn't be quite sure which building he went into. Here are the names of the offices. Is there anything there that might be his?"

Roger looked down the list and shook his head. "He might be any of these, for all I know. He's not likely to go under his own name."

"Well, we're going to find him now, and the sooner you do it the better."

"Have I got to walk up and down Newgate Street?"

"Unpleasant associations? No; I've got a better plan than that."

She took out a cutting from a newspaper, and passed it over to him. It was an advertisement asking for canvassers to sell a new work of reference to City offices. Roger Tregarth made a grimace of disgust.

"Rotten job," he exclaimed.

"It's the very thing you want. It will give you the excuse you want when you have found him—the air of pure accident."

"Wait till I *do* find him." Tregarth gritted his teeth

as some of his old vindictive self blazed up for the moment.

" You'll be very terrible, no doubt," sneered his sister. " That's one of the subjects I want to discuss. What are we going to do when we have found him ? "

" Let's find him first."

" That's like you. Am I to do it all ? Brains, money, energy, everything ? Pull yourself together. Wait till we find him ? What then ? Don't you think I know you, Roger ? When you come face to face with him you'll borrow half a sovereign, and slink out like a whipped cur."

" Oh, shall I ? "

" You talk big now, but that man holds you in the hollow of his hand, and you know it. Suppose you go in with your melodramatic threatenings—you never would, but suppose you did—what then ? He knows perfectly well you won't cut off your nose to spite your face by exposing him, and he will show you out with that inimitable way of his. No, Roger. We've practically got to write our dialogue, and you've got to rehearse it."

" Go ahead then."

" The atmosphere's the thing. It's got to be friendly—very friendly. You're on your beam-ends, you tell him ; selling books on commission."

" Just so."

" You'll even get him to give you an order—which he will do at once. Meantime not a word about your share of the money."

" Pooh, Hilda," broke in her brother impatiently. " You're like a child for all your cleverness. That's a woman's idea of a conspiracy, got from a penny novellette or some cheap melodrama. A man like Bevington would never be taken in for a second. You'll have to leave it to me. I'll take this job on, and I'll find him ; and when I've found him I'll decide how to act and what to say, but not before."

Hilda Tregarth looked at her brother with some surprise at the sudden reassertion of his rights as a man.

For the last two weeks she had drifted completely into the habit of ignoring him. But there was fire in his sunken eyes, and a flush of something—whether shame or energy—on his swarthy cheeks. He paced the room quickly several times.

"I'll do it, Hilda," he said; "though I'm not going to pretend I like it. You can call it what you like, but it's a dirty piece of blackmail, and it's too damned dangerous."

CHAPTER XVI.

DURING the first few weeks of his new life Neil Wishart seemed to walk on air. He had not been invited again to the flat at Palmyra Mansions, certainly; nor had he seen anything of Nan; but that things were going on well he divined from the never-failing jollity of his chief. Besides, his work made him busy and happy. The first anxious days were past. Quick-witted and untiring, he had soon dropped into his routine, and he knew without being told that he was giving satisfaction to the great man who ruled over his destinies.

Compared with the deserted appearance of the office during the time that Mr Dittany and he had worked literally with their coats off, it had become a hive of industry. One by one, starting with the eccentric Mr Maplin, new members had been added to their staff. There was the accountant himself, a ledger clerk who was bald-headed and was called Paterson, a junior clerk, and an office boy.

Neil was doing his utmost to qualify for the post that Providence had sent him. He had borrowed the book on Company Law from Mr Dittany, and had already acquired enough undigested material to wreck the soundest company ever floated, if he had had a free hand. He read all the correspondence that went out of the office (not that there was much of importance yet), and never missed an opportunity of a long chat with the astute Peter Maplin. He did not hear again such a farrago of cynical worldly wisdom as that which had left so unpleasant a taste in his mouth on the occasion

of their first interview—possibly the little man had received his instructions on that point from Dittany himself—but his conversation could not fail to be instructive.

Meantime real business began to be mingled with the active preparations for it, that had filled up every one's time at the beginning. Worried-looking men sidled in to make inquiries—suspicious for the most part, and evidently inclined to regard the whole thing as a mysterious swindle. Yet they always went out reassured. Mr Dittany was not the man to scare a fly before it was safely in the web. The fixed impression of the applicants when they first came was that it was a new kind of moneylender's, worked very artfully no doubt, and with a great flourish of trumpets in the matter of office furniture, but of course a dodge somewhere. But when they found they could fill in their form without any preliminary fee, and when it was driven into their minds that the London and Provincial Industrial Mortgage Corporation, Limited, really didn't care a jot whether they did business with them or not, they began to pluck up their courage, and to think that here at last was a sensible firm who knew when a man could be trusted as a borrower.

Because, with all the clear indifference of the corporation, they were treated civilly. That was the pith of it. They were not cross-examined and browbeaten like common thieves; their statements and estimates of the huge margin of solvency, which they one and all enjoyed, never drew an incredulous smile with their prodigious optimism. They were believed, and treated as gentlemen; and there is nothing a man who has been chronically insolvent for a great many years likes better in the way of treatment.

But, above all, the young man who took the particulars from them at the solid mahogany counter was the real thing. Kindly, courteous, considerate, with a straight eye that looked a man clear in the face without evasion—that was not the man who was going to assist in cheating them. Assuredly Mr Dittany had known what

he was about when he allotted the task of the preliminary interviews to Neil Wishart.

As usual, he had flattered the strenuous secretary when he had told him off for this duty. "I rely implicitly on your judgment, Wishart," he said. "This is what I call the application book. You will copy out every form you receive at the counter, and note down immediately your first impressions of the applicant. It will be largely on that judgment that I shall act in deciding whether to make a loan or not."

Beginning with a thin trickling stream, their callers soon became a substantial river. Their attractive advertisements were being inserted every day in all the leading papers, and Wishart was kept hard at it. His copying of the forms became a task beyond his powers, and Mr Dittany engaged a junior clerk for him without the slightest hesitation. A typist had come during the first week for Mr Dittany's letters. Another was speedily added for the special use of old Peter Maplin, who was literally humming with work; and a third appeared on the scene before a month was out. Things were evidently looking up.

When Wishart had dealt with the forms, they were passed on to the accountant's department, where Mr Maplin brooded like a very bony spider. For the first few days, till she became used to him, his typist could hardly work for laughing at his eccentric comments. He ran through each form audibly. "Ha! Nice man!" he would cry. "Solvent, of course—who isn't? Takes us for children. Now, I ask you, Miss Marchant, do I look like a child? Five, six, two. Where's his depreciation. He's one of those men who never depreciate."

But, for all his loquacity, Mr Maplin worked rapidly and with a system. He had three or four stereotyped forms for his refusals. There was the point-blank refusal, without equivocation; there was the qualified refusal asking for further security; there was the semi-refusal (and this was the commonest of them all), which was not sure that anything could be done, but said

that if the applicant cared to pay such and such a sum to have his books audited, an advance might be negotiated.

There was such a transparent honesty and disinterestedness about this last. It seemed to say, "Do as you like. We really don't want to be bothered with you. We don't think there is enough security, but if you think there is you must back your judgment by paying out out-of-pocket expenses first. Only don't blame us afterwards if nothing comes of it."

But such is human nature, and especially the human nature of men who clutch at any straw that will mock them with salvation before they sink for the last time in the waters of failure, that Peter Maplin was soon quite busy with audits in every quarter of London, and as happy as a sandboy. To do Mr Dittany justice, he had a contempt for this sordid variety of swindle, and made up his mind to put a stop to it as soon as he could. Meantime, however, till more important things came along, it was essential to keep old Maplin occupied, and to let him make some money on his own account. He looked up therefore with a smile of pleasure when the old accountant came shuffling into his room with an air of mystery, and closed the door tightly behind him.

"Here's two that'll do, I think," he said. "Listen to this." He poured out a torrent of staccato details: "Edward James Mitchell, brass-caster, Hackney Wick. Established twenty-seven years. Married man, eight children. Wages last year, £962; turnover, £2300; stock in hand—metal, £220; patterns, £100. . . . Wipe out patterns, Mr Dittany, sir. Fetch about £5 breaking-up price. Book debts—good, £135; doubtful, £25. Office furniture, £50. Cause of application, over-purchase of metal to secure bargain—long credits. Eight children something to do with it, though he doesn't say so, but children no good as security. Sounds all right. I've put an inquiry through Stubbs. I'll run down and have a look round if you like. Shan't ask him for audit fees. Other one's a cabinetmaker."

Mr Maplin recited the cabinetmaker's financial history with equal gusto, and cracked his knuckles as he waited for his chief's verdict.

Mr Dittany had taken the forms from the auditor's hands and perused them in silence.

"I'll go down myself," he said at last. "They're both close together."

"Good. Take the young innocent with you. Gives a good impression."

Mr Dittany smiled with significant assent.

The "young innocent" felt the honour of his invitation to accompany Mr Dittany with a glow of pleasure, that his opinion on such a matter should have been sought. "Keep your eyes open for little things," said his chief on the way down in the train. "Nods and winks to clerks or workmen when they think my back is turned. Those are the things that count. Never lose sight of the fact that however straight and honourable these men appear to be on the surface, they are pressed for money, and will tell lies and do things they wouldn't dream of if they were flush. We are not out to blame them—merely to see that we are not swindled."

But, for all his cautioning, he could see nothing in the behaviour of Mitchell, the brass-caster, to call for remark. If ever there was an upright, conscientious man, here was one. He met them in the yard of his works with a respectful deference that had nothing cringing about it. He was a short, thick-set man with hair going grey about the temples. He had been playing with a little flaxen-haired girl, who left the rough knee she had been hugging to gaze up open-mouthed at the strangers. Mr Dittany patted her affectionately on her head, and she smiled up at him with complete confidence. Mitchell seemed puzzled at first at the presence of two gentlemen, and a little afraid until he recognised Wishart, whom he had seen at Holborn.

"Ah, you've come from the Debenture Company," he began; "if you'd let me know . . ."

Mr Dittany's manner was delightfully frank.

"We surprised you on purpose, Mr Mitchell," he smiled. "Some people have a way of making preparations you know."

Mitchell flushed. "There's nothing like that about me, sir. You'll find everything open and above-board."

"I'm quite sure now. But then I hadn't seen you when I decided."

The subtle compliment evidently made a good impression. "You'll be wanting to see the place?" he asked.

"Presently. Have you got an office where we can talk?"

The man led the way into a little hutch of a place, and found two stools which he dusted with his sleeve.

"I have got the particulars you filled in," began Mr Dittany. "Now, frankly, what's the difficulty?"

"A bill due in less than a week."

"How much?"

"£92 odd."

"What for?"

"Metal."

"And you can't find it?"

"I shouldn't have come to you else. I must have £50."

Mr Dittany appeared to be thinking.

"Must have it, I tell you," continued the brass-caster. A flush of excitement was rising in his face. "I'm fair strangled for capital. Man and boy I've worked at this business for thirty years, and always paid my way. Ask any one round here. Never owed a penny till now."

"Trade bad, then?"

"Never better. Can't get the work out. But what with bad debts and long credits I'm fair strangled."

"Bad debts? You say nothing here about bad debts."

"All over and done with, sir, two years ago. I was let in for three hundred when the Bedstead Company went broke, and I haven't got over it yet. That's the only one I've made to speak of."

" You keep books, of course ? "

" Yes, sir."

" May I glance through them ? "

Mr Dittany went hurriedly through the roughly-kept books with the sure touch of an expert.

" This account of the Whitworth Foundry Company, now," he said presently. " You debit them with £29, 14s. They pay you £25, and you carry down £4, 14s. to Profit and Loss. Why ? "

" Had to, sir. Whatever happens, the men have to be paid. I had to offer to take £25 to get anything at all."

" But it's your profit on it ? "

" About that."

" More ? "

Mitchell coloured up with confusion. " Well, p'raps a bit," he admitted.

" And I suppose there are other cases like it. How long do you think your business is going on like that ? While we're at it, let's see what your profit is."

In less than two minutes Mr Dittany had all the figures at his fingers' ends, while Wishart looked on in admiring wonderment. Cost of metal, price of labour, percentage of waste, proportion of fuel and crucibles all went into the melting-pot of his rapid calculations. The man was truly marvellous. He seemed to have as much technical knowledge of the casting trade as the man who stood humbly by giving the information, and a head for figures that even old Pete Maplin might have envied.

" But you can't do it at the price," he said at last irritably.

" Competition, sir. Others do, and I must, or lose the business."

" Then for Heaven's sake lose it, man, if that's the best you can do. Better be an idle fool than a busy fool. But if others do it, you can. Where's the difference ? It's in the price you pay for your metal, depend upon it."

" Only the market price, sir."

"I suppose you buy ingot copper at somewhere about eighty, and fine it down with spelter at twenty-six. Why don't you use scrap?"

"I never have done, sir. It works up inferior."

"Well, you're getting an inferior price. You might as well sell sovereigns for eighteen shillings apiece as to carry on the business the way you are doing. Let's have a glance round the place, if you don't mind."

The three men went from shed to shed, Mr Dittany and Mitchell abreast, and Wishart following humbly after. He had begun to feel very insignificant again. His chief was putting his finger infallibly on all the weak spots. Nothing seemed too trifling to avert his comment. "You ought to keep that spelter under cover," he said. "You'll get a man throwing in a wet piece one of these days, and lose his eye. The lock on this shed isn't strong enough. You mean to say you let the men help themselves to what metal they want? You don't weigh it out? It's wicked."

But when the inspection was over, his manner changed instantly. It was the old difference between his business and his social side, and the poor brass-caster's anger at the lecture he had received evaporated as quickly as it had arisen.

"Well, what do you think of your chance of doing anything for me, sir?" he asked hopefully. But the expectations raised by Mr Dittany's smiles were damped.

"Nothing at all under present conditions," was the curt reply. "I'll let you know to-night. You haven't any time to lose. I don't feel disposed to put my own money in it, but I could introduce some—say five hundred, if you are prepared to be reasonable."

Mitchell gasped at five hundred. "It would make my fortune," he said. To which Mr Dittany replied that it might if he had a business man to help him. "A partner, sir?" asked Mitchell, his jaw dropping a little with disappointment. "Not necessarily. I'll let you know by to-morrow. Is that your house at the end of the yard?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wonder whether it would be convenient to give us a cup of tea."

Mr Mitchell tumbled over himself in his anxiety to oblige the great man. He went in, leaving them alone for a minute, and they caught a glimpse through a window of a woman with a scared, white face, who nervously untied an apron and patted her scanty locks with apprehension.

But Mr Dittany speedily put her at her ease. He had a way with women, even of the most humble kind, a way that was respectful, courteous, yet gently bantering. Mrs Mitchell was a quiet, colourless woman, with limpid blue eyes that fastened themselves helplessly on any one who was good enough to speak to her, and a look in them as if she would start running about at the least word of command. Yet she was clearly a perfect wife of her kind. Her house was spotlessly clean, from the burnished kettle singing on the brilliant hob, to the white lace curtains which must have had such a struggle for supremacy with the reek of green smoke from the casting sheds. The children, too, who came peeping shyly in from time to time, were well fed and tidy. Mr Dittany was most affable to them, taking them on his knee and giving them pennies all round.

It was late in the afternoon when they got back to Holborn. Dittany wanted to call in at the Post Office, and sent Wishart on ahead, saying he would be back in two minutes.

There was a dark man standing at the counter when Neil reached the office.

"Are you being attended to?" he asked.

"Not yet. I want to show you our new Business Vade Mecum. We . . ."

"I'm afraid it's not in our line."

"But if you'll allow me. Your principal, perhaps."

"He's out."

"What is the best time to catch him?"

"Really, I don't know. It's only wasting your time."

The canvasser was pertinacious. "I apologise for my

persistence," he said, "but if I took refusals at the counter, I might starve."

There was a well-known step on the staircase.

"Here he is himself, then," said Wishart with irritation. "You'd better ask him."

The door opened, and Edward Dittany stood facing the seller of books.

CHAPTER XVII.

IT was perhaps the highest tribute that could be paid to Edward Dittany's sangfroid and self-possession that he took the shock of meeting Roger Tregarth—the man of all men whose reappearance from the cauldron of his past he dreaded most—without flinching, and without the smallest token that the encounter was anything but a pleasant surprise. Indeed, of the two standing there it was Tregarth himself who was the more nervous and hesitating. His nerves seemed to go to pieces on the instant; his face went pale, and he clutched for support to the counter behind him, scattering a parcel of volumes to the floor in his perturbation.

His old confederate affected not to notice his emotion. He stepped forward with outstretched hand.

"Well, this *is* a surprise!" he exclaimed. "How did you find me? Come inside. I've been hunting for you everywhere."

He opened the low swing door as he spoke, and ushered his visitor into the office. Tregarth adjusted his features to represent a sneer of incredulity, which was not a success. He was palpably afraid, artificially affecting a pose he was far from feeling. In the private room, away from the prying eyes of clerks, and with the green baize door tightly closed behind them, he breathed a little more freely. He braced himself up for his great effort.

"You're a cool hand, Bevington," he began. "But it won't take me in. Once bit, twice shy. You've tried to dodge me."

"Nonsense, man. You're broken down with your trouble. Was I ever the man to go back on my friends?"

"I never thought so, but you've proved yourself. You broke me, and when I had served your purpose you threw me away like so much dirt."

"On the contrary, my dear Tregarth, I wrote you at Shropbury Gaol the moment I had fixed up an address."

"You're a liar, Bevington."

"I'll make allowances for you, my dear boy. I understand your feelings."

He unlocked a drawer in the bottom of the big safe that stood in the corner, and took out an envelope of the Dead Letter Office. "Read for yourself," he said, with a quiet smile.

Tregarth took the letter in his hand, glancing doubtfully from the writing on it to the man who stood triumphantly over him. Then he carefully examined the date of the postmark. "Eighteenth?" he remarked. "That's two days after I came out. You knew it, I suppose."

"What date did your time expire?"

Tregarth made no reply. He saw the point, but left the other man to make it.

"You were due out on the 26th. Open it."

Tregarth tore the envelope and took out the letter it contained. It was a request, couched in the most friendly terms, asking him to communicate directly he was set at liberty. It took the sting out of his attack. He guessed the truth. He had more than a shrewd suspicion that the clever rascal who stood smiling before him had timed the letter with infallible judgment and unerring accuracy, confidently foreseeing some such necessity as the present for clearing himself; but he could not prove it, and he stood there toying with the piece of evidence, incredulous and perplexed.

He decided at last to play the game out according to the rules that Dittany was pleased to lay down—the game of complete confidence—but he mixed too much sarcasm with it to play it well.

"Sorry to misjudge you, old chap," he said. "What a blow it must have been to you when you couldn't find me."

Dittany ignored the remark. He carefully maintained his high level of pleasantry and pleasure.

"Well, now you're here, sit down. You're not in a hurry, are you?" he added with a shade of anxiety in his voice.

Tregarth laughed—an evil, mocking laugh which rasped its hearer, and made him put out all his powers to fight down the danger that had sprung upon him so suddenly.

"I daresay I can find time to hear all the news," he sneered. "I've sold all the books I'm likely to sell to-day—or ever, perhaps."

"Books? Poor chap!" Mr Dittany ignored the grim significance of the "ever," and threw as much sympathy into his expression of commiseration for such a penurious calling as he could.

"I don't want your pity," said Tregarth.

"Help, I suppose. Well, to a limited extent I can help you too. It is what I had in my mind when I wrote to you."

"Ah, now you're talking business."

"At the same time, Tregarth, let me advise you strongly to drop this pinchbeck attempt at bullying me. I can see through it and you. The only effect it can possibly have is to irritate me. If you have come here as an old friend, asking me to set you on your feet again, well and good; but if you have come to start a system of blackmail, then, by God, Tregarth, I'll destroy you. I'll never rest till I see you in the gutter."

Mr Dittany's pent-up anger, so sternly suppressed up till now, burst out like a devastating whirlwind. His great eyes blazed, and the fist that banged the table was white at the knuckles. A blue swollen vein stood out like cord on his temple. Tregarth shrank back in alarm. He tried to laugh easily, but his own voice sounded thin and strange in his ears.

"Easy, old fellow," he said, with a pitiful attempt at bravado. "Who said anything about blackmail?"

"That's all right, then," said the other, sinking back into his apathy.

"At the same time," continued Tregarth, plucking at the skirts of his courage, "you can't expect a fellow to feel very charmed at your methods. What's the good of saying you tried to find me, when you deliberately dodged Hilda and myself the day we saw you in the Park?"

Mr Dittany was genuinely astonished, and frowned in a futile effort at recollection.

"In the Park?" he repeated. "What park?"

"Of course you're going to deny it. You'll deny, I suppose, that you dragged us right down Piccadilly and slipped through the Gambrinus while we were waiting for you to come out?"

"Ah, I remember now. I went through to see a man I had promised to meet there. Why didn't you speak?"

"Because we wanted to find out where you live."

"I can't be responsible for your absurd suspicions. Well, I'm busy. What do you want me to do?"

"You can find me something to do."

It was a pitiful come-down from the heroic dreams the man had indulged in for the last few weeks, and Dittany was quick to see his power over the weaker man.

"If you mean here," he said, "it's quite out of the question. I'll do anything in reason. Best of references, and so on; but to take you on here would be courting disaster, doubling our chances of recognition. Get something to do, and I'll back you up. I can't talk to you now. Come and see me on Saturday. Perhaps you will have heard of something by that time."

Mr Dittany turned with a gesture of impatience to the pile of papers on his desk, and started writing busily. Tregarth made no effort to move, but sat watching him in fidgety silence, a dumb rage gnawing at his heart. With all the cards in his hand he felt himself quite impotent. He knew that he was beaten, and would always be beaten. Only the despair of going out once more starving into the wilderness of the grey

London he had tramped for so many weary days, the dread of confessing his failure to Hilda, and the knowledge that he would henceforth be without even the mocking hope of what would happen when he had found his man, kept him waiting for more to be said. A sidelong glance at the strong immovable features showed him against what a wall of adamant he was running his head. Dittany grew restive under his gaze and his silence, and turned round to him with lifted brows.

"Well?" he asked coldly. "Are you going?"

"Yes," replied Tregarth, with bitter desperation in his voice. "I'm going. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"I suppose . . ."

"Well?"

"You couldn't lend me a sovereign, could you? I'm starving."

Mr Dittany took out his sovereign case, and handed him the coin. There was implied contempt in the silence of the action. Tregarth took the money and went out.

He had muttered some words of thanks, but when he reached the street, he stood stock-still, with hands clenched, and cursed aloud.

Yet if he could have looked back into the room he had just left he would have exulted. If he could have seen that calm, cold man, who had been so strong and contemptuous, stand trembling at the window, wiping away the beads of sweat that had gathered on his forehead, he would have returned then and there and delivered his ultimatum point-blank.

For courage is a fixed quantity between foes, and what one loses is the other's gain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR EDWARD MITCHELL had locked the big gate behind the last of his men, had taken a final look round the yard, and seen that the shed where the copper ingots were stacked high had been made secure, and now sat thoughtfully stirring his tea while he listened to the spluttering hiss of sausages frying in the scullery. When his wife came in with the smoking dish, wiping the bottom of it carefully before she set it on the spotless cloth, he pushed a chair towards her, and laid an affectionate hand on her arm.

"Sit down, old Dutch," he said, "and let's have a word together afore the kids come in."

"Well, let me see to the taters first," she urged.

Mr Mitchell, full of his subject, broke straight into the topic that was filling his mind.

"What do you think of this here Mr Dittany?" he asked.

Mrs Mitchell was a woman slow of speech and cautious of judgment. She had a habit of concealing her poverty of ideas behind a veil of impenetrable gravity, which, in spite of eighteen years of married life, her husband mistook for the summit of wisdom. She thought Mr Dittany seemed a very kind gentleman, and well spoken.

Mr Mitchell nodded with pleasure at the confirmation of his own estimate. "And sharp," he added. "Quick as a needle he is. You ought to have heard him putting me to rights about the works."

"He can't teach you nothing, my dear."

"I ain't so sure about that. I've been thinking over what he says, and there's a good deal in it. Fact is, old girl," he went on humbly, "I ain't no good at book-keeping. When it comes to throwing a cast I can lay over any one, but figures never was my strong point. He says I'm working at a loss."

"Maybe you are, maybe you ain't," she said oracularly. "Figures ain't everything."

"Right for you there, my dear. But they takes a deal of explaining away for all that—a deal of explaining. And there's no denying that since Jimsons came into the district the trade's been cut to ribbons."

"How can they do it?"

"Just the very thing I said to him. But when you come to think of it, they've got ways I don't hold by. I clean my castings, and they send 'em in all full of dirt, and dirt weighs a lot on a big order. Then look at their stuff. Looks all right at first, I admit; but how's it going to look after a year's wear. They never use no antimony, and their works never sees the colour of tin. Course they can do it."

"Anyways, you've got a clear conscience, Ted."

"Ay, but a clear conscience won't meet this here bill; and a clear conscience won't send our Nellie to the seaside, to give her lungs a chance from the fumes of the brass."

"Did you see the gentleman at the bank?"

"He's done me in, too. There ain't an honest man in the world as far as I can see. 'About this here overdraft,' he says as pleasant as pie, 'we've gone as far as we can,' he says. 'Of course, we trust you; but supposing you was to die, how do we stand then?' 'That's quite reasonable,' I says. 'I'll tell you how it might be done,' he says. 'Take out a life policy for £200, and lodge it with us as collateral security. Here's a good company I'm an agent for myself. Fill in this form, and we'll debit your account with the premium.' Like a fool I does it, and when I goes round this morning to see if it's all right, I find they've increased my over-

draft by ten pounds, which is used up in paying the insurance premium, so that I don't get one penny out of it. I'm a blooming child in the hands of these sharps,—that's what I am."

He stabbed a sausage with as much vicious zeal as if it had been the person of the wily bank manager, but his face lighted up as a young girl came into the room and took her seat at the table. "Hullo, Nell! How goes it? Bit more perky, eh?"

"I'm much better to-day, father," she answered, with a bright smile that, do what she would, tapered off into weariness.

"That's the style," he cried heartily. "Met old Tom Buckle to-day, and he says we're bound to have a change of wind before morning. He's been a sailor, and sailors can smell a change a mile off."

Mr Mitchell was always meeting old Tom Buckle, and old Tom Buckle was everlastingly reported to have prophesied a change of wind. A mighty subject was that of the wind, for when it blew from the east it carried greenish poisonous fumes from the smelting-pots right over the house and through it, sowing irritation to their tempers, despair in the heart of the cleanly Mrs Mitchell, and the seeds of death in the lungs of the girl who was now trying so bravely to choke down the hacking cough that worried her parents.

"Seen the doctor, Nellie?" asked her mother.

"Yes, mother."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, it's all right, I suppose."

"But what did he say?"

"He's coming round to see you, he says."

Mitchell and his wife exchanged a glance shot through with terror.

There are heroes of the home as well as on the battle-field: men who keep a stiff upper lip when disaster stares them in the face, who hide the worst of their dread from those dear to them with a smile and a jest. And women, too, who will fight like a wounded tigress to save their own, denying themselves the smallest of

luxuries and the least atom of comfort if by so doing they can preserve the ties that bind them to love and happiness.

Edward Mitchell and his wife were heroes in their small way. The man's back was to the wall. He had shot his last bolt. He had striven worthily all his life, and the end was at hand. Yet his voice was loud and cheerful; he teased his wife, and made quiet fun of the children; he jested and joked hilariously.

When the youngsters had gone to bed he and his wife sat on waiting for the post. Mr Dittany had promised to write as soon as he got back, and Mitchell hoped against hope that there would be favourable news for them. But when the postman's steps had gone past, he took off his spectacles and folded the paper he had been trying to read.

"Old 'un," he said when they had retired, "I ain't good enough myself. As often as not when I ought to be at chapel I'm waiting for the pubs to open. But you're a good 'un, mother. Just tack on a bit of a prayer that this here Mr Dittany 'll see us through. It's our last chance."

CHAPTER XIX.

THERE were many things to which Mr Dittany had to give his consideration in those early days, and very serious consideration, too. One of them, and not the least pressing, was the question of Tregarth. Knowing as he did the tortuous ways of blackmailers and the nature of his former colleague, he was by no means under the illusion that he had exorcised the evil thing with the sovereign he had paid for a momentary peace. Was he to go on buying his immunity at as cheap a rate as possible, or should he put down his foot once and for all, braving the worst that could happen? Pity for Tregarth did not enter into his calculations, not that he was without a sort of fantastic humanity on occasion, but because Tregarth had been directly responsible for his trouble in Shropbury, and because he was a man who never forgave. What he had told Nan was technically correct. He had had no hand in the original "cooking" of the accounts which brought them both into trouble, but though he preferred to back up the fraud rather than face honourable disaster, he had never forgiven the act, and never would.

Sooner or later, he told himself, he would rub the wretched man's face in the dust, forcing him lower even than he had already become, but the time was not yet. The man might be down, but he had a sting left. Give the Debenture Corporation time to justify his—Dittany's—faith in it, and he would fear not even exposure. A year, perhaps, or at the most eighteen months, and then let Tregarth look out for himself. Meantime—that was

the point—how was he to be kept quiet? It was not the actual expenditure of the money he grudged; he would gladly have paid a thousand to keep the rascal's mouth shut. But he knew he was on a slope when he started paying out—a slope that had a precipice at the foot of it. Tregarth was a man who never tried to live under some twelve hundred a-year. His habits were luxurious, his tastes gross and extravagant. The knowledge that he had only to ask in order to receive would grow with its proof in practice.

The picture of Nan flashed through his mind. He bore a grudge against his daughter for the obstacles she kept throwing in his way. But for her absurd scruples she would have been his salvation. He took it for base ingratitude that her actions made her so unreliable. She could have kept Tregarth quiet if only she would consent to swallow her hatred of the man for twelve months or so. His infatuation for her might possibly have died out through absence; but a little encouragement would bring him to her feet again, and the rest would be easy. He called to mind a scene that had occurred in Shropbury: Nan's quiet pale face and flashing eyes when she had come to him with her scornful story of his partner's overtures, and, optimist though he was, he knew he must look elsewhere for assistance. Nan had taken Tregarth's proposal as an insult of the worst kind. His reputation had been so bad, and his affairs in Shropbury so notorious, that even now, though she had long since ceased to speak or even to think consciously of the subject, the recollection left behind it a bitter sense as of humiliation.

However much Mr Dittany might have respected the purity that shrank so horror-stricken from the pollution of such a man, in his capacity as a man of business he regretted it. The girl could have played with him, holding him at arm's length until the time came to give him his final *congé*. There would be no harm done, and the situation would be saved.

Nevertheless, Nan being impossible as an ally, something else would have to be done, and that quickly.

Some words of old Peter Maplin came back to him. "Don't take options yourself," he had said. "Figure-head—dummy—man of straw—tame vendor." He wondered whether, under any circumstances, Tregarth might be persuaded to become a tame vendor—a man who, if disaster came, could be thrown to the wolves. He could not hope to deceive him. Tregarth's knowledge of company law was as complete and well equipped as his own: he would know the risk he was running. He would know that, if he bought impecunious concerns to sell to a new company, he would have to shoulder their liabilities, with the almost certain chance of being left callously in the lurch. His own plans were so well formulated that he could easily see what would happen. He had no intention of trying to run these businesses he was acquiring. The moment he had squeezed them dry he would foreclose on his debenture and put them into liquidation. It was so ridiculously simple. A bill would fail to be met, a restraint made, and his company would step in before the other creditors. But in such a case how would Tregarth shape in the witness-box? Would he hold his tongue, or would he give his old confederate away in order to save himself?

Yet men in the grip of necessity did queer and unexpected things, and reckless men with nothing to lose, not even a good name, might easily be persuaded to take a risk for a mess of pottage. There was one point in the scheme that commended itself to the far-sighted plotter. Tregarth, if he undertook the job, would see at once the necessity of keeping in the background. There would be no need to impress him with the danger of showing his face in the office.

Meanwhile the subject of all this searching thought for his future remained unconscious of his power to intimidate. When he had left Dittany with futile rage consuming the very marrow of his bones, he sent a wire to his sister announcing the success of his search, and occupied the hours that elapsed before he kept the appointment he had made with her in concocting a tale that would put him in as favourable a light as possible.

He was heartily afraid of Hilda. He dreaded the sharpness of her tongue and the penetration of her acute mind. If he could have done without her help he would have walked ten miles to avoid her, but as far as his broken nerves would permit he braced himself up for the ordeal.

Yet her face, when he met her, went far to reassure him. For once her contempt for him had given way to a keener emotion. Her deep-set eyes glowed with vindictive joy, and she clung to his arm with a trembling excitement that might have passed for a deep affection.

"I forgive you everything for this, Rogie. Let's have a nice little dinner together where we can talk to our hearts' content."

It was the first time for years that he remembered her to have used the diminutive of his name, and he plucked up his courage as he heard it. The vindictive spite with which she welcomed the news of the finding of their mutual enemy gave him a throb of pleasure, and the evil in her face a pang of brotherly pride. The load of contempt with which she had oppressed him had been added to her hate for Dittany. He suddenly found himself with an ally instead of a critic, and his spirits soared like a fired rocket. In his altered mood he lied freely.

"Good news, eh, my dear?"

They had taken their seats at a secluded table in the first restaurant they encountered.

"Great!" she exclaimed. "Tell me everything from the start. I've never known an afternoon so long. How did he take it? Start right from the beginning."

"He came in while I was in his office. You ought to have seen his jaw drop. Shylock's, when he tumbled to that little matter of the pound of flesh, was nothing to it. You could have knocked him down with a feather."

"How lovely! Where is he? What's he doing?"

"Malvern House, Holborn Viaduct. Good offices, everything tiptop. Some elaborate swindle, of course. I didn't have time to tumble to it. But there's money there. Big staff and all that sort of thing."

"Well, go on. What did he say?"

"You know his off-hand way. He tried to take me in with a cock-and-bull story that he'd been looking for me everywhere, but I soon settled his little hash by telling him about giving us the slip in Regent Street. Told him it wouldn't do. Then he began pretending to pity me for coming down so low as selling books over office counters. I cursed him up and down, and said I wanted my share of the money, not his pity. The way he begged me not to speak too loud would have made you laugh."

"That doesn't sound like Bevington."

"Perhaps not, but the man's scared. Says, of course, he'll help me."

"We'll see to that. Well, how did it end?"

"I've given him till Saturday to think it over. Of course, the sudden shock of finding him put a lot of things I had meant to say out of my head. In any case, I wanted to have a good talk with you first. When I go in on Saturday I must have our ultimatum ready. The question is, are we to go for the lot at once or fasten ourselves on him?"

Hilda Tregarth had no sort of doubt.

"Bevington's a man who will make a fortune anywhere," she said. "Stick to him quietly at first. It's no good killing the goose with the golden eggs. We've got our knife in him now, and we can give it a twist whenever he gets awkward. Look here, Roger," she continued fervently, "I've brought some money out with me. Get something decent to put on. Poverty will never go down with him. And let him know clearly that the book business was only a blind to find him. Take this bank-note—and, by the bye, you'd better shift your lodgings. Get a good address, if it is only for a week or two. See me again to-morrow. I've got a lot of thinking to do."

"You understand," she continued later, "I'm going to have a hand in this. A woman's touch is surer than a man's, and I'm not so much afraid of him as you are. Share and share alike, that's the bargain."

Roger Tregarth was in a mood of high generosity.

He agreed to her terms with all the airiness of a born gambler. Yet this same generosity led him into a fatal mistake. His sister furtively pushed a half-sovereign towards him to pay for their meal, but he waved it aside.

"I'm paying for this," he said.

He laid a handful of loose silver ostentatiously on the cloth, the change from the sovereign he had extracted with so much humiliation from Bevington. Hilda looked at him wonderingly for a moment, and a frown of anger came between her eyes.

"Where did you get that money?" she demanded imperiously.

"Where do you think?" he blustered. He saw the mistake into which he had fallen, and the woman at his side was quick to detect the shame of the knowledge.

"Oh, you utter fool!" she said bitterly. "I might have known you were lying. He's beaten you, then? You've cadged that money from him."

CHAPTER XX.

IT was two full days after Mr Dittany's visit before Edward Mitchell received his promised letter. The delay left him in a fever of anxiety. Already the demon of bankruptcy had fastened its claws in him. A note had come from the bank advising him that the bill had been presented for payment, and asking him to put them in credit to meet it by the following Thursday. Like a hare before a snake, the poor man was too paralysed to exert himself. Several times a day he reached down his hat with the intention of going to town, and every time he replaced it with a sigh. No longer did he trouble to collect accounts. His wife watched him furtively with her big blue eyes, but the emergency was too profound for her to offer any counsel. She went about her ordinary duties as methodically as ever. The curtains were washed, the brass work scrubbed, and the stone steps up to the kitchen scrupulously hearthstoned. In a subtle way it showed her trust in things. She was one of those women who do not believe that when a certain way of life has gone on for twenty-seven years it is within the power of Fate ever to alter it. To such there is a statute of limitations for disaster, an inalienable right of way to perpetual happiness, ancient lights that may never brick up the windows of joy.

"You shouldn't ha' worried yourself, Ted," she said when the promised letter at last actually arrived. "I knew it 'ud be all right."

There was not much in it when it came, except vague

hope, Mr Dittany not being the man to put more than he could help in writing. Merely a request that Mr Mitchell should give him a call at Holborn on the following day, specifying certain hours, and a polite intimation that he had seen the gentleman he had referred to, and thought that perhaps something might be done.

"We don't know yet, my dear," replied her husband, trying to cover his jubilation with an air of cautious pessimism. "It don't do to build too much on it. At the same time, it do look rather hopeful, I will admit. But he might ha' left us a bit more time. For the business man he seems to be it ain't the smartness one might have expected from him in a manner o' speaking."

In which estimate Mr Mitchell was wrong. Dittany's delay was timed to an hour. He knew the ways of banks, and when they advised bills due, and he knew the advantage of driving a bargain with a drowning man. Besides, he was not going to be fool enough to give the man time to set a solicitor worrying about his tracks; not that the average solicitor had any terrors for him, but because they annoyed him with their foolish insistence on minor points.

He therefore temporised with the anxious brass-caster, and kept him in burning suspense right up to the Wednesday morning.

It was the third interview they had had, and so far the wretched Mitchell had been unable to make head or tail of what was being proposed.

"I hope you understand, sir," he began with quiet dignity, "that if that money isn't paid into my bank at Hackney by four o'clock to-day, I'm a ruined man. If as how you're playing with me, Mr Dittany, I ask you kindly . . . not to."

The meek anti-climax, with the gulp in the throat which accompanied it, was really tragic. Mr Dittany smiled sympathetically.

"I think it can be settled to-day," he said. The implied doubt seemed to drive his victim frantic.

"Think?" he cried, banging his fist on the desk. "That's no good to me. *Can* it be? That's what I want to know."

"That greatly depends on you."

Mr Dittany carefully propounded his terms. He was clear and lucid, so that a child could have understood him, and he seemed scrupulously fair. Mr Mitchell was startled at the first mention of a limited company, but it was easy to see that something in the idea pleased him. To small men of his type there is something big and fine about the word "Limited." The notion elates them, and from some inscrutable reason it always enables them to get more credit. Mr Dittany went on to explain that unless the parties he referred to had some control over the conduct of the business, negotiations would be hopeless.

Mr Mitchell sat rather dazed through it all. He dimly remembered that he was to be General Manager, with a seat on the Board (which sounded very like a title to him), and an appointment in perpetuity, which meant for ever, subject only to the very improbable contingencies of fraud or embezzlement on his part, and—oh yes, of course—if the Company went into liquidation. In addition to this post, the salary of which was to be £2 a-week, he was to have 1000 shares out of the 2000 which were to form the nominal capital of the Company. That, Mr Dittany showed by a simple calculation, was exactly half the profits of the Company in addition to his £2 a-week. Then—and this was a strong point—he would have no further worry. The financial part of the business would be entirely lifted from his shoulders, and the hideous nightmare of Saturdays, and the finding of wages, gone for ever.

The spirits of Mr Mitchell slowly rose during the recital. He saw his darling business rise once more from the dust in which want of capital had laid it, and become once again fair and prosperous. There was a document lying on the desk, setting out all these things that Mr Dittany was speaking about, with a place for his signature at the bottom. It was a roughly torn

piece of foolscap, and did not look very formidable. Parchment and red tape might have given him pause; but this was only what Mr Dittany called an "Option"—just security for the money that was about to be advanced.

It was just that attention to petty detail which made Dittany so successful in dealing with men; that avoidance of parchment and tape, that accurate knowledge of the effect of applications from banks, that subtle window-dressing of the emotions. While Mitchell was making a vain pretence to study the document before him, he asked the amount of the bill, and with the same idea in his head started ostentatiously to write out a cheque.

At the psychological moment he laid the coveted money before the man, and the deed was done. With a hand trembling with excitement he put his signature to the document, and signed away his birthright with a sigh of relief. He folded up his cheque and placed it carefully in his pocket-book. Mr Dittany watched him with a quizzing smile. "What are you going to do with it?" he asked. The question seemed a little ridiculous.

"Go straight down and pay it in, of course."

"Exactly. You have an overdraft at the bank, I believe?"

"Why, yes."

"For which they have been getting nervous?"

"Maybe."

"And what are you going to do when they put this cheque against your overdraft, and refuse to meet the bill after all? Come to me for more?"

"Lordy, I never thought of that."

"Of course you didn't, and that's just why we insist on having some supervision of your business. The world's gone past you, Mr Mitchell. The only trade a man wants to know to-day is the trade of a financier. You may be the best brass-caster in London, but you'll always hew wood and draw water for men with the financial brains. You might have fallen into the hands

of rogues. Think yourself lucky. We must earmark that cheque, so that they can't collar it for anything else. Here's some paper. Sit down and write what I tell you."

For the first time for twenty-seven years Mr Mitchell put on the livery of servitude. For the first time he sat down humbly and did what he was told in matters pertaining to his own business. But it never occurred to him to question or resent the dictation. It was natural to fall under Mr Dittany's hand, for he was a leader of men.

Edward Mitchell went away cherishing his miserable mess of pottage. The business for which he had striven, and his father and grandfather before him, had gone by a stroke of the pen. All the twenty-seven years of toil, of anxiety, of hope, for nothing. To enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him; that had been his portion, and was to be his portion no more for ever. For such is business in our great cities, and these be the brains that have made us great among the nations.

In Mr Dittany's vast and active brain, poor Mitchell's affairs made but a single brick in the huge edifice that he was constructing. Already there were other similar cases, differing only in detail from his. There was the cabinetmaker of whom Peter Maplin had spoken; there was a saddle manufacturer, and the owner of a motor garage; there was a struggling clockmaker in Clerkenwell, and a hire-purchase furnisher in the Mile End Road. The end was the same in every case; all poured their livelihood into the seething cauldron to make a hotchpot of profit for the scheming man who financed them. Of the nominal sums lent all but a fraction returned to the Debenture Corporation in the shape of commission for floating them, of office rent, of secretary's salary and directors' and auditors' fees; while the original debt remained like a millstone, well secured by assets that could be realised when the time came to shut the businesses down and turn the unfortunate owners derelict in a world for which they were not fitted.

These were some of the happiest days of Mr Dittany's life. He smiled and hummed to himself as he turned over the pages of the ledger and scrutinised the copper-plate entries of Peter Maplin.

"Doing well, Mr Maplin, eh?" he chuckled one day.
"Last week's profit £120, I see."

The accountant washed his hands together. "Not bad, sir," he said, "not bad. But don't give 'em too much rope, Mr Dittany. Not too much rope."

CHAPTER XXI.

"NAN," said Mr Dittany, looking up from his paper, "you remember Roger Tregarth?"

"I don't think I'm ever very likely to forget the gentleman."

Nan answered the question coldly, without taking her eyes from the book she was reading. Nothing but a slightly excessive stirring of her coffee showed that the name mentioned had any effect upon her. The two—father and daughter—had contracted by mutual consent the habit of reading at meals. They had never done so in the old days far back in Shropbury, but things were so different then. They had been the best of comrades, the closest of friends; there was news to tell on both sides, and plans to be discussed; not, as now, subjects and eyes to be avoided. At one time the girl had grudged every minute he was away; now meals were slow torture, and the necessary hours spent together one long martyrdom. Mr Dittany had not hitherto cavilled at the new arrangement; indeed he was glad to be spared the necessity of constant friction, but at the present moment her aloofness seemed to irritate him.

"May I ask for your attention for a moment?" he asked suavely.

Nan turned the book face downwards on the table, and looked up with her brows arched in resigned expectation.

"I think I told you," he continued in the same even voice, "that a few weeks ago I had seen Tregarth and

his sister in Hyde Park, and that they had followed me. If I recollect rightly you were pleased to be indignant that I should have run away from them."

"Well?"

"To be brief—I needn't go into explanations—I have come across them again,—or rather I have seen Roger Tregarth again, and, so far from avoiding him, I have asked him to bring his sister here to dinner one night next week."

"Dad!"

There was no need now to crave for her attention. She sat up galvanically, with something like consternation in her face.

"There is no necessity to quarrel with them," he went on; "and I don't intend to quarrel. To be quite blunt, I can't afford to."

"You mean they're forcing themselves on you?"

"I mean nothing of the sort," he replied tartly. "I'm not quite such a weakling. On the other hand, I'm not such a fool as to wantonly offend them when a little civility will keep them quiet."

"But that awful woman. Mr Tregarth's bad enough. But she . . ." Nan searched for a phrase. "She's . . . not a nice woman," she concluded lamely.

"Don't be a prude, my dear. You know nothing about her except some malicious tittle-tattle. I don't want you to suppose I should invite them unless I had some very good reason for doing so. I ask you to take my word that I am doing it from policy."

Nan shrugged her shoulders. "It's a matter for you, of course," she said. "As long as you don't ask me to be present."

Mr Dittany's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"No, Nan," he said, and his voice was still quiet and tense; "I don't ask you. I order you. If you don't like the word, I insist on your presence."

It was the first open breach between them. Nan's quick Irish blood was all aflame in a moment, and her glorious eyes blazed at him.

"Insist?" She laughed the word with a wealth of

bitterness. "You insist? How will you insist? I tell you, father, I'm at the end of my patience. What you choose to do with your own life I cannot help, but you shall not any longer have the ordering of mine. Will you understand that is final? If I don't please you—and God knows I have tried—I can go my own way. I'm not dependent on you. I don't want this luxury you try to bribe me with; I take it under protest every minute of my life. Every mouthful I eat seems to poison me. To think that it is you—of all men in the world, you."

Mr Dittany's under lip protruded dangerously. His voice when he spoke was low and restrained, but there was a tone in it like the crack of a whip.

"Under the circumstances," he sneered, "with morality of such a transcendent order, your logical course is to give me up to the police. I don't want to argue the matter in your present state of temper. I merely state the fact that I am inviting the Tregarths here to dinner next week, together with young Wishart—and my wish that you should be present to receive them."

The inclusion of Wishart's name was a sudden ruse, and he watched observantly for the effect. He was not disappointed at seeing none. He was shrewd enough to guess that it would serve as an afterthought when her temper had calmed down.

And he was right. The name of the man she had come to love so wildly numbed her senses for the minute. She could not place him just then with these other people, or imagine the effect of the complication. She said no more just then, but fled to her room to think, if the turmoil of her brain would let her.

In vain she searched her passionate heart to find if she could the key to unlock the solution of her grief. A hundred times a day she told herself that Neil was, and could be, nothing to her. Even if she loved him (she was always putting in the qualifying word to reassure herself), how was she to tell him her shame; how could she say that the very name he knew her by was an alias; with what face could she confess herself

the daughter of a convict, even if such a thing could be done without giving her father away? But she must save him from the clutches of her father; that was due to his clean honesty, and to his open boyish faith in the man who was using him for his tool. She tried to deceive herself into thinking that this was the reason of her new-found interest in him. The wild desire to see him again almost made her go to her father and say she had changed her mind. She could hear him brushing his hat in the lobby, and preparing to leave for the office. Yet the knowledge that he would see through the reason of her altered decision made her pause, and she stood irresolutely with her hand on the knob of the door until it was too late.

From the window of her room she could catch a glimpse of her father as he strode down the gravel drive. She saw him look up, and she was staggered by the expression on his face. If he had seemed merely angry or sneering, she could have borne it, but his features were set in lines of grey misery such as she had never seen before. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Poor old dad!" she said. "I'm cruel to him. Perhaps I don't understand."

CHAPTER XXII.

MR DITTANY had told Nan in a burst of indignation which pointed to the sting of truth in her accusation, that there had been no compulsion in his invitation to the Tregarths. Perhaps he thought so. With his marvellous power of twisting and moulding an objectionable fact to fit in with the haughtiness of his self-confidence, he may have persuaded himself that his graciousness to people he so detested was due to motives of high policy, and not to fear. He was a sublime egoist, and courage was the quality of all others on which he prided himself most.

The truth would be rather difficult to get out. Probably, such was the inflexible nature of the man under certain aspects, intimidation would have had the effect only of stiffening his lip: but intimidation had not been visible on the surface. Hilda Tregarth had accompanied her weak-kneed brother on his appointed visit of the Saturday following, and so far from threatening she had been full of charm and good-nature. However capable of protecting himself against men, Dittany was always a little at a loss in his attitude towards women—especially clever women. He failed to understand their psychology. The instincts that moved them were not instincts that he comprehended. He made the mistake of underrating their business ability. He found them deficient in reason and in logic, prone to jump to conclusions, and born enemies to any sort of that compromise which is the breath of life of commerce. He had a belief, not perhaps altogether wrong, that one

must touch their personal likes in order to persuade them. With all his faults Dittany was not a man who came under the physical influence of the other sex. He had a striking power of fascination over them. He was easy and fluent, handsome and well-built in person, strong and masterful in temperament, bantering and caressing in his manner of speech, and in mind intellectual and alert. But he felt nothing of the fascination which he wielded, and to do him justice, he used his powers over individuals only when some business end was to be gained, and even then in no way to which the most censorious of moralists could have objected.

He therefore toyed with Hilda Tregarth in his best manner, and from the way she responded to his charm he flattered himself the battle was half won. In a subtle way she gave him to understand that he had found in her, if not exactly an ally against her own brother, at least a moderator, and one whose influence would tend to rational counsels if Roger proved dangerous and intractable. He could not see with all his ability that he was playing into her hands; that of the two she was infinitely the more dangerous.

Within a quarter of an hour of their arrival she had extracted the invitation with the deftest ease, and it was not until they had gone that he had the impulse to curse himself for his stupidity. For the first time in his life he was conscious of fearing Nan, and what she would say when he broke the news to her. He brooded over the necessity of telling her during the whole of the week end, and it was not until ten minutes before he left for the office on the Monday morning that he plucked up his courage to blurt out his wishes.

His anger with Nan was complex. It was no sudden outburst of disappointment. He had known well what attitude she would take up, and, theoretically, he could not find it in his heart to blame her. Hilda Tregarth was *not* a "nice" woman as the world understands the word, and it was notorious that she had left Shropbury in the shadow of suspicion, if not of actual accusation. Perhaps his wrath was due to anger with himself. He

knew that Nan was taking no higher stand than she would have ever done under the circumstances—than any decent-minded girl would have done—and that if she looked down on him now from her superior pedestal it must needs be because he himself had sunk below her level. Perhaps it was the knowledge that he ought to have protected his daughter from the contamination of such a woman of the world.

As usual, he found his excuse and his moral sanction easily enough. Circumstances necessitate fresh lines of conduct. He told himself he was fighting for his life, and self-defence justifies exceptional action. Even the prudish law comprehended that, forgiving even murder when a man's body was in danger. What was a man's body to his soul? And what comparison could there be between fighting for a paltry life and fighting for the recovery of one's reputation, for the happiness of one's daughter? There was a nobility, an unselfishness, in the thought that pleased him. And if the law tolerated murder for such an inferior motive, why should it be unbearable that Nan should hide her scruples for one short evening behind a mask of civility?

By the time he had reached the office he was quite satisfied with his own conduct again, and more certain than ever that he was justified in being angry with Nan. In any case things had gone too far. He must and would have his own way. He could hardly put off the invitation, and if Nan was not present, the snub would be grossly palpable, inflaming people who had it in their power to do so much harm.

His scheming mind turned cunningly to the use he would make of young Wishart in the emergency. If he did not scruple to use Nan's influence to place fetters of authority on his secretary, he was hardly likely to feel any qualms of compunction in using the youth as a tool to ensure his daughter's presence.

Within half an hour after his arrival in Holborn, Neil Wishart came out from the private room with such a glow on his eager face that the bald-headed ledger clerk, who was a man with a large family and an

ambition which ran in a sordid groove of the narrowest dimensions, could only suppose enviously that his fellow employee had had a rise in salary. He would have opened his tired eyes wider if he had been told that the secretary would have foregone a month's salary willingly for the sake of the happiness in store for him.

It was more than a month since he had seen Nan, and a gloom of despair had settled gradually on his spirits, which even hard work and the hope of prosperity could not drown. He had almost made up his mind that the scene he had witnessed on his last visit was connected in some incomprehensible way with a determination on Mr Dittany's part never to invite him again. From Bloomsbury, where he had taken up his quarters, he had walked every Sunday through the parks and down Victoria Street in the forlorn hope of meeting her. If he could have trusted himself to ask in a self-composed way after the health of the girl who occupied all his thoughts, he would have done so, but he knew well that a tell-tale blush would expose his secret. The sudden unexpected shock uplifted him. Mr Dittany had been delightfully frank and confidential.

"There are some people coming I want you to be civil to," he explained. "The position may be just a wee bit strained at first. Nan doesn't like them. Brother and sister, Tregarth by name. To be quite open with you, Roger Tregarth did me a bad turn once. It was indirectly through him that I lost my fortune, and Nan has never quite forgiven him. But I can't bear malice. The poor devil turned up destitute the other day, selling books or something of that sort . . ."

"What, the dark man who was standing at the counter when you came in?"

"Ah, you saw him, of course. Yes, that's the man."
"Oh!"

Dittany was quick to notice the tone of disappointed indifference.

"You didn't like him?"

"Well, you see, sir, I saw so little of him."

"And that little not at his best. We mustn't be

uncharitable. I want to set him on his feet again, if I can, so make things as easy for him as you can. His sister is rather a charming woman; been helping her brother a good deal, I understand."

Wishart might reasonably have wondered why Dittany took so much pains to let him into the inner sanctuary of his confidences, but the bare fact flattered him too well to allow him to be critical. He felt a little resentment that Mr Dittany should have implied by comparison that his amiable benevolence was not shared by his daughter, but he felt that he himself would not have felt too well disposed in her place. As a matter of fact, the great man's confidence was merely a precaution against some possible tension when Neil recognised the seller of books. There was no detail too small for him to anticipate and guard against.

Mr Dittany had a telephone message from Hilda Tregarth during the day, and to judge from the charming manner in which he received it from the wire, and the heartiness of his laughter as he replied to her amiable sallies, it may be taken for granted that the friendship between them was a growing one, and promised to avert the threatened danger. Wishart, who was in the room while his chief was speaking, noticed that he seemed to hang up his laughter with the telephone receiver, and came away from the instrument with a face full of worry. He said nothing, however, except to remark, almost casually, that Thursday was the night they had fixed up.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE fateful Thursday came at last, fraught with fears and hopes and a thousand half shades of emotion. Uneventful though the occasion seemed on the surface, surely no ambassadorial conference, no meeting of plenipotentiaries for the settlement of terms of peace, was ever the subject of so much anxious rehearsal on the part of its various members.

Dittany had said but half a dozen words further on the subject to his daughter, and those only to ask her her intentions. Her reply was quite as curt. "I shall be there, dad," was all she said. But the manner of the words pleased him. Nan was not one to sulk after she had surrendered. The resolution having been made—from what motive even she could not have said exactly—she would make her submission with grace.

"That's a good girl," her father replied. He would have said more if some subtle instinct had not warned him that the ice was still perilously thin. He carefully avoided the stupidity of exhibiting the haughty satisfaction of a conqueror. To tell the truth, he did not feel in the vein of Hercules. He might have said with the famous general, "A few more such victories, and all is lost." The paradoxical love he bore to the girl, passionately rooted in his selfishness, burst out suddenly into the heavy bloom of affection, very beautiful, if one did not examine the petals too closely. He spent at least half an hour of his valuable time in thinking out some way of recompense for the sacrifice she was making; and his little attentions and kindnesses would

have been most touching for an outsider to have witnessed. Nan accepted them gratefully enough, thankful for the respite from acute friction. At the back of her worried mind she had a vague plan of finding in the coming clash of temperaments and interests some clue to the line she would have to take. Come what might, she had firmly resolved to find out whether her father was once again on the broad highroad of dishonesty, or whether, as he had so often said, he was engaged in a life-and-death struggle to wipe out the past and take his place once again among honourable men. Come what might, she had decided, if the former proved unhappily true, to warn Neil Wishart of the risk he was running.

Of the part he was playing in the drama, Wishart was sublimely unconscious. A far more important matter was occupying his heart—the resolution to advance a step in the winning of the woman he loved so fervently. And why should he not hope? he asked himself. With all the beautiful restraint which sat so divinely on her, she had not been able to hide her own sentiments from him. Lover-like, he went over again and again the signs and tokens he had received at her hands,—revisualising each glance, and hearing again every tone of the words she had spoken. Was she above him? Proudly he told himself that, if so, it was only in the conquerable aspect of money. The breed in him, forcing its way upwards without the slightest trace of snobbery, through the sordid fetters that had been holding him to earth, came to its own at last, and bade him woo in a manner befitting his race. Would Mr Dittany consent? He laughed boyishly at his own question. He knew so well how vastly he had improved his position with his employer. With the conceit of youth, he already believed himself to be indispensable to the firm. His work was shaping under his hands, and every day added to his responsibilities; every day Mr Dittany shed some of the labours that had grown too heavy for his personal supervision, and turned them over to his secretary. Wishart proved a

glutton for work, and accepted every addition with a smile, coming earlier and earlier, and staying later and later. He began to have his dreams of prosperity, like all young apprentices, and who shall blame him? Feeling himself so secure, he looked upon the coming dinner as the raised curtain of a new act, in which anything might happen, but which would work through inevitably to a happy ending, and he stepped on the boards with courage and resolution.

But if Neil Wishart's plans were rose-coloured and as honest as the day, Mr Dittany's subtle schemes were open and straightforward compared with the subterranean plottings of the brother and sister who were the occasion of so much searching of heart. Many were the interviews they had together, and dark and cunning were the plottings they evolved in their talks together. They approached the thorny question from the different sides that sex will always take. Roger relied on exposure and the threats of it, Hilda Tregarth on a consciousness of feminine charm. If she had deceived Dittany into thinking that he had found an ally, she was herself cheated through her innate vanity into believing she had made an impression on a susceptible man, and with the cunning of an unscrupulous woman resolved to play on the discovery to the utmost of her power. Strange strands of passionate colour were woven into the texture of her sombre mind. Love of admiration played its part, as it always did, with her; but, in addition, was the thread of an incipient desire for the man himself, scarcely perceptible as yet, but destined more and more to influence her line of conduct. She found herself suppressing a desire to call on him when there was nothing to discuss, when, indeed, it was clearly indiscreet to push matters at such indecent haste. She wondered vaguely why she was trumping up excuses to herself to rush round to Holborn in her leisure moments, and she tried to ascribe it to an over-precipitate desire to fasten him down, to wind her toils around him, and gloat over the spoils of conquest. Yet in her heart she was

conscious of a sort of fear of the man, a thrill of hero-worship that was most apparent when she compared him with her invertebrate brother. The feeling as yet vented itself only in sarcasm at Roger's expense. She openly derided him, jeered at his threats to bring Dittany to his knees, and ridiculed his hatred of his old colleague as being due to impotent terror. Roger stood it with more patience than he would have believed himself capable. His sister had become quite indispensable to him.

They had met the night before the dinner, and were putting the finishing touches to their dress rehearsal.

"We've discussed Bevington enough," Hilda was saying. "What's going to be your attitude to that chit of a girl?"

"That's my business," replied Roger irritably.

"You're not going to lay yourself open to be snubbed twice, are you? What on earth you can see in her I don't know. She may be pretty and all that in a statuesque sort of way, but you'll spoil everything if you make a fool of yourself again."

"It's nothing to do with you, Hilda. If I choose to add Nan Bevington to the price, it's my own affair. I know what I want, and I know what I mean to get. That's enough for you."

Hilda Tregarth shrugged her elegant shoulders. "True," she said; "I hate her well enough to make it worth while to see her your wife, but I know what you are with women. She'll twist you round her finger. I can just see you giving her father away if she coos to you. Keep your wits, Roger, and don't be bamboozled out of your money by a pair of love-sick eyes. Don't forget that things are different now—very different. She might have snubbed you then, but now that she knows her father is in your power, take my word she'll play a different tune. I don't want to see you fuddled with love."

Nevertheless, with all their cleverness, they made one big mistake; they overplayed their part. When they entered the rose-tinted drawing-room at Palmyra

Mansions, Hilda was attired in a startling creation of black and amber, and wore every atom of jewellery she could rake up or borrow; while her brother had provided himself with evening dress and an ostentatious fob. It made an incongruous scene. Mr Dittany received the scintillating woman and her immaculate brother in a morning suit, his daughter, Nan, stood by his side in a simple skirt and blouse, while in the background, waiting to be introduced, was a tall, fair young man in neat blue serge. Hilda realised that she had struck the wrong note at the very start, and bit her lip with vexation; but a moment later she was smiling her best at Nan and Neil Wishart.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHATEVER social acting had to be done by the Tregarths was left to the sister. Roger himself made no attempt to hide his displeasure at seeing a stranger present at a meeting on which he had staked so much hope of success; and his displeasure grew into ill-temper when he recognised the stranger as the youngster who had dared to rebuff him with his canvassing. He put the intrusion down as part of Bevington's cleverness. The chap was obviously in the employment of the Corporation, possibly in confidential employment; he might be there as a spy or a reporter. He started badly for a conspirator. "Hullo, Bev . . ." he began, forgetting the alias he had been asked to use. His host was perhaps on the alert for the slip, but whether he was or not, he was equal to the occasion, interrupting him with a smile. "You know Miss Dittany, I believe," he said.

"How are you, Miss Dittany?" going to the other extreme in the awkward emphasis he placed on her new name. "It seems ages since we met."

His clumsiness was due very likely to nervousness at tripping up so early in the rencontre, but Nan in her hyper-sensitive mood saw a palpable sneer. The shame of her concealment seemed to place her at once under his heel. She played her part, however, much better than either she or her father had hoped. She had become hard and brilliant, very much the society woman, and she answered him without a tremor.

"It is a long time, Mr Tregarth. So you are living in London?"

"For the present—yes."

"What a magnet the place is. But it must be delightful for your sister to have you near her. Shall you be setting up together?"

"Hardly, I think; eh, Hilda?"

He spoke with a vindictive sneer. It was a sign of their mutual suspicions that he thought he detected in a remark uttered merely for the sake of saying something, a barbed sarcasm at his expense. Hilda came to the rescue of the dangerous situation.

"I wouldn't have him with me for a thousand a-year," she laughingly replied. "He's drifted into the most abominable bachelor ways since he has been away. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he smokes in bed."

Mr Dittany chimed in with smiling good-humour. "You've slain us all with that shaft, I expect," he laughed.

The lightest of banter went on, superficially mere idle chatter, but charged for four of them with a vivid current of innuendos and sneers, which only the presence of the innocent Wishart prevented from flashing into forked lightning. Roger Tregarth was in a dangerously truculent mood, and when he could stand it no longer he drew Dittany aside.

"Who's the pup?" he asked contemptuously.

"My secretary. What's the objection?"

Tregarth shrugged his shoulders. "No business of mine," he said. "Only, if you want to spend a pleasant evening, just give him the tip not to put on so many frills. I'm not in a mood to tolerate being looked up and down like a piece of dirt."

"Pooh, all your imagination. The boy's all right, and as straight as a line."

"What do you want with him, then?"

Mr Dittany ignored the insult. He was itching to retort that he had employed an honest man for the sake of change, but he restrained himself in time, remarking instead, "Tregarth, my boy; if you and I are going through the world thinking that every one sees through us, we may as well emigrate."

"How much have you told him about me?"

"Less than such a sublime idiot as you seem to take me for would, and more than he would have got from George Washington. I've told him as much as suits my purpose, which is as much as to say, nothing."

Roger Tregarth watched the talk and laughter of the other three with an ugly scowl on his face. There is no character a blackguard distrusts so much in the world as that of a gentleman. He was not mistaken in his reading of Wishart's estimate. He had caught the well-bred stare, more of indifference than active contempt, and he knew that his own veneer was penetrated, that he had been dismissed in a quick mental flash as an outsider.

It was the fact that Neil, with a sort of native shrewdness which made up for his want of experience of the world, had accurately sized up both brother and sister; but he knew what was due from him as a fellow-guest, and remembering also Mr Dittany's request to him to make himself agreeable, he broke through both his dislike of the strangers and his natural reticence with an effort, and talked and laughed with Nan and Hilda Tregarth as freely as his shyness would let him. And Nan backed him up bravely. With consummate tact she steered an even course between the Scylla of rudeness and the Charybdis of too great familiarity. Hilda tried in vain to comprehend her new manner. She tried hard to find it the result of fear. The slightest suspicion of gush would have allowed her to place her foot on the girl's neck with the knowledge of her power, but she could not detect it. She knew she was hated and despised, but she could not find she was feared. From a purely worldly point of view Nan had improved out of all recognition since she had known her in Shropbury. Her smile was a mask, her conversation flawless, her thoughts impenetrable. Miss Tregarth showed her consternation at the formidable defence that confronted her rather too clearly. She had expected such an easy victory; she had hoped with all the venom of a wicked woman to witness the demoralisation in the enemy's

camp ; she made up her mind to return from her first encounter with flying flags, and in her train the trophies of tears and humiliation. There were so many old scores to be wiped out, ignorings in the street, cuttings at public receptions, and the innumerable ways, invisible to clumsy man, in which women hurt each other mortally. Instead of tears were smiles that came from the lips and not the eyes ; instead of humiliation, pride unbending, pride too great and scornful to be proud. Small wonder, then, that she breathed a sigh of relief when at last dinner was announced ; when Mr Dittany, offering her his arm, led her to the post of honour on his right.

The dinner itself passed off uneventfully. Roger Tregarth was the danger point. He punished his host's wine with a fervent zeal which brought a dusky flush to his cheek, and so far from mellowing under its warming influence, he threatened to become more truculent. More than once, too, he made a slip with Dittany's old name, correcting himself each time with a laugh that lent emphasis to his mistake. On these occasions Mr Dittany watched Wishart narrowly, but he alarmed himself in vain. He caught the lapse, certainly, but in his innocence imagined the Bev to be some familiar nickname which, in the altered circumstances of their positions, Tregarth was trying to shake off.

Roger Tregarth ignored Wishart in a way which might have been accidental at first, but which, as time went on, became too pronounced to pass unnoticed. Already the ill-tempered man had observed the looks which were passing between Nan and the object of his dislike ; already the seeds of bitter enmity were being sown, giving promise of a crop of tragedy to any one who knew the depths of ungovernable evil in Tregarth's breast, and the clear courage against which it had so soon pitted itself.

For the expected had happened. Nan's beauty, so much more mature and inaccessible than in the old days coupled with the unexpected presence of a rival, favoured as he had never been, fired him with all his old infatuation and his old resolve.

He had one weapon that had been out of his reach at his last attempt, the weapon of power, and when he had thrown himself on his bed at night he told himself with a curse that he would use it to the uttermost reach of its fell stroke.

Nan Dittany as she paraded herself—Nan Bevington as she was—might make her choice. He would not mince matters with her; she would know his terms without any beating round the bush. She could be his wife, or see her father smoked out of his concealment into the arms of the law.

CHAPTER XXV.

EDWARD MITCHELL had settled down to his new duties with a zeal and enthusiasm that could hardly fail to be noticed by his neighbours, and a loquacity about his altered circumstances that, at least on one occasion, drew down a somewhat severe rebuke from Mr Dittany. Mrs Mitchell, too, was quickly shedding her humility, and showed a proper pride in being the wife of a managing director who had a seat on the Board. Nellie had been sent post-haste to St Leonards to breathe ozone in the place of brass fumes. No longer was it necessary for her father to strain his inventive faculty with imaginary discussions with old Tom Buckle, who so invariably prophesied a change of wind. The excited pair began to build their castle with the zest of young lovers. Mr Dittany had hinted that they might want the dwelling-house and premises and all the appurtenances thereof for office room, and this made them cast glances, fearful in their daring extravagance, in the direction of moving farther out. Tottenham and a little bit o' garden where Mitchell could grow his own "runners," and a few sticks of peas, quickly developed into more rural Waltham, and at last with the reckless doubling of stakes of gamblers to far-off Broxbourne, the Mecca of all true Hackneyites. They were aghast at first at their own temerity, but if a managing director with a seat on the Board could not live at Broxbourne, Mrs Mitchell would like some one kindly to inform her who could.

Children playing at business, Mr Dittany called them;

and such they were. It took Mitchell some time to grasp the fact that the occasions when his assistance was asked were becoming rarer and rarer; that the pretence of deference to his opinion was more and more a hollow mockery—sops thrown to keep his vanity quiet; that he was sinking fast to the level of a foreman of works.

Mr Dittany spent a good deal of time in the yard and office during the first few weeks, putting things in order. The atmosphere of the place changed perceptibly. The men were more punctual, and turned out more work, accounts were rendered month by month with accuracy and clearness, disputes about them were settled at once, and cheques came in on the due date correct to the shillings and pence instead of dribbles on account of statements that had never been verified for years. There was bound to be some grumbling in the "shop." From some unaccountable reason the pourers could not earn their usual money. They were paid at the same rate, and cast more than the usual amount of metal, but their wage lists were as much as five shillings down in some instances. When the matter was proved to the astonished eyes of Mitchell, the poor fellow scratched his head at the mystery. The "boys" had been with him so long and treated him with so much affectionate regard, that he sturdily repudiated the theory that he had been robbed all these years.

Neil Wishart went down every Friday afternoon to write up the ledger and make out the pay-sheet for the week, and at the end of the month the keen-eyed Peter Maplin paid a visit to strike a trial balance and take rough stock. He grumbled more than once to his chief about wasting so much energy over the trumpery concern.

"We ain't going to run it, are we?" he asked querulously. "How's it going to be broken up if it pays? That's what I want to know."

Mr Dittany could give him no satisfactory answer. Indeed he had asked himself the same question many

times. It was not as if Mitchells Limited was the only concern that was growing under his capable hands. Every one of the concerns in which he was dabbling was showing a most amazing growth. The capital he put into them was ludicrously small—in some cases the Corporation had only to find a few weeks' wages in order to set them going on a paying basis. The answer to his question was contained in one word—instinct. He made them lucrative because he could not help it. It was in his blood. When it came to buying metal for the brass-casting business, leather and timber for the cabinetmakers, or gold and silver for the clock factory, he drove hard bargains because it was in his nature to drive bargains; and when he collected accounts he was a stern creditor, for the simple reason that it went against the grain to be cheated. With all his far-sighted acumen it was an element in his scheme that he had not reckoned on. In vain he persuaded himself that his present undertakings were exceptions due to an unprecedented boom in trade, that the time would come when he could bring his plans to fruition. In vain he took over new businesses, in the hope that there he would find the salvation of his scheme. One by one they lifted their heads like flowers after rain, one by one he reluctantly put them aside for ruin at some future date.

It was not that they did not bring grist in plenty to the mill. He mulcted them heavily in fees. The interest on his cash outlay was enormous and progressive. Even then he would have killed the geese in spite of the quantity of golden eggs they persisted in laying, but for the irresistible instinct that made him fight for their lives.

Mitchells Limited was his pet scheme, possibly because it was his first venture, but also because of a concerted attempt on the part of the firm's local competitors to ruin them. Jimson, the great octopus of the district, who had cut the trade to ribbons in the words of Mitchell himself, had taken alarm. He was a hard, uncouth man, keen as Dittany himself, but without his

education or cunning. His formation of the ring or trust is an historic episode in the Stratford district to this day. Nearly every caster of standing stood in with it except Mitchells. In less than three months from the floating of that company Dittany stood with his back to the wall, a figure almost heroic in its fierce grimness. For a time it seemed almost as if the ruin he had craved would come about of its own accord, from the sheer cutting of prices, but it was the worst method in the world to make him shut down. With the well-known frown between his eyes, and the compression of his lips, he had sworn in the presence of Wishart and Mitchell that he would beat the ring; and he did.

"Where do we get our moulding earth from?" he asked one day.

"Ours comes all the way from Aston," replied Mitchell.

"Why? Can't we get it nearer than that?"

"Not for our class of work. You see, sir, them bed knobs are cut so light nowadays; like paper they are, and strap buckles the same."

"Where else does this earth come from?"

"Why, as to that, sir, there's p'raps half a dozen places. There's some at Leicester, and some down Bristol way."

"Do you know them all?"

"Yes, sir."

"All?"

"Every one as far as I know. There ain't so many of 'em as all that."

"Right. Make me out a complete list at once, and see that you don't leave one out."

Mr Dittany made several mysterious visits out of town, and had interviews with some rather rough-looking provincial men who came and went incessantly.

Peter Maplin came into him one day for a serious talk. "Last month shows a loss at Mitchells," he said, rather triumphantly. "If you're ever going to shut down, now's the time. The stock's big. Partington's have joined the ring. They swear they're going to

squeeze us out, and they can if they like. Take my word, Mr Dittany, sir, now's the time."

"I don't intend to be squeezed out, Maplin."

"I didn't think it of you, sir. You'll drop thousands before you've done."

"Do you know what moulding earth is, Maplin?"

"What, that brown stuff they put the patterns in?"

"Yes; do you know it's very scarce?"

"What's the price?"

"Never mind the price. When I say scarce, I mean to say there are only one or two places where it can be got. What would you say if I told you I had cornered the supply?"

"Pooh; they don't use enough of it. Why, if it was ten pound a ton it wouldn't make a farden difference on the price of castings."

"We shall see," said Mr Dittany.

Mr Jimson, the leading spirit of the ring that was to crush Mr Dittany, sat scratching his head in some perplexity. He had a letter in his hand. "Wotcher think of this, Jack?" he called out to his old clerk. "This is from Cohen's of Leicester. 'Dear sirs,— Referring to your esteemed order for three loads of earth, we regret to inform you that our entire supply has been booked for three months ahead, and we are therefore reluctantly compelled to refuse your order.' Someone's busy, Jack. Well, we must write to Aston, that's all. Write to-night. There ain't more'n a week's supply in the shed."

But Aston sent a similar reply, and Mr Jimson scratched his head more than ever. When Bristol and Torquay and Derby all answered in the same strain, and when the other firms in the ring came round with scare in their faces and the same story on their lips, he knew what had happened, and cursed the master-mind who had checkmated him.

The end was inevitable from the first, but the ring struggled on for a couple of months. They were handicapped with the inferior stuff they were compelled to

use. Their castings were almost useless, and tons of them were returned on their hands. Little by little Mitchells stopped the cutting of prices, and before the end came their brass was $1\frac{1}{2}$ d. dearer than the ring's, and they were putting down new "hearts" and taking on new men every week.

"Gentlemen," he said to them at last, when a deputation, headed by Jimson himself, came to Holborn to beg peace, "I didn't start this war; you did. I can ruin you if I like, but I'm not a vindictive man. Take your seats round the table, please, and I'll tell you my terms."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE half-dozen men shambled awkwardly into their seats round the brilliantly polished Board table of the Debenture Corporation. They were men for the most part illiterate and uneducated—self-made in the best sense of the word. From workmen to foremen, from foremen to small employers, struggling, toiling from early morning to late at night, paying their way with a sort of rugged honesty.

They were not seen at their best in defeat. From Jimson himself down to the smallest of the ring they had no cunning in concealing their emotions. The suave polished man at the head of the table could read them like open books. What he saw was shame, hatred, and suspicion, but above all he saw fear.

"Where's Teddy Mitchell?" blurted out Jimson. "I thought we was dealing with 'im, not you. We don't know you."

"I'm afraid Mitchell's too busy at the works. We don't know how to get the stuff out. Of course, if you care to postpone the meeting for a week or two I have no objection."

"Not now we're 'ere," said some one timidly.

"Well, who are you?" went on Jimson. "What's your standing in this 'ere business?"

Mr Dittany's eyes kindled dangerously for a moment. "Of course, Mr Jimson, if it pleases you to be offensive; if it soothes your feelings to pretend not to know me do so. But can you afford it?"

"Wotcher mean; can I afford it?"

"I mean that I'm going before this meeting breaks up to enter into some working arrangement with these gentlemen here. Can you afford to stand out?"

"I dessay I could buy *you* up."

"I hope so, for your sake. Only you can't buy me *out*; that's where the trouble comes in."

"We've just found a quarry you don't know nothing about," ejaculated a little fat man. His tone was so far from being enthusiastic that he seemed actually dejected at the discovery. Mr Dittany smiled delightedly. "Then, of course, there's nothing to bother about. We needn't discuss the matter any further, need we?"

Mr Jimson picked his teeth in sullen silence. "We don't want this cutting to go on, sir; that's the long and the short of it," said another.

"We're not cutting," said Dittany. "Our price is a halfpenny better than it ever was. What, may I ask, do you want?"

"Why can't we all go in together, and work friendly like?"

"Nothing would please me better. I was going to make the same suggestion. Only it will have to be on my terms."

"What's your terms?"

"To make one concern of it. Float for say £100,000, and each to come in on his respective valuation."

A murmur of astonishment went up all round the table. Mr Dittany handled the outlines of his scheme in his usual masterly and lucid way. Incidentally he succeeded in detaching every member of the ring from Jimson's side, leaving that indignant man stupidly bewildered and angrily nonplussed. He dwelt on the economy of working, the increase of prices, his monopoly of casting-earth. He flattered, cajoled, and threatened in turn, and in the end dismissed them to think over it for a week.

The man was in his true element. He had his finger on the pulse of power. He was the only one there who knew what he wanted, and knew how to get it. The

battle was over before it had begun. Jimson, who had up till now sat in the seat of authority, might sulkily fume at the usurpation, but he was beaten, and he knew it. The first to start hostilities, he was the last to give in, and the only one of the crowd who left the room without shaking hands.

Mr Dittany took Wishart out to lunch when they had gone. "We've cleared a matter of twelve thousand this morning," he said. "A bottle of wine won't hurt us to celebrate it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A GOOD deal of the latter part of the incidents mentioned in the last chapter are of necessity anticipation. Companies like Mitchell & Jimsons, Limited, are not floated in a day, even when the vivid business methods of a Dittany are behind them. One need hardly say it was a success from the start—not perhaps from the point of view of the owners of the firms who were swallowed up in the giant's maw, but then it is impossible to please everyone—but as a trading concern, and as a source of enormous profit and advertisement to its god-parent, the Debenture Corporation, it left nothing to be desired.

But in the meantime the Nemesis of trouble was stalking silently at the side of prosperity, doggedly refusing to be shaken off, however much the grim, far-sighted man might quicken his steps to outpace it. Dittany was not the only one to feel the sweets of power realised. As day by day went by, each bringing its fresh sheaves for grinding in the mill, each seeming to put the bugbear of premature exposure farther out of sight beneath the horizon, another was cautiously feeling his way to the moment when it would be safe to grapple his piratical craft to the thwarts of the glittering argosy. Roger Tregarth might have rested content if money alone had been his object, for he was being well paid for his silence; but the crumbs that fell from his master's table served only to sharpen his appetite for the great prize of all.

More and more he was finding that he had to act for himself. The attitude of his sister was beginning to

puzzle him. It did not seem like her to be content with the modest reward they had received for the sealing of their lips. She sneered at his discontent, and became furiously angry whenever he suggested carrying his threat into practice. He could only put it down to her hatred of Nan, and her determination to put obstacles in the way of a marriage.

"I tell you I'm fed up with it, Hilda. It isn't good enough. A fiver here and a fiver there, and all the time his rotten sneers. That's not what we're out for. I'm going to tell him straight that he's got to take me in as a partner . . ."

"And a son-in-law."

"That's my affair. As a partner, I tell you, or I go straight to Vance, Capper, & Co., and tell them where he is and what he's doing."

"I should," she replied sarcastically. The laconic remark exasperated him, and he walked into Dittany's private room with a swagger that put the older man at once on his guard.

"Look here, Bevington," he blustered. "This has gone on long enough. I want to come to an understanding."

Dittany affected a mild surprise. He pushed his papers aside, and pulled a chair round for his visitor.

"Would you mind remembering that Dittany is my name," he said.

"Damn Dittany!" replied the other. "If you want me to play that sort of game you'll have to pay for it."

"I thought you were satisfied. What is it you want now?"

There was that dangerous light in Mr Dittany's eyes that always brought such men as Tregarth to their senses. Roger's bluster was perceptibly sobered, and he laughed uneasily; but the matter had gone so far that he was compelled to brazen it out.

"You seem to think I'm to be bought off with five pounds a-week. I suppose you're making twenty or thirty times that. You're clever enough to, anyway."

"Well?"

"Well, five isn't enough, that's all. Not by a very long way."

"It depends on yourself how you increase it. I've shown you the way."

"Thanks. To tie myself up with your precious options so that you can ruin me as you did before. I'm not having any this time."

"Please yourself."

"Exactly what I'm going to do, Bevington." Tre-garth came close to the table. His attitude was rather threatening, but the fearless steel-grey eyes held him, and he felt his power oozing from every pore.

"In the first place," he began weakly, "I want more money."

"And in the second?"

"In the second, I want to marry your daughter."

Mr Dittany's eyes never left the other's face, but the glance that he endeavoured to fix was shifty and wandering, and when by some hypnotic fascination he had brought it to meet him squarely, it was weak and sullen, the eye of a slave cringing to his punishment.

"You honour me," said Dittany. "Assuming that I have as much authority over Nan as you seem to imply, what if I refuse?"

"You daren't."

"Sit down, man. Don't stand there twitching like a monkey on a stick. I'm not going to kick you out of the office. We're business men, I hope, and you've made me a business proposition. I want to know your terms. I don't hanker after you as a son-in-law—that at all events is plain enough. If you want another home-truth, it is that I consider you are doing pretty well out of me, and that you are not in the least likely to get a penny more. If you try to threaten me, you'll get nothing at all. Do I understand you to threaten?"

"You can call it that if you like."

Mr Dittany threw back his head and laughed. It was cleverly done, without a trace of theatricality, without a trace of a sneer; merely bluff genial amusement,

as if he had suddenly seen the humorous side of the business.

"We flatter ourselves on our sharpness," he said; "but we're like a couple of children. Why bluff? We're neither of us going to cut off our nose to spite our face. I'm not going to let you expose me, any more than you have the faintest intention of doing so. Aren't we both in the same boat?"

"Don't be too sure of that."

"It's all bosh, Tregarth, my boy; and you know it. You want to marry Nan. Very well; I don't think she'll have you. That's frank."

"She will, if she knows what it means to you."

"If you deceived her into thinking it meant anything to me. What is it you want me to do? Where do I come in in this touching romance?"

"Your influence and consent."

"You shall have them for what they are worth. Is that good enough?"

"Perfectly."

"At the same time you can't expect a definite decision straight away. How long will you give me?"

"Say a month."

"Too short. Three at least. In three months from to-day I will undertake to have placed the position frankly before my daughter, and to do what I can to influence her. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes; but none of your tricks, Bevington. You may have some dodge up your sleeve, but I tell you that if in three months from to-day your daughter refuses to marry me, and you refuse to make a suitable provision for us—what *I* call suitable—I go straight to Vance, Capper, and tell them where you are."

"If you threaten me, Tregarth, I shall have to withdraw my offer. I am not submitting to threats. You have shown me a possible solution from a position of difficulty; that is all. To tell you the truth, there is considerable danger of her contracting an objectionable mesalliance if I can't give her a reason why it should be stopped."

"That young cub in the office? Get rid of him, then."

"That's my affair."

"Why wait three months, then?"

"Because, my dear Tregarth, there's such a thing as the psychological moment."

Whatever uneasiness Roger might have felt about some dodge up Dittany's sleeve, he bragged outrageously to his sister Hilda, and quoted the remark of someone-or-other who accused who-do-you-call-it of being a lath painted to look like iron. To his renewed surprise Hilda was violently angry with him, and stormed at him tempestuously. He consoled himself as well as he could with the thought that women were strange creatures, and that he would soon be in a position to snap his fingers at her and every one else.

Yet the more he thought the matter over, the more suspicious and uneasy he became. He saw Dittany from time to time, and he felt there was something sinister in the man's unfailing good-humour. He caught, too, the quizzing look under the arched brows that seemed to mock him, and drove him to the most murderous resolutions.

For what reason also did Dittany keep him away from Nan? Why was he never asked again to Palmyra Mansions? Hilda went several times, and, apart from the invidious fact of her going without him, she was so deucedly mysterious about what happened there that his soul burned with suspicious envy. One Sunday afternoon fuel was added to the fire at the sight of Neil Wishart turning into Whitehall from the direction of Victoria. He did not know that the man he had come to hate so bitterly had been wandering about disconsolately in the neighbourhood on the same quest as himself, and with equal disappointment; he could only suppose he had been lunching at the flat.

In such an atmosphere of envy things could not go on indefinitely. He soon decided in his mind that three months' waiting would be not only intolerable, but fatal to his chances; and he determined to see Nan herself. He thought he could open her scornful eyes to a few

home-truths. She might look at him very differently when she realised that his were the hands that manipulated the wires of her luxurious existence, that his were the lips that could hurl her father into bankruptcy at the lightest word.

Nan Dittany's own feelings at this time were too complex for analysis. Her wits were numbed; she did not seem to feel. Vaguely she wondered at herself. Where was the conscience that had given her so much torture? Where the reprobation of her father's crookedness? The fervent resolutions she had made to find out at any cost what was going on around her had all evaporated. She took the little luxuries that came in her way, if not with enjoyment, at all events with resignation. "I'm getting hardened," she said to herself several times. "Perhaps I shall be as bad as that Tregarth woman." The Tregarth woman came and went with her false smiles and her transparent artificiality, and still she did not care. She saw through her, and suffered her with civilities as false as her own. So light had her scruples become that she even bantered her father about her. "Take care, dad," she said with a laugh, "she's setting her cap at you. You'll be caught to a certainty if you're not careful." Mr Dittany as usual failed to see through her altered mood. He thought it signified a return to her senses, and sung and whistled through the flat like a schoolboy home for the holidays. When she chaffed him about Hilda Tregarth he roared with delight, and, picking her up in his great arms, imprinted a sounding kiss on her pale cheek. "That's my own little lass," he cried. "If I ever let any other woman keep house for me I shall deserve all I get. It will be time enough to think of that when you leave me to get married." At which Nan smiled a little sadly and impatiently, shaking her head. "That will never be," she replied. The moment seemed propitious for mentioning Roger Tregarth's request. "You'll soon have plenty of suitors," he said. "I had an application for your hand, or rather for my permission to ask you for it, only the other day."

"Dad, whom do you mean?" The colour flickered in her face, and her eyes widened with a momentary gleam of light in them.

"An old admirer—Roger Tregarth."

"Oh!"

The tone was unmistakable. There were petulance, disgust, and irritation in it, but there was also disappointment, which the man was quick to notice. He passed over the subject lightly. "We don't want to offend him yet," he said quickly. "Of course it's impossible, but I told him to wait."

"It's a matter I don't want to discuss," she said.

"Of course not. But meantime, my dear, everything's going on swimmingly. I am going to give you the surprise of your life, Nan."

Nan sighed. "I believe I am past surprises, dad," she said.

Roger Tregarth had taken to loitering in Victoria Street when he knew that Dittany was safely at the office, and his patience was soon rewarded. He saw Nan walking with that inimitable poise of hers through Chapel Street, and he dogged her footsteps into the Park. When she had left the bustle of the pavement behind her, he quickened his stride and touched her lightly on the arm. The disgust he saw on her face when she turned and recognised him armed him with a fierce hatred. Whatever he felt in the presence of her father, he was a man who could be very brave with women.

"May I have a word with you, Miss Bevington?" he said smoothly. "There is something very important I want to say."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"FATHER!"

"Yes, my girl?"

Mr Dittany, struck by the tense tones of his daughter's voice, looked up anxiously. The paleness of her face and the burning lustre of her eyes alarmed him.

"I was stopped in the street to-day by Mr Tregarth."

"The deuce you were! He's never dared . . ."

"Oh, he was most explicit. He has told me everything."

"About what?"

"About your present business, and his power to ruin you. Please don't bother to explain. You have good reasons for anything you do, I am sure. I want a plain answer to a simple question. Dad, is it true?"

"Is what true, child?"

"That he can send you to prison if he likes."

Mr Dittany took time over his answer. He frowned heavily, with an ugly look on his face.

"He can certainly make things awkward for me."

"How? Is it some swindle you are working, as he says?"

"No."

"Then how?"

"By giving the information that I am an undischarged bankrupt."

"But you have been punished for that once."

"The law does not allow me to earn a living till I get my discharge."

"And so my marriage with Mr Tregarth is the only way to secure his silence?"

"That, I believe, is what he says."

"Do you ask me to do it, dad?"

"No, child; I ask you nothing. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" She panted the words with excitement. Her little hands, so strong and slender, clenched and unclenched as she waited for his reply.

"Unless, perhaps, to temporise. In a month or two, if we can keep him hanging on, there will be other ways."

"I see," she said slowly. "You mean I am to promise him."

"There will be no danger of having to keep it."

"It will not be a danger, it will be a certainty. If I promise to marry Roger Tregarth, I will keep my promise. Do you want me to do it? That's all I ask you."

"Oh, God knows what I want, my dear." He spoke with a gesture of despair. "He has us in a cleft stick."

"And my engagement to him would save you?"

Mr Dittany looked at the girl with trouble on his face. He was out of his depth in tragedies of the heart, though he had imagination enough to see the hideous enormity of such a contract as they were discussing. Grosser and more material things he could bargain for with the most cunning of competitors, but he could not huckster a woman's soul. If he could have had his way with Nan he would have compelled her to dangle the wretched blackmailer on a thread of pretence. He would have had her stoop to endearments,—nay, even embraces,—to smiles and blandishments, and the thousand different ways in which a beautiful and clever woman can fool a man who has fallen into her toils. But he knew well that his power over his daughter was gone. Her clean, honest courage beat down all his equipment of brains and experience. He tried to deceive himself into thinking it was his imprisonment that had given her the advantage over him. In his heart he knew it was his present twistings and turnings that made her despise

him; that she was looking into his heart, and not his past.

He paused long before he replied.

"Need it necessarily go so far as an engagement?" he asked at last rather weakly.

Nan flushed angrily. She saw through the contemptible hint, but before she could retort he had taken alarm, and began to pare it down and explain it away.

"Please don't misunderstand me," he said. "All I mean is that, instead of a sneering refusal which will send him packing off to Shropbury by the next train, you should tell him politely you will give him a definite answer in a couple of months. I want . . . I must have two months, Nan; three, if possible. Take my word, child, there are other ways to get out of this mess." Then, with the emphasis that only shatters a conviction, he added desperately, "There *must* be other ways."

Nan sighed and went away. "Perhaps I can do that," she said wearily. "I will see. I'll write to him. I can't see him again, or I shall strike him in the face."

Mr Dittany sat at his desk toying with a paper-knife for nearly half an hour after she had left him. His head was sunk on his breast, and something approaching a sigh escaped his lips from time to time. He was enduring a rare moment of self-abasement. Not all his finer feelings had forsaken him, and if his conscience did not rule him, it had broken out rebelliously enough to give him acute uneasiness. With a flash of enlightenment he became aware he had sunk low enough to sacrifice even his beloved daughter on the altar of success.

But presently he swept the papers from his desk with a gesture of supreme resolution. The fighting spirit came over him again, and he rose to his feet a little pale and troubled, but grim in the lips, and with eyes that scorched.

"I'll send for Hilda Tregarth," he muttered, tearing a telegraph form from a nail and scratching a hurried message. "We'll try what that will do first."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"DEAR MR WISHART,—Can you see me when you leave the office to-morrow, say the Marble Arch Station at half-past seven? I want your advice on a very important matter. In haste.—Very sincerely yours,
"NAN DITTANY."

Neil Wishart flushed eagerly when he found the envelope in the well-remembered writing on his mantelpiece, and he coloured still more when he had read its brief contents. Its terseness and a certain stiff formality which peeped out between the lines did not damp his excitement in the least; indeed, they accentuated it. If she had been even more laconic he felt that it would only have heightened the effect; if she had said in words, for instance, what she said in effect, "Come and help me," she could only have stirred him the more.

By some instinct he knew the matter was grave, and he knew, although she did not crave secrecy, that it was confidential. "Will it be convenient for me to go punctually at seven to-night?" he asked his chief. He knew that Dittany would not ask questions, but he was relieved at the friendly nod with which his request was granted.

Nan was waiting for him when he reached the rendezvous. He saw her standing in the booking-hall looking anxiously about for him. When she caught sight of his tall form striding towards her she hurried to him.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "Shall we go into the Park?"

"Wherever you like," he answered gaily, but saw he had struck the wrong note. "Nothing the matter?" he asked with concern.

"Everything," she replied bitterly. A little sob caught her in the throat, and Neil saw with alarm that tears were not far off.

"Don't," he said, with a pressure of her arm. "If I can help you . . ."

She looked up gratefully, and made a pitiful attempt at smiling. They left the gravel walk and stepped across the low rails to the green turf, leaving the crowd that had gathered round a Socialist orator.

"Let's sit down," she said presently. "We can talk better."

He flicked a seat for her with his handkerchief. "Now tell me," he said gently.

"It's so difficult to know where to begin," she said. "I want to ask you a curious question. This business of my father's, is it quite straight?" He frowned a puzzled inquiry. "It's a strange thing for me to ask," she went on hurriedly; "and, in its way, a sort of insult to you. Don't answer me if you can't, and please don't take offence. Is it quite an honest business? That's what I want to know."

"Honest? Of course it is. As straight as a line."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly certain."

"Oh, thank God for that. I want no details. I couldn't understand them if you told me. If you say it is an honest business, I believe you. You, at all events, couldn't lie. But do you *know*? Are you enough on the inside? Is it possible it could be a swindle and you not know it?"

"Quite impossible."

"You've taken a terrible load off my mind."

"But why? What on earth . . ."

"Don't ask me."

"But I must. It's only fair to your guv'nor. Can't you see . . ."

Nan looked at him piteously. In her anxiety to

satisfy her knowledge she had overlooked the inevitable suspicions that were bound to be aroused by her strange question. She knew in a flash she could not tell him all, and she cast about in her mind for such an explanation as would satisfy him. A lie was out of the question. Even if she had been less honest than she was, his frank grey eyes searching hers with such a troubled perplexity put deceit out of court. "Some one poisoned my mind," she began haltingly.

"Who?" he asked.

Falteringly, with many a stumble and many a qualifying correction, she related Roger Tregarth's proposal and his threat, while Neil listened with a gathering cloud of anger on his face.

"The cur!" he exclaimed. "You are telling your father, of course?"

The girl made no immediate reply, but bent her head and prodded at the turf with her umbrella.

"Will you mind," she said at last, "if I ask you not to discuss it any more? It's very painful. There are things . . ."

"I don't want to hurt you, dear," he said quietly. The gathering September dusk made it possible for him to seize her hand, and she left it unresistingly in his. "All the same, if you could . . . I'm a clumsy kind of chap, I know; no tact and all that sort of thing. I ought to be jolly well kicked for the way I always put my foot in it. But there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do to help you. Can't you confide in me? That's what I'm trying to drive at. It isn't beastly curiosity. Somehow I know you're in trouble, and I want so much to help you."

"I know," she murmured. She lifted her eyes for a moment, but dropped them again before the great love she saw burning in his face.

He drew her towards him, and she rested lightly against his broad shoulder, listening with a strange thrill of surrender to the torrent of protest that assailed her ears. Curiously jumbled up and incoherent was his speech for the most part, full of boyish idioms and slang

culled from school and college; not at all the sort of avowal one could set down in cold print without giving a shudder to the purists. Yet what does it matter? If Neil Wishart had spoken of "the ecstatic moment when at last I shall call thee mine," it would have convinced her less and not more than the atrocious phrase he actually used. If memory serves them aright he referred to marriage as "awfully jolly," and to the desolate alternative as "beastly hard lines on a chap."

But passion was behind, with all its driving power of conviction, and with it truth and honesty and the divine tenderness which is the offspring of love and strength. Nan found herself incapable of speech. With the same movement of her little hand she seemed to thrust him away and cling to him.

"Oh, I can't, I can't," she murmured presently with a piteous wail in her voice. "Why will you torture me?" She threw her arms suddenly about his neck, forgetting the place in which they were sitting, and took his burning kisses full on her lips.

"You love me?" he asked. The half-whispered words almost choked him.

"Can you ask?"

"I want to hear you say it, dear." He felt her trembling in his arms as she breathed the words he so madly desired. "Let me go now," she faltered. "This is utter folly. Nothing can come of it."

"But why? Is it because of my position? Oh, Nan, I'm working hard now, but I'll work twice as hard if you'll give me some hope. I'm useful to your dad as it is; I'll make myself indispensable if I know I'm working for you. As it is, every company we take up adds something to my income, and they're coming along every day."

She tore herself free, and sat bolt upright in her chair.

"Neil, dear," she said earnestly, "once for all I want you to understand that money has nothing to do with it. If you were penniless it would make no difference, I would cling to you if you were a common labourer

and, God knows, be thankful. You think this luxury is necessary to me, that I am some gay butterfly who lives for fine dresses. I tell you I hate money; I hate the very sound of the word."

"Then what is it, darling? Surely you can tell me. There's no one else? You haven't promised another man?"

She shook her head sadly.

"Then tell me, dear."

She stood up suddenly before him. "I will tell you," she cried. The tone of her voice had become hard and brittle, and in the dim light Neil caught the flash of her eyes. He waited expectantly.

"Because I am not what you think I am," she said, blurting the words hurriedly, dropping them from her lips as if they were hot coals that scorched her. "My very name is not Dittany."

"Not Dittany?" he repeated helplessly.

"My name is Anne Bevington," she said, and there was pride gleaming icily through her coldness. "And I am the daughter of a . . . of a man who had to change it."

Wishart watched her in silence. The girl imagined her confession had sobered his love; that he would no longer want her. She was wrong. An infinite tenderness had come over him; he was thinking only of the pain such an avowal must cause her, and when he spoke his words were very gentle.

"But . . . Edward Dittany—he is your father?"

"Yes; he is Edward Bevington."

The name had loomed large on the limited horizon of Shropbury, and Nan supposed it must carry its own shameful meaning to the man who heard it. To Neil, however, it meant nothing.

"I don't ask you why he changed it," he said gravely. "I don't think I want to know. I only know it has hurt you to tell me so much." He stood by her side, and took her hand again. Her pride, and the sudden fury that had prompted her to speak, had left her, and she stood as if crushed, with head bent low on her

bosom. "I only want to say this, Nan. I have worked by the side of your father for nearly five months. I have seen all he does, and heard all he says, and I say to you, if it were the last word I ever speak, that there isn't a straighter man in London to-day or a finer. Even you, dear, should be proud of having such a father; and that is saying more than I would say of any man I know."

"But you don't quite understand. Can't you imagine the shame of living under false pretences—of going through one's life under an *alias*? Oh, it is dreadful, Neil."

"I think I understand," he answered gravely. "But . . ." his tone lightened into banter, "I can give you an escape from that."

"You still want me?"

"If I don't have you I don't want to live."

"Even now I haven't told you the worst."

"Not if it hurts you."

"I must, I must. When you knew me at Kennington, father was not abroad; he was . . . in prison."

"My brave little kiddie! And you lived through such a time! I'm grateful to you from the bottom of my heart for trusting me with this. I don't care." He shot out his clenched fist for emphasis. "Whatever the reason, it was false. I know what false accusations are; which is something I have to tell you presently. Your father couldn't do a crooked thing."

She clutched at the hope. "That is what he says—at least he says the accusation was false."

They walked with arms interlocked through the great Park, until they came to the shadows of the trees.

"And now my answer, dear?" he asked.

"If you still want me, Neil."

"More than want, little Nan, I need you."

"I will follow you through the world," she said.

Neil Wishart called at Tregarth's rooms later in the same evening. "I want a few words with you, Tregarth," he said grimly.

CHAPTER XXX.

HILDA TREGARTH sailed into the offices of the Mortgage Debenture Corporation with that air of loud self-assertion which, in her case, always denoted nervousness. She smiled with the utmost amiability on all the clerks, and shook hands with those within her reach. Wishart, who was coming out of Peter Maplin's room as she passed through the swing door, beat a hurried retreat. He felt, after what Nan had told him the night before, and after a subsequent violent interview with Roger Tregarth, that it would be impossible to hold a civil tongue. He was conscious of a little nervousness, too, not far removed from panic. The woman's visit so early in the day portended something. It seemed too much like obvious cause and effect for him to dismiss it as a pure coincidence. The fat was in the fire; he would be sent for presently to the great man's room, and there would be a scene.

Neil had been through too much in the last twenty-four hours to be able to think coherently. Had it been a situation demanding only plain, straightforward courage he would not have minded so greatly; but tact was needed and the utmost diplomacy. It spoke volumes for his deep-rooted faith in Mr Dittany that the confession Nan had made to him only seemed to enhance his chief's splendid qualities. He had stolen furtive glances at the calm imperious face, and had seen things written there that he had never before noticed—but things that only succeeded in filling him with the most generous admiration: pride, for instance, and the

righteous patience of a good man wronged. He longed to return the sympathy he himself had received, to grip his benefactor by the hand and say "it was rough luck." And with his access of admiration for Dittany came a corresponding hatred of the Tregarths, brother and sister. It was safer to back himself into Mr Maplin's room; he could not have shaken hands with Hilda Tregarth, and if she had spoken to him he would have said something rude.

He imagined he knew what she had come about. With his usual tactless impetuosity he had blurted out things to her brother that he had much better have left unsaid, and she had, of course, come to complain about his unwarrantable interference. How was he to justify himself? Later, when he had time to explain to Mr Dittany that he had won his daughter's love, he would have the semblance of an excuse; no man with any spirit can be expected to suffer an utter cad to insult the woman he adores with impunity. But as yet he was in a false position. He could hardly explain the situation before a woman like Hilda Tregarth, and, failing that, what could he say to justify himself? So he waited with ill-concealed trepidation, fumbling at papers and flitting uneasily in and out of Peter Maplin's room till that irascible little man nearly swore at him.

It would have given a set-back to his self-importance if he had known that his name was never once mentioned. Hilda Tregarth had Mr Dittany's telegram in her hand when she stepped into his room and took the chair he offered her so courteously. The worried man shot an anxious glance at the quality of the smile on her handsome face as she seated herself. He could not decide whether it was one of friendliness or evil satisfaction at the evidence of her growing power over him, shown by the fact that he was obliged to send for her, and he set himself with an effort to exert all his well-known powers of personal charm.

"My dear lady," he began, "it's like the splash of water in a desert to be lighted up like this in our dingy working hours."

"Oh, come," she replied with a light laugh; "you didn't wire for me to pay me delicate compliments. Do go on smoking, there's a dear man."

He noticed the tinge of colour that had mounted to her face. He was not vain enough to put it down to anything more than a conceited woman's love of idle flattery.

"Thanks," he said. "No, Miss Tregarth; we're both, I hope, too sensible for that. I'll be perfectly plain. I've sent for you to ask you to keep that mad-headed brother of yours under control."

"Have I influence? But what has he been doing now?"

"He has been good enough to renew his attentions to Nan. Of course, she won't have him; that's a foregone conclusion. His methods of courtship, for example, are too brusque. He coupled his proposal with a threat to go at once to Vance, Capper, & Co. if she refuses. You know what that means?"

"Bluff, perhaps. Offer him more money."

"I don't think it is bluff. Infatuated men are blind Samsons; they will destroy themselves if they can bring down other people's temples. I'm going to ask you a very straight question, Miss Tregarth; are you on my side or on his?"

For such a hardened woman of the world, for an adventuress who had urged her brother to exact his full pound of flesh, Hilda Tregarth became strangely perturbed. She seemed to find some difficulty in meeting the grave questioning eyes that were trying to fathom her inscrutable soul; she coloured perceptibly, and toyed with her purse.

"Why should I be on your side?" she murmured in some confusion.

He was very dense for a clever man. He might have seen that the question she had put was asked of herself. He ought to have perceived that however it might clash with her financial interests, the fact remained that she was on his side, and no longer an ally of her despicable brother. But, though he wondered at the emotion in her tone, he could only grasp the money aspect.

" You mean I haven't treated you both as well as I might have done. We differ there, but let that pass. What have you personally to gain by letting him go to Shropbury ? "

" Why shouldn't it be spite ? "

" I give you credit for more sense. Besides, why should you feel spiteful to me ? What have I done to you ? "

" Nothing—and everything."

He looked at her searchingly, with raised brows.

" A strange answer, surely. What am I to make of that ? "

" If you were less wrapped up in your money-grubbing you would understand." She tried to face him defiantly. " You think," she went on in rising tones, " that every one is as cool and calculating as you are ; that we are sordid adventurers trying to extract the last possible penny from you. Haven't you learnt from Roger that even to him there are things that no money can buy ? Why are you so blind ? Why will you make me drink the very dregs of humiliation ? "

Her words might be incoherent and mystifying, but her face told him all he needed to know. Her dark cheeks were aflame with colour, her utterance was charged with uncontrolled passion, her lower lip quivered hysterically. For a moment a cruel gleam of mastery flashed from his eyes—a glint coming from the knowledge of what his new-found power might mean if carefully handled. Yet, instead of inflaming her to indignation at his callousness, the sight of it brought her even more abjectly to his feet. He had the good sense not to persist in his triumph.

" But think a moment, Hilda," he said gently. " We're not children ; we must be sensible." It was the first time he had used her Christian name, and as he spoke he tried to take her hand. She flung herself free in a tornado of passion, and rose to her feet.

" Because I have told you so much, you think you can play with me. Don't deceive yourself, Edward Bevington. I'm not one of your cold, placid women. With me love and hate are very close together. Do

you understand me? So close that even I don't know which it is; don't know whether I want to caress you or stab you. You can trample on me as brutally as you like, but I won't be fawned on and coaxed."

"Sit down."

He spoke very quietly, and sat pointing to the chair with an outstretched finger as she stood panting and heaving at his side.

"Sit down," he repeated. A curious look had come into his face. There was a round spot of unwonted colour on either cheek; his heart was beating rapidly with a sensation of delirious excitement defying analysis. He found himself touched vulnerably; he who had imagined himself clad in triple mail was in danger of a mortal hurt. Hilda Tregarth, without knowing it, had attacked him on his weakest side—his lust of power and mastery.

He watched her snake-like form triumphantly as she came to heel. He was fascinated by his own power of fascination, vanquished by his own ascendancy. Hilda sat down slowly, trembling with the utterness of her surrender. For both of them in that moment the outer world had passed away; one pair of wild, feverish eyes riveted on the other, they were conscious of little else; their great black souls seemed to clasp and unclasp, and finally to mingle into one. Here was no divine gentleness; no unspeakable abnegation of self. There is an iniquity which is not weak, and it was theirs. There is a frailty which is but a smirch of black on a white raiment, ugly and offensive; but there is also a wickedness as positive as it is, in the providence of a merciful Heaven, rare; rejoicing in its strength, hideously beautiful, a caricature of the divine gift it apes; and this was theirs. So nearly akin, as Hilda Tregarth had said, to hate that one could scarce distinguish between them, linked to a mad passion to hurt, was this new emotion, that it left them both trembling when it had passed. With all his vaunted self-knowledge, Edward Dittany had not realised the full sweep of his gamut; he had sounded a diapason which vibrated through him with

a joy hitherto undreamt. Yet still was he master of himself. With a supreme effort he resisted the fierce impulse to take the yielding woman in his arms, and the reaction steadied her also.

"We mustn't make idiots of ourselves," he said. There was a hoarseness in his voice which gave the lie to his spoken indifference, and the woman marked it with a fierce joy.

"You did not know, did you?" she asked in a half whisper.

"No, I did not know," he replied. Then, with some sort of return to his old manner, he added, "We mustn't forget where we are."

Womanlike, Hilda Tregarth was not to be cheated of her triumph. She would have talked about it during the whole day if he would have let her.

"No man has ever stirred me like this," she said. "You make me feel as if I want you to put your foot on my neck and trample me in the dust."

"Hush, my dear. Not now, for Heaven's sake. We were talking about Roger; need I repeat my question?"

She smiled between her red, parted lips, and shook her head.

"Your safety is mine," she said.

"Then you will see him?"

"Of course."

"There is no time to be lost. Go now, my dear."

She lingered over her departure. Gladly would she have renewed the scene through which they had just passed; longingly she waited for some spark of the fire she had ignited so suddenly, but not one scintillation gleamed through the mask of businesslike calm that had settled once more over his manner.

"When shall I see you again?" she asked seductively

"Dine with me this evening, if you will," he replied; "but see Roger first. We must lay our plans carefully."

"At the flat?"

"No, no; Nan will be there. Call for me here at seven, and we'll go to the Carlton."

"How lovely!" She purred the words, with a languishing glance over her shoulder.

Mr Dittany ushered her out of the room. He bit his lip at her exclamation. It seemed to throw a lurid light on the relation in which she regarded herself. It was so obvious that she looked forward to the coming dinner in the aspect of an affectionate *tête-à-tête*; whereas he had done his best to throw into his casual tone a clear intimation that it was to discuss the matter of Roger. He grimaced a little when she had gone. It was all very well to exert his fascination over her in order to secure her support, but he read her evil nature well enough to be quite certain he had burned his boats. There could be no going back now unless he were prepared to heat her animosity seven times seven.

He paced his room for several minutes, wondering at himself. Where was the passion that had struck him into such senseless folly? By no effort of will could he raise even the ghost of it. With Hilda's departure had gone every shred of her mesmeric power; he even thought he was conscious of an acute dislike for the woman.

There was only one thing to be done. He must do what he should have done at first—fall back on his second line of defence, and put it out of the power of either brother or sister to harm him. He rang his bell with quite unnecessary violence, and sent for Peter Maplin. The little man shuffled in expectantly.

"Sit down, Maplin. What balance have we at the bank, including the deposit balance? Roughly."

"About four thousand two hundred."

"I've got a scheme that wants fifteen thousand ready cash. Can you get it?"

"Where?"

"That's what I'm asking you. Can you get it?"

"No."

"Well, it has to be got; do you see?"

"How long?"

"A month at the outside."

"We can rake up a bit. What do you want it for?"

"That's my business. Let me have the balance-sheet file."

He tapped his fingers irritably on the table and snatched the documents from the accountant's hands. One by one he went through the sheets.

"Redwood's not up to much. We can shut him down. Haven't they got a big bill falling due?"

"A hundred and twelve odd, next week."

"We should have to meet it for them. Just take a note that it isn't to be met, and apply for a voluntary liquidation the next day. Burchill's the same. There's a good twelve hundred between them. They're the only ones we can lay hands on, I'm afraid. Now about Mitchell & Jimson's valuations; how long are you going to be with them?"

"I've finished 'em."

"Right. Rush the thing through. Call a meeting for next Friday. See that Mitchell is there, but don't let the others think there is anything important. You know how to water down the agenda. We've got to have a majority present."

"What's the idea?"

"To transfer all accounts to our bank."

"Jimson 'll kick."

"Let him."

"What's the idea. You're on the straight, ain't you; know what you're doing, and all that sort of thing?"

"Damn your impertinence. What do you mean by it?"

"Keep your hair on. Looks remarkably fishy, that's all."

"If you'll kindly attend to your own department, Maplin, I shall be much obliged."

"And if the accounts of this firm, sir, ain't in my department, I should very much like to know what is."

"Your department, Mr Maplin, like that of every one else in this office, is to do what I tell you."

Peter Maplin shrugged his shoulders. He had never been spoken to like this before, but, for all the liberties he was accustomed to take, he knew his place, and had

accurately sized up the domineering personality of his masterful chief.

"Anything else?" he demanded sulkily.

"You've got quite enough to get on with. Send Wishart here."

To Neil's surprise, Dittany's remarks were entirely relevant to business. He would have braced himself up to speak about Nan, but there was a lowering look on his employer's face that warned him that this was not the time. When he had gone Mr Dittany unlocked the drawer of his safe and took out an envelope full of papers. "Why not?" he muttered. "It's risky, but what isn't?"

He rang the bell again. "Send a wire at once to Mr Roger Tregarth," he said to the boy who answered it. "And say on it that I want to see him here at once."

"If he'll only agree," he said to himself. "But I'm afraid he'll smell a rat."

CHAPTER XXXI.

NAN DITTANY had seen nothing of Neil for three days after she had given him her promise, nor had he written. She was perhaps just a little angry with him, and anxious when she thought of the confidence she had divulged, but her prevailing mood was one of gratitude. There are strains that must not be repeated too soon. Some tactful instinct of Neil's had told him this; some guardian angel whispered in his ear that a second meeting under the stress of such emotion would have been an anti-climax. At the same time, Nan would have been glad to see him, if only to allay her fears. She watched her father anxiously, wondering from the strangeness of his altered mood whether Neil could have said anything to open his eyes to the fact that she had parted with his secret. Mr Dittany never mentioned another word on the subject of Roger Tregarth, or indeed on hardly any other subject. He had become taciturn and morose when left alone; irritable when spoken to. His appetite was gone, and he had taken to muttering to himself. She could hear him moving restlessly about in the silence of the night: going from his bedroom to his study, and from his study to the drawing-room. At breakfast he was jaded, and drank brandy in his coffee.

On the third day after her meeting with Neil Wishart, Nan had been out to the shops, and when she returned in the early afternoon she was surprised to find a stranger waiting at the top of the stairs. He was a youngish man, evidently of the better-class artisan type, with a face thin to emaciation, and sandy hair. His

health seemed bad, for although the weather was warm he was huddled up in an overcoat. He watched the girl fit her key in the lock, and then, raising his hat, he came forward.

"Can you tell me where I shall find Mr Dittany?" he asked.

"He's in the city," Nan replied. "He won't be home for a long time. Will you leave any name?"

"I must see him, miss. I've just come from the office, and they said he wasn't well, and had come home early. Are you Mrs Dittany?"

"I'm his daughter. Would you like to leave a message?"

"That 'ud be no good. It's urgent, you see. My name's Redwood. P'raps you've heard of me?"

Nan shook her head. "I don't know anything about my father's affairs," she said. She looked at the man shrewdly; he looked very inoffensive, and very ill and miserable. "Perhaps you would like to come in and wait," she went on. "Are you sure they said he was ill?"

"Not very well was the words they used, miss; and that he was coming home early."

"Can't you put it off till to-morrow, then? He won't want to talk business if he's not well."

"He's got to talk business whether he's well or not. He's got to hear what I've got to say to him. I ain't well myself, if it comes to that, but I got a wife and four children at home what depends on me for their daily bread, and, ill or well, I'm going to see as how they're not robbed o' their living by a man what can live in the lap o' luxury in a place like this."

As he continued speaking the man worked himself up into a fury of temper, shouting the concluding words, with eyes blazing and a hectic flush on his consumptive cheeks. Nan shrank from that most tragic of all sights — a weak man at bay. His words, confirming her worst fears, stabbed at her heart.

"You mustn't talk like that of Mr Dittany," she said. "Please, come in." She did not stop to think whether

her father would approve of her meddling ; she thought only of the raised voice on a public staircase, and the necessity of covering some shameful scandal.

"Sit down, Mr Redwood. Let me give you a glass of wine."

"I touch neither bite nor sup in this place," cried the agitated man. "Let him give me my business back that he's robbed me of. He can have the money back he lent —every penny of it, and interest."

"But I don't understand," said Nan. "How could he rob you of a business?"

"By lying promises—that's how. By getting me tied up hand and foot with his damned cleverness—him and that rascal Maplin between 'em. If you ain't satisfied, says Maplin, see a solicitor. I've just come from one now, and what does he say? Says there ain't one little hole or crack I can get out of; everything as cunning as Satan. And what's to become o' me? That's what I want to know. The business I worked and slaved and toiled for, the business what I lost my health in, all gone; sold up next week. Who's going to take me on? And what's the wife and kiddies going to do? Oh, it's wicked, it's wicked."

The wretched man broke down and sobbed, while Nan looked on with a turmoil of rage, compassion, and fear in her heart,—struck into silence through sheer perplexity.

"Come, come," she said at last, "I'm sure there's some mistake. I'm sure my father wouldn't sell you up if he knew all you tell me."

"Then you don't know him, miss," said Redwood, dabbing his eyes.

"Give me your address," she said, "and leave it to me." She was anxious to get rid of the man before her father came home. She did not believe much in the story of the illness—that was probably an excuse to put Redwood off—but there was just a chance he might return, and then there would be a scene. "If he had been coming home, he would have been here before now. You can trust me, Mr Redwood. If I find the facts as

you state, I will do all I can to persuade Mr Dittany to alter his mind."

"Then you'll have to look sharp, miss. The bill was returned to-day. There may be a writ to-morrow, and the lawyer chap tells me your father can walk straight in with a winding-up order and give me the sack on the spot. P'r'aps I'll come again to-night."

"Yes, that will be the better way. Don't worry about it unnecessarily."

She got rid of him as quickly as she could, and wandered up and down the flat abstractedly, forgetting even to take off her hat and coat.

"Neil should have told me the truth," she said continually to herself. Woman-like she began to make excuses for him even in the midst of her censure. "He wanted to shield dad," she thought. "Perhaps he doesn't know what is going on."

But whatever excuse she put to herself in mitigation of the facts, it was significant that the facts themselves were never once in doubt. Whatever she might guess, she knew that Redwood was being robbed and turned into the street; that the wine she would sip would be the blood of his children. Surging over her came the fierce resolve to save the man and his family; to pit her whole strength against her father; to use every weapon in her armoury—even to death—to crush the hideous dragon of fraud and roguery. Her chance came soon, for while she planned she heard her father's key in the lock. He passed straight through to his study, and she followed him with firmness and a high resolve in every movement of her body.

"Father!"

"I've come home early. I wasn't up to the mark." He explained his return, seeing in her tense remark a filial anxiety on his behalf.

"I know," she said; "I expected you before."

The absence of sympathy irritated him. Everything jarred on him now.

"How did you know?"

"I have had a Mr Redwood here."

" Well ? "

" He waited to see you. They told him at the office you were on your way home."

" They had no business to do anything of the kind. I called at Harley Street on my way back. I've been sleeping badly. I'm sick."

For a man of such self-reliant strength Mr Dittany was strangely anxious for sympathy. His fretful annoyance grew visibly at the want of condolence in either word or look.

" Mr Redwood says you are selling him up. Is that true ? "

" Confound it, girl. Can't you see I'm ill ? Am I not to leave business behind for one afternoon ? "

" What is business for you, dad, is life and death for him. Why are you selling him up ? Don't look at me like that. I insist on talking it over. Why are you ruining the man ? "

" He was already ruined when he came to me. He would have been sold up months ago if we hadn't helped him. The man has no energy. He can't make his business pay."

" The poor fellow is ill."

" But, devil take it all, am I a charitable institution ? Do you expect me to become a convalescent home for sick merchants ? Why can't you mind your own business ? "

" As long as I eat your food and share your luxury, dad, this is my business."

Mr Dittany brushed the hair back from his brow with a gesture of impatience, and passed his hand wearily over his eyes. " Sit down," he said. Nan obeyed expectantly. With her overwrought nerves she felt angry with him for the tacit appeal the grey pallor of his face made on her sympathy.

" You say," he began, " you insist on discussing this business. Don't blame me ; you bring it on yourself. I would have kept all this unpleasantness from you if I could. You will remember we were discussing the subject of Roger Tregarth's proposal the other day."

"Well?"

"I think I said that, granting you were determined on a refusal, there were other alternatives."

"Yes?" There was a growing sickness at her heart.

"This is one of them."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean that the only other way to stave off the ruin he threatens is to raise money at any cost."

Nan had gone very pale.

"Then if I marry Mr Tregarth I save the Redwoods?"

"And several others in the same position. But why discuss it? We have ruled out the alternative. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"This is terrible, dad."

"It is not quite all. I find other things are necessary. Among them I shall have to marry Hilda Tregarth in order to get her on our side."

Nan sat speechless, clutching at her throat.

"I dined with the lady the other night," he continued, "and she was frank enough to make it a *sine qua non*."

Mr Dittany sat looking at his daughter in silence. There was a little vindictive gleam in his eye which showed he was enjoying his revenge. She, for her part, looked piteously at him, her breast heaving as if it would burst.

"On the other hand, my dear," he said presently, "there are other advantages accruing to such an arrangement. Incidentally, while cheating Tregarth of his revenge, I shall be able to keep a promise I made to you when I came back from Shropbury, that I would pay off all my creditors and enable you to resume your real name, and hold up your head again before the world."

"Honestly, you said, dad."

"Everything is honest. Ask any solicitor."

In her happier moments Nan would have poked glorious fun at the notion of making a solicitor the guardian of one's conscience, but in her present agitation his words were flying aimlessly over her head; she scarcely heard what he said.

"We'll leave the matter now," he said. "Where's your maid?"

"She is out for the day."

"Unfortunate. Tregarth is coming here presently. You won't care to let him in. I will open the door myself. Give me a wine-glass half full of water. I'll see what a dose of this stuff will do for my nerves. I don't want to be disturbed for an hour; I shall lie down."

He was still angling for her sympathy, but she fetched the water in a dazed way without speaking. When her father had gone to his room, she threw herself down on the settee in the drawing-room. Her head was aching miserably, and she shook convulsively with tearless sobs.

Perhaps she slept. At all events it was with a start that she heard the sound of talking in the lobby, and recognised the voice of Roger Tregarth. "Come in," she heard her father say. "Nan at home?" asked the other. She boiled indignantly at the familiarity, and the contemptuous tone in which it was uttered. "No; she's gone to . . ." The closing of the study door cut the lie in half. The atmosphere of deceit sickened her. She had an almost irresistible impulse to rush along the passage, beat on the study door with her clenched fists, and cry out that it was a lie, that they were all lies, that her father was temporising with him only to cheat him in the end, to dare him to go at once to Shropbury and do his worst. She craved to blow the roof off, that by so doing she could let in the clean air of heaven on the poisonous fumes that were suffocating her. The reek of wickedness was about her, and stank in her nostrils. Hastily putting on the hat she had taken off when she threw herself on to the settee, she fled from the flat, and ran down the wide staircase like a stricken deer.

Tregarth swaggered into the little room through the door which Dittany held open for him, and pitched his hat and gloves disdainfully on a chair.

"Gone out, has she?" he said, in answer to the lie of

which Nan had heard the half. "I thought, perhaps, by asking me to come here, you were both coming to terms."

"You're in too great a hurry, my boy. I asked you here because we can talk without fear of interruption. Have one of these cigars. You'll only make a mess of things if you try to force the pace. I've sown the seeds; I've explained the position, and we must give it time to mature. She doesn't like you; there's no good to be gained in blinking that fact; but I think she'll come round. That isn't what I want to speak about."

"What, then?"

"I've got a good thing I can't work alone. I can put you on to it if you care to work it with me."

"Let's hear it, then."

"You've been to West Africa; where is the Adarah country?"

"Half-way to Kumasi."

"What sort of place is it?"

"It's hell; one big, infernal swamp."

"You wouldn't like to go out again?"

Tregarth laughed. "I think I can see myself doing it," he replied.

"I've got a concession there; bought it from some poor starving devil who swears he found gold there."

"They all do. Going to float it? You can get plenty of gold out of it that way."

"Quite so. But we've got to show them something for their money. I think you told me you were a mining accountant there. You know the jargon. Will you run over to Accra and send in a report? You needn't go up country."

"Not I. For one thing, I don't trust you, Bevington. How do I know it isn't some bally dodge to get me out of the way?"

"I must get some one else, then. I would rather it was you, because I've got some specimen ore which will fetch the market to a certainty, and you could take it out with you to send home. If you won't go I shall

have to do the conjuring here. It's a pity. I've got a rattling good Board in my pocket, and the thing would go off like smoke."

A cunning look had come into Tregarth's face. It was on his lips to carry on his customary offensive rôle, but he was struck with the sudden idea that here was another rivet in the chain he was forging for Nan and her father.

"If you don't mind, old chap," he said in altered tones, "I'd rather not be mixed up in it openly. My name's not much good, you know. But as you say, I know the jargon. I can put you up to all sorts of wrinkles if you like."

"That's better than nothing. Here are the papers; let's go into the matter now while we're about it."

The two confederates of old sat head to head, poring over their swindling plans. Something of their former enthusiasm came over them. For the moment they forgot their enmity and became allies in concocting their schemes of prey. Yet, at the back of their minds, they were both working for ends they would not acknowledge: Dittany to fire the younger man with a zeal that would drive him for two months or more into a region charged with death, where his drink-soaked frame would be sure to remove his baneful influence at one stroke by succumbing to malaria; Tregarth seeking to close his grip tighter by loading himself with information he could threaten to divulge.

Truly, there is no man so easy to cheat as one who is trying to defraud you.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THERE was a melancholy air of desuetude brooding over the factory of William Redwood & Co., Ltd., Mattress Manufacturers, when old Peter Maplin came down armed with the formal notice from the Debenture Corporation. Redwood took it from him sulkily without remark. His solicitor was coming down presently, and had impressed on him the urgency of keeping his temper and his tongue. Girls working at tables and benches, stitching covers or sorting flock, looked up from their work with startled glances, their heart gone out of their labours. Mrs Redwood herself, carrying a nine-months-old baby, watched the meeting of the two men with eyes which were anxious with dread and swollen with weeping, prepared if necessary to use her influence in averting a scene.

Mr Maplin himself was unaccountably nervous. To any one who knew his brusque and rather questionable business morality, it would have come as a shock to see the irritable twitching of his eyelids and the troubled glances he kept throwing in the direction of Redwood's wife. Several times he blew his red nose with trumpet-like violence, and once he took off his black-rimmed glasses to rub his eyes with his forefinger.

"Damn it all, man," he cried at last, "I don't like this sort of job, and it's no good saying I do. But it's business, you know; it's business."

"Is it?" said Redwood laconically. "I thought it was murder."

"Come, you mustn't talk like that. P'raps it's only

a matter of form. Creditors 'll have to walk out as soon as they come in. We must protect ourselves. Come, ma'am, cheer this chap up. What a bonny little babby ! Boy or girl, ma'am ? Diddums, then ?" He pinched the infant's cheek, and it lifted out its arms and crowed at him.

"Leave the kid alone!" shouted Redwood with sudden fury.

"Bill!" remonstrated Mrs Redwood. "Don't go for forgetting yourself. I don't suppose it's Mr Maplin's fault; he's got to do what he's told, same as we have."

The mattress-maker's wife had seen through the rough husk of the accountant's exterior to an inner soul of him which had nothing to do with figures: she knew why he had blown his nose and taken off his horn-rimmed spectacles. Her man was denser; he did not argue.

"Let him leave the kid alone then," he repeated, "if he don't want trouble."

Mr Maplin looked surprised and troubled, and might have put his foot into it still further but that at that moment Neil Wishart entered the factory. He looked very grave as, nodding to the Redwoods, he went up to the accountant. "Mr Dittany says you and I have got to take stock," he remarked, taking him apart. "What's it all about?" he asked quietly.

"It's about breaking 'em up; it's about turning 'em into the street, kids and all; it's about sending that man to his grave; that's what it's about," replied Maplin. He spoke venomously. "Why don't he come down himself?" he went on. "Why can't he do his own dirty work?"

"He is coming down presently."

"The sooner the better, then. Mind," he continued impressively, "I won't deny that I ain't been taken in; I won't say I didn't know all along that this sort of thing had got to come. I even admired it on paper. It was clean cut and clever; not a flaw in it. I thought figures was everything, and they ain't. I hadn't got imagination. Figures are all right in their way, but they don't

take stock of wives and babies, they don't reckon on consumptive fathers, and children crying out for bread; that's what they don't reckon on."

"But the guv'nor must have some good reason. He's never done a thing like this before."

"Oh, he's got reason enough. He wants their money for some new-fangled scheme or other; something that'll pay a good twenty-five per cent, I'll warrant. What's the good of worrying? Let's get on with the stock. I ain't going to ask this Redwood chap to help; he's got enough trouble as it is. We'll do it ourselves. Come on, off with your coat."

Neil made no reply. His face was very serious as he looked over in the direction of the Redwoods. The man had an angry sullen look in his eyes, and his wife, clinging tearfully to his arm, was remonstrating with him earnestly, but apparently without avail. "But you must have a bite of something, Bill," he heard her say. "You've got a wearing day in front of you, and you'll be bad again."

Wishart turned impatiently, and followed his fellow-clerk into the warehouse. A dull aching depression came over him. It was hard to own himself in the wrong, hard to shake off his faith in Dittany at a moment's notice; but he remembered Nan and her question. Whatever course he ought to pursue, he could do nothing then. He took off his coat and turned up his sleeves, and for half an hour worked like a navvy at the pulling out of sacks, the weighing of feathers and flock, the measuring of hundreds of yards of tick and canvas; while old Maplin at his elbow jotted down the particulars in his note-book, and echoed his figures in his croaking voice. When, hot and dirty, he paused for a moment, Nan Dittany was standing before him with wrathful eyes.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"Don't let me interrupt you," she said sarcastically. "You are pleasantly occupied, I see."

Neil straightened his back and wiped the dust from

his hands. His face, whether from his exertion or her insinuation, was crimson.

"You have no right to say that," he replied quietly.

"Have I not?" she asked. "Honest toil should always be a pleasure."

"If you mean," he answered with heat, "I like this job, you're utterly mistaken. I'm told to do it, and I do it."

"Naturally. Of course the business is as straight as a line, or you wouldn't be here. Where is my father, Mr Wishart?"

Wishart bit his lip with vexation. "Excuse me, Maplin," he said. "May I speak to you a minute, Miss Dittany?"

Nan inclined her head proudly, and walked with him to a far end of the room.

"I think you're very unjust to me," he began. "This morning was the very first I had heard of this business. I don't like it; I don't understand it. Won't you believe me? If you ask me to do it, I'll throw up the job now, and here."

"Isn't that rather weak? If your own conscience lets you do it, you should not be prevented by a woman's tongue."

"I can't argue now," he said sullenly. "You seem determined to misunderstand me. Your father is coming soon, and I was only waiting to have it out with him. We will see him together."

"Send him into the house when he comes," she said. "I am talking to Mrs Redwood."

She turned on her heel and left him standing there, consumed with vexation. He had a momentary desire to run after her. He realised how his conduct must shape in her eyes, and he felt a wave of impotent meaninglessness surge over him. On second thoughts however, he went back to Maplin.

"I've done with the job," he said, picking up his coat. "Where's a basin and some soap and water?"

"What's up, youngster?"

"Only that I'm not going to be one of a pack of thieves. That's all."

"You know you'll get sacked?"

"I quite appreciate that."

"I'm not sure that I won't join you. I don't like it, and he can't afford to sack us both. What did the gal want?"

Wishart made no reply, and as he walked away to get his wash he heard the well-known voice of his employer in the office below. The cold water seemed to steady his nerves, to take the angry flush from his cheeks, and clear his head for the resolution he had taken. When he went down Dittany was talking to a stranger—a young man with eyeglasses and a prim manner. "Come in, Wishart," said Dittany pleasantly. "This is Mr Redwood's solicitor; we may want a witness."

Wishart stood in the doorway, making no sign. Listening impatiently to the discussion, bursting to break in with interruptions, was Redwood himself. Even the lawyer was heated beyond professional wont; only Mr Dittany remained calm and smiling. "You were saying, sir . . ." went on the latter.

"I was saying, sir, that if you persist in breaking my client's business up so unwarrantably, we shall see to it that you get nothing out of it."

"You use terms, Mr Shepherd, that beg the question. What do you mean by 'unwarrantably,' may I ask?"

"I mean that the business is solvent, sir, and progressive."

"You do not deny, I presume, that it is unable to meet Witherbys' bill, or that they have issued a writ in consequence? You do not deny that under the terms of the debenture we are empowered to step in *ipso facto* to protect our interests?"

"You stuck the clause in after I signed," interrupted Redwood.

"Do please keep quiet, Mr Redwood," said his solicitor. "The clause is quite usual. Yes, sir, we admit all that. The point is, that hitherto your company had financed

whenever it was required. You had taken up several bills before this. What reason had we for supposing you would allow this one to be dishonoured?"

" You refute yourself. You show our *bona fides*. You admit we have more than once done things quite outside our undertaking."

" You have the power to do what you are doing; I will admit that. What I say is that we will show up your methods. We shall . . ."

" Write to 'Truth' about him," suggested Redwood.

" Do be quiet, please. We shall oppose your application for a winding-up order tooth and nail."

" On what grounds ? "

" On the ground, sir, that it is a malicious application. If necessary, on the ground that Witherbys have withdrawn their writ."

Mr Dittany laughed, and in the grating sound of his guffaw Wishart heard with a shudder the whole evil of the man's nature.

" But the writ has been served. We are justified in falling back on the clause in the debenture relating to jeopardy of assets."

Mr Shepherd was crestfallen, and showed it. " Very well, Mr Dittany, do your worst," he said; " but it's going to cost you a good deal more than you will get out of it."

" We can trust you lawyers to see to that. Well, Wishart, what is it ? "

" Your daughter is waiting to see you in the house."

" What house? Here? What the devil . . . ? All right, I'll come in in a minute. Have you finished taking the stock ? "

" No, Mr Dittany."

" Well, hurry up. How long will it take you ? "

" I'm not going to finish it."

" Not . . . going . . . to finish it? What do you mean? Explain yourself."

" I mean," replied Neil, speaking quietly so that the others should not overhear, " that when I entered your service I didn't undertake to be a broker's man."

Mr Dittany's eyes glinted dangerously. "I see," he said, nodding; "I'll talk to you presently. Here, Maplin, I want you."

Peter Maplin came up rubbing his hands.

"Our young saint here has scruples about finishing the stock. Can you finish alone?"

"I can, sir; but I ain't going to."

"Why?"

"Because it's a damnable shame, and there ain't any other word for it. That's why."

Mr Dittany's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I begin to see," he said. "A conspiracy, eh? Very well. We'll see who is master. Ask my daughter to come here."

Maplin moved towards the door, not sorry to get away, but Wishart forestalled him. He hurried across the yard. Nan was sitting in Mrs Redwood's parlour, nursing the child. "Your father wants you," he said. "I will come in a minute," she replied.

He waited for her outside. "I have refused to do the job," he said.

She darted a quick glance at his flushed face. "If only you had done it before I asked you," she said.

"There was no time. I hadn't seen him."

Nan touched his arm with a gentle pressure.

"Forgive me, then," she whispered. "I'm nearly distracted. We must stop this iniquity."

Mr Dittany met them at the door of the office. He looked strangely excited, with a bright spot of red on either cheek. "In here," he said curtly. "You can come too, Wishart. You had better hear what I've got to say—both of you."

Nan entered first with her head erect; Neil following, closed the door behind him.

"I can guess what brings you here, Nan. What I want to know is whether this conspiracy is a pre-arranged business to ruin me. When my own daughter and my own servants combine to thwart me in every possible way, I am justified in disbelieving it to be a pure coincidence."

"There is no conspiracy, father," said Nan. She spoke deliberately, with perfect calmness. "It simply means that you have allied every decent-minded person against you."

"I'm not in the mood to listen to insults from my own child. Where's your gratitude? Where's your common decency that you should choose to make an exhibition and a laughing-stock of me before all these people? What have you been saying to the Redwoods in that house?"

"I have been comforting a broken woman to the best of my ability."

"I thought as much. At my expense. Who is managing my business—you or I? Wishart here has heard all their solicitor has to say. If he is honest, he will tell you that on their own confession everything is straight and legal. What is it you want? To make me a charitable institution?"

"I haven't come to state my wants, father; still less to argue about the subject. I have come to state my terms. I have come to say that if you will not save these poor people, I will."

"You?"

"You have been good enough to show me the way. I merely want to make sure that my sacrifice will not be wasted; that when I have done what you asked me, you will let the people go."

"It is too late."

"Why is it? You can give them a signed agreement now. I want to see it, and I want Mr Redwood's solicitor to see it."

"You're not serious, Nan?"

"I was never more in earnest in my life. If you agree, I have only to ask Mr Wishart here to release me from a promise I made him, and the thing is done."

"Nan! No, no; not that."

Neil Wishart took one wild stride into the middle of the room, his clenched fist upraised as if to ward off a blow. Dittany looked up with astonishment. "And pray, what promise was that?" he asked quickly.

"A promise to marry him," answered Nan. She looked her father steadily in the face.

"Indeed! And how long has this pretty little romance been going on behind my back?"

"Since Wednesday."

Mr Dittany regarded Wishart for a moment in contemptuous silence. There was an ironic flash in his cold grey eye which had made many a man tremble, but Neil was of a different metal. Now that the secret was out, he became suddenly at his ease. His jaw was square, his lips set, and his eyes as steady as those that tried ineffectually to cow them. Mr Dittany took refuge in a sneering laugh, and turned to his daughter.

"I thought your sense of honour would not permit . . ." he began.

Nan cut him short. "Mr Wishart knows who we are," she said tersely.

Mr Dittany went white to the lips, and for a moment it seemed as if he were too paralysed to speak. His lips opened and closed several times without a sound. "Go!" he said at last, hoarsely. "And may I be struck dead if I ever acknowledge you as my daughter again."

Edward Dittany repented of his words before the day was out, and drove home in a turmoil of conflicting feelings. The desolate stillness of the flat appalled him.

"Nan!" he cried. "Nan! Where are you, my girl? It's all right; I've let them off."

But no answer came. Nan had gone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NEIL WISHART stood in the bay window of his rooms at Bloomsbury, with hands thrust deep in his pockets, glooming moodily at the monotonous happenings in the square below. After the keen, white-hot work of the last five months, the reaction became almost maddening. It was not that he had nothing to think about; his whole perspective had been altered at a blow. His employment gone, Dittany an enemy, Nan cut off from her father's home, it was small wonder he found himself in a state of bewildering perplexity.

His pride, stung to the quick by the events of the preceding day, would not allow him to go to the office. He could not do things by halves. A month's salary nearly due, and some thirty pounds of commission stood to his credit in the company's books; but if his principles compelled him to throw up his berth, they also prevented him from touching another penny of what was owing. He had saved something—very little—and the old sordid round of starvation stared him in the face; yet the thought of that was nothing to his fears for Nan. What was to become of her? He knew her pride, greater even than his own; he had seen the look of concentrated hatred which had passed over her father's face when he learnt that he knew all, and he could scarcely believe a man capable of such feelings would ever forgive either of them.

With his clean, honest mind he was unable to fathom the motives which at that very moment were working in Dittany's brain. Never, in his perplexed imaginings,

did he suppose for a moment that the very knowledge which would make Dittany hate him would make him fear him. Such a thing as blackmail, even for such worthy objects as saving the Redwoods or reconciling his daughter, never entered his head. On the other hand, if he did not sound the depths, neither did he attain to the heights of Dittany's nature. He did not give him credit for the yearning love he had for Nan; he did not know that the wretched man had spent a night of agony and remorse for the barrier his cruelty had raised between them, or that by the morning he was acting like a raving lunatic.

When they had come out from her father's presence, Nan had behaved like one distracted. She had stormed and caressed, upbraided and begged for forgiveness, and finally, had left him standing in the middle of the road, watching helplessly while she leapt into a passing cab.

While he stood at the window he heard a loud ring at the bell, and presently his landlady came up, knocking timidly at the door. Even she seemed to scent tragedy in the air.

"Mr Dittany to see you, sir."

"Mr Dittany?" he cried in astonishment. "I'm not in. Yes I am. Show him up."

He turned to front his late employer, and saw an altered man—a man whose eyes were bloodshot, whose cheeks were drawn, who had lost his height and presence, and who walked in with bowed shoulders, as if crushed. The tragic change disarmed him. His kindling anger gave way to a wave of sympathy.

Dittany walked in quickly, laying his soft felt hat and gloves on a chair as he passed.

"Why haven't you come to the office?" he asked. His tone had lost its brisk curtness; he spoke the words very wearily, as if he hardly expected an answer.

"After yesterday?"

"And why not? Do all the rats desert the sinking ship?"

" You surely didn't expect me to come."

" Perhaps not ; but I wanted you to come. How can I see to everything ? Now, of all times in the world."

" Won't you sit down, sir ? You looked knocked up."

" For a minute, yes. I'm a sick man, Wishart. Why have you left me in the lurch ? A dog with a bad name ; is that it ?"

" If you mean what your daughter told me, Mr Dittany, let me say at once that it had nothing whatever to do with it. If it had, I should have left you three days ago when I first heard it. My reason for falling out with you was what I saw and heard yesterday at Redwood's factory."

" That's just what I can't understand, not so much with you as with Maplin. It looks as if you had both agreed to seize on a straw to pick a quarrel about."

" Hardly a straw, I think."

" Do you always judge men so harshly ? Are you sure you know all the facts ? If I see a business hopelessly going to ruin, am I bound, on pain of losing all my friends, to bolster it up indefinitely ?"

" Perhaps not, sir, but . . . "

Mr Dittany was not aggressively argumentative ; his monotonous voice made no apparent effort to convince, yet Wishart found himself slipping under the magnetic influence of the older man. His cold logic, coupled with the visible misery on his face, went far towards his conversion.

" Don't argue, Wishart. I want you back badly. All my strength is needed for a stupendous effort, and if my hands are tied with petty details I shall break down. Maplin has seen his mistake ; let me take you back with me. If it is any comfort to you, I have given Redwood another three months to turn round in."

Wishart hesitated. Left to himself he would have given way with a sigh of relief, but he wondered how Nan would regard his weakness.

By intuition, or mere coincidence, Dittany clinched the matter.

"There's another thing, my boy," he said. "Nan is missing. If you don't want to see me a broken man, for God's sake come and help me find my daughter."

"Missing? Since when? Why didn't you say so at first? Wait while I put my boots on."

In less than two minutes they were in a cab, racing towards the office.

"Did she leave no note?" Wishart asked.

Dittany tried to answer, but his voice was broken. He shook his head.

"No clue at all?"

"One only. She has taken her typewriter."

"Thank Heaven! We shall find her through that."

"How?"

"Because she advertises for work."

Mr Dittany sat up galvanically. "Fool that I was!" he exclaimed. "Of course. And we shall find her in South London."

"Why?"

"Partly because women always gravitate to an old home, and partly because she will have customers there. Waste no time, my boy. Perhaps she'll listen to you. Tell her about the Redwoods; tell her I'm ill and broken up; tell her she needn't marry that rascal Tregarth."

"And if I succeed?"

"Make no terms. Find her; find her. Then come and talk to me."

Roger Tregarth was waiting in the office when they returned. Wishart in the light of all he knew about him cut him dead. There was a smile of evil satisfaction on the man's face as he followed Dittany into the private room.

"So you've taken my advice at last?" began Tregarth when the door was safely shut behind them.

"In what way?"

"I hear you've sacked the pup."

"Not yet."

"But you're going to?"

Mr Dittany turned round venomously. "I'll never

rest till he's in the gutter where I found him," he cried, raising his clenched fist.

"Good!" laughed the other. "I've come round about your precious Concession. I've found the right man for you—Percy Stapleton: do you know him?"

"I don't remember the name. Is he safe?"

"He's broke, which is the same thing. I've told him to be here in the morning. Have your samples ready, and he'll go out by the next boat. He'll write the report before he goes, if you like. Get your Directors ready, and your printing put in hand, and the thing can be on the market in three weeks."

"Leave that to me."

Tregarth edged his chair up closer with an air of mystery.

"Two birds with one stone," he said in a low voice. "I'm not a fool. I know what the chief obstacle is. Send that chap Wishart out with Stapleton; he's such a precious young innocent that he'll never suspect anything."

An answering gleam came in Dittany's eye, but he said nothing, and Tregarth went on.

"Malaria will probably do the trick for him. We'll put Stapleton up to it. The wet season's just coming on, and I doubt if he'll last a month; but, even if he's tougher than we think, we can manage it so that if there is any stink, as there's bound to be sooner or later, he'll get dropped on. See that the report Stapleton writes out is signed by him; see that your specimens are taken out in his bag, with his knowledge. He won't guess what they're for. You know how to tie him up if you like. When Nan hears about it, she'll soon turn him up."

Mr Dittany sat thinking. He never got a hint without improving on it. What he was considering now was the best way of working in an exposure of the Cambridge affair as a cumulative effect. Tregarth watched him anxiously. "You don't like the idea?" he asked.

"I didn't say so."

"Well; think it over by to-morrow. I suppose you can guess what I've come about?"

"You're not going to worry me about Nan to-day?"

"That's just what I am going to do. I want my answer."

"Then you can't have it."

"Why?"

"Because Nan isn't here. She's bolted."

Tregarth looked at him suspiciously.

"What game are you playing now, Bevington?" he snapped.

"No game at all. Before God, it's as I say. She has run away."

"Most charmingly convenient. However busy you are, Bevington, I'm very much afraid you'll have to find her."

"I don't need your instigation. Look at me. Do I look like a man who doesn't care?"

Tregarth inspected him contemptuously.

"You look like a man who is frightened of something," he said; "and I shouldn't be surprised if you are. Come, Bevington, I'm sick to death of this procrastination. You know well enough where your girl is, and you've got to find her. By the bye, what's this I hear about you and Hilda? Is that true? Are you marrying her?"

"That is so."

"Then you're both bigger fools than I took you for. I can see through your game, but what she's driving at I can't imagine. If you think I shall hold my hand for fear of ruining her chances, you never made a greater mistake in your life."

"I never gave you credit for so much generosity."

Roger Tregarth was misled by the fictitious meekness of Dittany's tone. He attributed it to weakness and fear. If he had been more observant he would have noticed the incessant tapping of the fingers, and the growing spot of colour in the wasted cheeks.

Dittany rose from his chair and rang the bell.

"What are you going to do?" asked Tregarth, startled at the sudden action.

"To have you shown off the premises."

"You'll regret this."

"Perhaps. I'm tired of you. I haven't time for your sort."

Roger Tregarth would have said more, but the boy entering at that moment made him pull himself together. He threw a look of concentrated spite over his shoulder as he went out, but it broke itself, or seemed to break, harmlessly against the steely glint of contempt in Dittany's eyes.

But when he had gone Mr Dittany sank back into his chair and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"It's all over," he said to himself wearily. "Perhaps I'm not sorry."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR DITTANY came to the office early on the morning following. He had heard no news of Nan for one thing, and the flat had become a horrible nightmare to him; and for another, he had a heavy day before him in the sorting of papers and the putting of his affairs in order. In his mind was no thought of flight. Under the stress of the last few days he had no heart for any further effort; business had become for the first time in his life nauseous to him—the virtue had gone out of it. He drew a mental picture of Tregarth on his way to Shropbury; he visualised clearly the interview with Vance, Capper, & Co. He could hear Vance say “Excellent, my dear sir”; and see Capper rubbing his lean hands. In his mind’s eye he followed them on their excited visit to their solicitors. He heard the application for the warrant, and felt the detective’s hand on his shoulder. Once again he listened to the empty clang of railed corridors, the clash of gongs, and the rattle of keys. He saw the cheerless, stone-floored cell with the barred window; his fingers seemed to be plucking once again at the tangled skeins of hemp, his feet to be dragging round and round the exercise-yard in dreary monotony. Once more he heard the responses in the prison chapel; the coarse, uncultured voices roaring out Tallis’s harmonies as they are never elsewhere roared. “For there is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O Lord.” How the thing haunted him that day.

How long the chastened mood would have lasted, or

whither it would have led him, it is hard to say. He sat at his table with his head lying on his folded arms for several minutes, broken and contrite, as near to Heaven as he had ever been—as near perhaps as such a man can be. When he roused himself there was the look in his eyes of a man who had taken a high resolve. But only for a moment. When he raised his eyes they fell on an envelope in the well-known writing of Roger Tregarth. He snatched it up eagerly. If the man were going to bite, he wouldn't trouble to bark.

Mr Dittany drew a deep breath as he read the letter—so deep that it shook his whole frame.

"DEAR BEVINGTON" (it read),—"On thinking things over I am not disposed to make too much of yesterday's business. Perhaps you had been dining a little freely. If you care to apologise to me for your insult, I am willing to give you till the end of the month to satisfy my terms. Meantime I have told Stapleton not to call upon you till he hears from me. As soon as I receive your apology I will bring him along."

In a moment Dittany was his old self again—erect, smiling, grim, and determined. Some one had propitiated Fate on his behalf that day. Wishart came in soon, with suppressed eagerness on his face.

"I have found her, Mr Dittany," he said with concentrated quietness.

"Already? Where?"

"I am asked not to tell, sir. She has written to me."

A cloud came over Dittany's face. He thought he detected an air of pride in the statement, and it drove another rivet into the resolution he had formed since Tregarth had put the ugly idea in his head. "To you and not to me?" he said angrily.

"You must remember what you said to her."

"Don't preach to me," snapped Mr Dittany.

"Have you any message I can give her?"

"Not through you. Let her come back. When she

remembers her duty to her own father, I'll talk to her, not before."

"I'll tell her what you say," said Wishart; but Mr Dittany turned the subject.

"I want to speak to you on a very important matter," he said. "Sit down."

Wishart obeyed with a certain amount of curiosity. He did not understand that there could be any important subjects other than the breach with Nan. Mr Dittany, however, was full of business.

"A very important matter has cropped up," he began tersely, "and I shall want you to go to West Africa."

"West Africa!"

A light broke over the boy's face. It was the old tug of adventure. Not for him or his kind is there any thought of malaria or death or discomfort. There are no lions in the path when the work of pioneering is to be done; nothing looms on the imagination but the big free life of the virgin jungle, the bright sunshine, the glorious skies, the utter liberty, the great game to be hunted and shot, and the spice of danger. Men of young Wishart's stamp take up a task of this kind with a fierce joy. They pass the days of preparation impatiently, and the nights in dreams of gleaming eyes and gun-triggers; they feel a pity amounting to contempt for the poor wretches who are doomed to continue in the alternate dust and slush of London, condemned to go on wearing hard hats and stiff collars. Mr Dittany, watching his face closely, saw all this, but saw also that it was followed by an emotion of less elation.

"You've no objection?" he asked quickly.

"Rather not; it's ripping. How long for?"

"Three months probably, perhaps more. Not more than a year certainly. You can't stand more than a year out there." Dittany fully understood the hesitation which had come over his secretary. He knew as well as if he had been told that he was wondering how he could exist without Nan, and he threw in a word of comfort. "Of course," he added, "it's open to you to throw it up at any time if you find you can't stand it."

"I'll go," said Wishart.

"Without knowing what the job is?"

"I don't care what it is."

"How long will it take you to get ready?"

"A week?"

"That will do admirably. I will tell you all about it later, but meantime I fully understand that I needn't look out for any one else. Is that right?"

"Certainly, sir. You can rely on me."

Neil went that evening overflowing with news to keep the appointment which Nan had made. He boarded a Streatham car at the Embankment, and was met at the top of Brixton Hill, where he alighted, by the same little figure he had grown to know so well in the old days at Kennington. He wondered if they were happier or more miserable than these. Bathed in soft tints of his early love, everything that was sordid had gone out of their recollection. His heart beat rapidly at the thought that in a sense they were now to be renewed. However much he regretted and feared the girl's estrangement with her father, he felt with a throb that at any rate he could play the part of a protector, and he realised more than he had ever done the craving of a strong man to throw a shield over the woman he loves.

Her face lit up as she hurried to meet him, but he could see from the lines of anxiety on her brow how poignantly she was feeling the pain of her self-inflicted exile.

"I've got news," he said.

"Good?"

"How do we know what is good? Some of it at any rate is."

She looked her inquiry.

"In the first place, your father's changed his mind about the Redwood people. They're not to be sold up."

"I'm so glad."

"Secondly, I'm going abroad."

"You, Neil? Oh, no."

"Only for a time, dear. Three months probably."

"But where?"

"West Africa. I don't know what the job is, but I shall most likely be off in a week."

He felt her grasp close tightly on his arm, and looking down he saw the eyes that were fastened intently on his face full of trouble and a vague fear.

"And dad has asked you to go?"

He nodded his reply. "It won't be for long, dear. We can write each other by every mail, and before we know where we are I shall be home again."

"But West Africa, Neil; I don't like it. Oh, dear, it's dreadful to have these suspicions, but what business is he doing in West Africa, and why should he want you to go to the most dangerous place in the world?"

"You're unnerved, Nan. I'm sure we misjudged your father. He's been awfully decent over those Redwoods, for instance. Mrs Redwood says he explained everything to her afterwards; said it was a step that was absolutely necessary to prevent the other creditors from coming in, and that he never intended actually to sell. Gave her a five-pound note, too, for the trouble she had had."

Nan shook her head sadly. "That is dad all over," she said. "If he can't get his own way, he always pretends he never wanted it. It's the one great terror of his life, that people should imagine they have beaten him. Neil, can't you see? It's the principle that worries me so—the principle that anything is fair in business. After . . . after the other affair I have never had a moment's rest."

"But you'll go back to him, Nan?"

She smiled up at him with tears welling in her eyes, but those inflexible lines of old were drawn round the corners of her mouth, and she shook her head obstinately.

"Don't you think he wants you?"

"If I thought he did," she answered, "I would forget all he said—forgive it, I mean, I'm afraid I shall never be able to forget it—and go to him at once. But he doesn't want me, Neil. I have seen it for a long time.

It's as much as he can do to keep his temper when I'm in his sight." They had wandered into dark streets, and she nestled close to his side. "There is only one in the world who wants me now, dear, and he is going to leave me too."

"Not for long, little one."

"Neil, I wonder what I shall do when you are gone? I could never have borne up against all this care and worry if the thought of you hadn't been behind it all the time."

"When first, darling?"

"Isn't that like a man? Is it your vanity that you always want to explore the very source of the river?"

"Was it at Kennington?"

"Perhaps," she said shyly. Then with her old caressing banter she shook him by the arm. "You mustn't be too conceited," she laughed; "you found me at a weak moment, when I was very lonely. It's cruel of you to leave me now; you might have thought. I believe you want to go."

Neil tried to laugh away her suspicion.

"Do you?" she persisted.

"If it hadn't been for you I should certainly have jumped at it."

"And if I ask you to stop?"

"I've promised."

It was a tacit compliment to his strength and honour that she knew the futility of pursuing the entreaty further. The mood she was in was new to him and quite divine. Strength and weakness, tears and laughter, chased over her spirit like sunshine and cloud; and all the time she clung to him as a sailor clings to a last desperate anchorage.

And with her weakness his strength increased. There was no empty conceit in the thought of her reliance on him. He felt humble when he realised the treasure he had won, but it was a humility that was not inconsistent with a sort of fierce pride. It was a memorable evening for him, and one of which the recollection lighted up the dismal Adarah swamp for many a dark night.

He little knew what anxiety was tearing at her breast while she chattered on; what a nervous dread of treachery, what terror of the unseen and uncomprehended. Still less did he understand the more complex dread that assailed her,—how wildly she was fighting down her growing belief in her father's iniquity. In six short months her suspicions had passed from sharp practice to utter swindling, and from swindling to murder. From time to time the image of her parent's face—serene and smiling as it had been of old—came before her tortured vision, and her heart clamoured to her that she was wrong, that it was wicked to glance even into such thoughts. And so she chattered on, and laughed with eyes that looked on the man at her side through blinding tears.

Neil turned the subject to her own affairs, getting her with some difficulty to talk of her new life. She would not say much; she could not trust herself to go very far into that topic without letting him see how lonely and how miserable she was. She knew he would go to Africa, and she tried to avert her gaze from the future when he would not be there to wait for in the evenings; when there would be nothing but desolate monotony and terrifying dread. But she had resolved to say nothing that would make it harder for him to go.

"You'll see me every night before you go, won't you?" she entreated as they parted.

"Of course," he said. "How can you ask?"

"Let me meet you in town, Neil. Take me to a theatre or a music-hall; anywhere where we needn't think. I want to be with you where we can't talk. Do you understand?"

"I think so, dear."

"You are good to me. You do everything I want; and I'm so selfish."

He stopped her accusation with a kiss, and left her at the gate of her new apartments. With a pang he compared the luxurious comfort of the flat she had left with the hideous monotony of this long, mean street. There was a light on the ground-floor window, some one was

thumping a rag-time march on a tuneless piano, and shadows of people violently dancing were thrown on the blind.

"I must get her to go back," was the entire burden of his thoughts as he wended his way back to Bloomsbury.

Mr Dittany sent for his secretary as soon as he arrived at the office in the morning. He was remarkably affable compared with his manner of the preceding day.

"Sit down, my boy," he said kindly, pointing to the chair.

Wishart half expected to be asked some questions about Nan. His own mind was full of her troubles, even to the exclusion of the African project, and he had resolved to have it out with the hard-hearted man who could let her go into the world and rough it without making an effort to bring her back. But Mr Dittany never once mentioned the subject.

"I've got," he began, "a mining engineer named Stapleton coming in half an hour, and I want you to meet him. He is going out next week to report on a valuable Concession we have obtained in a place called Adarah. You will be companions out there—probably close friends, as there are not likely to be any other white men within twenty miles of you."

"I see."

"When he has reported—provided, of course, that his report is satisfactory—we shall float a company here to work the Concession. I want a trustworthy man to open an office in Accra, which is the nearest port, another office on the Concession itself, and to arrange all the formalities in connection with registering our title, and fixing up contracts for transit and so on; and I can think of no one who could do the work better than yourself."

"It's kind of you to say so, sir."

"I am only outlining it now. You will have full directions later on. Now, Wishart; I was going to send you out with Stapleton next week, but for certain

reasons which I needn't go into, I think he had better get his report well in hand before you join him. For one thing, you would only be kicking your heels idly while you were waiting for him. I want to know if you will be ready to go at the end of the month. There is a boat sailing on the third of December, which gives you nearly six weeks."

"I'm at your disposal, sir."

"Thank you. I'll send for you when I have had a chat with Stapleton, and make you acquainted. I'm going north for a few days next week, which is an additional reason why I want you in the office."

"There's another matter, Mr Dittany."

"Well?"

"I saw your daughter last night."

"Really?"

Wishart caught the sneer, and flushed hotly.

"I wanted to say, sir, that she's roughing it. The place she's living in is quite impossible."

"Has she complained?"

"You know she wouldn't do that."

"I don't know. I don't know anything about her. She passes my comprehension. She has made her own bed, and she must lie on it. The flat is still there whenever she likes to come back."

"But won't you ask her? She thinks from what you said you don't want her."

Mr Dittany laughed mockingly. "I congratulate you on being so far in her confidence," was all he said.

Wishart waited a moment for something further, but getting no satisfaction went out, his disappointment showing keenly on his face. If the green baize door had not shut out the sounds so completely, he might have derived some hope and consolation from the deep sigh that escaped Mr Dittany's lips when he had gone.

Stapleton came in shortly after with Roger Tregarth, and Wishart scrutinised him eagerly. He rather liked his face. It was keen and boyish, and its youthfulness was accentuated by the mass of dark-brown curls which

eovered his well-shaped head. Tregarth went soon afterwards, and Wishart was called in to be introduced. The first impression he had gathered was dissipated when he came face to face with the stranger. He saw behind the keenness and the youthfulness a look of pathetic weariness, and the light-coloured eyes which regarded him so curiously were rather contemptuous.

"It's a rotten hole we're going to," he told him. "We shall have to make the best of each other. Ever been out?"

"Never."

"Then you'd better give me an hour or two, and I'll put you up to a few wrinkles as to what outfit you'll want."

"What's the idea?" asked Stapleton, when Wishart had gone.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE month that Roger Tregarth had granted before he delivered his threatened ultimatum came and went. Outwardly everything remained unchanged. Nan had not returned. Neil Wishart was evidently seeing her regularly, for if there was anxiety in his face, there was also happiness. Several times he had essayed to play the part of peace-maker, but Mr Dittany had ignored the subject at first, and sternly forbidden him to mention her name later. In the office itself the hum of business went on. The report glowing with hope, and replete with fabulous figures, came from Stapleton in West Africa. Great men with titles and fur-lined coats strolled casually in and out of the private room, looking very hopeful and very knowing. Carriages and magnificent cars were drawn up at the pavement outside; proofs of prospectuses were coming in three or four times a day from the printers; crates of champagne were brought up the stairs on the shoulders of staggering men, and the office reeked with the incense of half-crown cigars. Reporters from financial papers waited humbly in the outer office, grateful for any crumbs that fell from the great man's table. For Mr Dittany had suddenly become a power in the city. His name was bandied about in Capel Court, and men asked each other who he was.

In the hush that came before the curtain rose, Mr Dittany disappeared. He was away several days, arranging some further big scheme on the Continent it was said, though no one knew certainly. Peter

Maplin alone was anxious. He had sent for the pass-book of the Corporation, and found the funds completely depleted. Mitchell & Jimson's account too, which had been successfully transferred to Mr Dittany's bank, showed evidence of an enormous raid.

"He can't have been such a fool as to bolt," he muttered to himself. "Not with a cool twenty thousand coming in over this Adarah Concession anyway. But if he don't come back soon and put things straight, we're in the cart."

Mr Dittany did come back soon. He had recovered all his old spirits. He looked bronzed and well, and dined and joked with his new aristocratic friends for all the world as if he had a million in the bank instead of a paltry hundred or two.

Tregarth was one of the earliest callers. He came punctually on the last day of the month. Dittany greeted him jovially. "Well, Shylock," he cried; "come for your pound of flesh?"

"I've come for your answer."

"I have no time to waste. My answer is . . . No."

"Don't act the fool, Bevington. Whatever you might have said a month ago, you can't afford to say it now, with this Adarah flotation just coming on."

"I am perfectly serious."

"One word to these Johnnies and the game is up."

"Speak it, then."

"I can go one better than that. I shall go to Vance, Capper."

"You have said so many times."

"And before God I mean it. Before it's too late, Bevington, is it yes or no?"

"I am getting rather tired of saying it. Once for all . . . No."

"I'll give you till to-night."

"No need." Mr Dittany reached out his hand, and took down a time-table. He turned over the leaves with a hand as steady as his face, and ran his forefinger down a column. "There's a train from Euston at 11.35, getting down at three. You can just catch it."

"Thanks. I shall go at my own time. I can see through your bluff. You think I don't mean it. You've got my address. I shall wait till five for your wire, and if I don't get it, I shall go down to-night."

He watched the quiet smile with which his threat was received with suspicious uneasiness. If it was bluff it was certainly very clever bluff, but he could not see what else was behind it. Unless . . . A sudden thought struck him that a trap had been laid. He peered uncomfortably about the room. Possibly a Scotland Yard man was concealed somewhere. A glance satisfied him. Although everything was of the best, the sanctum was sparsely furnished; there was nothing that would conceal a cat.

Mr Dittany read his fears. "Perhaps you'll find him in the safe," he said mockingly.

Tregarth turned to go. Dittany saw the suspicious doubt in his face, and his manner changed.

"Come," he said seriously. "Haven't you worked this for all it's worth? You know as well as I do that you've not the slightest intention of going to Shropbury. Whatever you are, you're not a fool. How are you going to live if you dish me?"

"I thought you'd climb down," sneered the other. "Don't make any mistake, old fellow. If I don't have Nan's promise to-night I go to Shropbury. And as for living, I've no doubt Vance, Capper will give me more for my information than I shall ever make out of you."

"But be reasonable. How can I get her promise? In the first place, I don't know where she is; and in the second, she wouldn't have you even to save her own father."

Tregarth laughed aloud. "You've had a month to find her; it's your look-out if you haven't done so yet. Five o'clock to-night."

"Give me another month."

"Not another hour. Good-bye. You know where to wire."

"No, but Tregarth—Roger . . ."

Mr Dittany's acting was well done; so well done that

Tregarth went out of the office chuckling,—so well that when no wire came by five o'clock he was stupefied with amazement. From five till half-past his anger steadily rose, and when the time came for him to catch his train, he clutched his bag with an oath.

Later in the evening Mr Dittany drove up to his rooms, and asked for him. "He's away," he was told; "gone north, sir, and won't be back for two or three days."

As Mr Dittany came down the stairs he smiled, and when he got into the taxi he slapped his thigh and laughed aloud.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR CAPPER sat opposite Mr Vance at a broad table littered with documents and samples of cotton tied up in skeins with packthread. Charts of prices current and maps of the United States with black patches on them showing the cotton-growing areas, adorned walls thick with dust and cobwebs. Compared with the magnificent appointments of the Debenture Corporation the room and furniture were dingy indeed, but any one with experience would have seen that solidity which nothing but several generations of established reputation are able to give. In the language of trade, Vance, Capper, & Co. were "substantial." The place breathed substantiality; it seemed to exude from every pore of the partners sitting there, as they had sat any time these forty years, and their fathers and grandfathers before them, opposite each other at the substantial mahogany table.

Mr Vance was a flaccid man with pouch cheeks, who wore antiquated collars, and wrote with a quill pen. His partner was tall, thin, and sinewy, and looked as if he might have been nourished on cotton.

Mr Vance's quill pen screamed over the paper as he sat there writing his American letter in his stiff, angular writing. Mr Capper on the other side was similarly attending to the Indian mail. It was characteristic of them that there was not such a thing as a typewriter or a telephone in the whole place.

An ancient clerk came in presently with a card which Mr Capper took from his hand. The old gentle-

man looked at it under his spectacles and over his spectacles, and turned it round and about as if to make quite sure it was what it purported to be. Having satisfied himself on this point he looked through his spectacles to Mr Vance across the table.

"Mr Roger Tregarth to see us," he said.

"Dear me! Mr Roger Tregarth—and to see us. Extraordinary! We have no objection to seeing Mr Tregarth, partner?"

"None at all I should say. We will see Mr Tregarth."

The old clerk bowed and went out. For such very substantial gentlemen there was an expression of so much humorous cunning in the glance they exchanged, that one might have wondered how on earth even such a plausible man as Edward Dittany could ever have taken them in.

Tregarth came in quickly, with a hunted look in his eyes. His chin was badly gashed where his trembling hand had slipped in shaving. A strong odour of spirits pointed to an effort to raise courage of a sort, and made Mr Capper, who was a staunch teetotaler, cough significantly.

"Sit down, Mr Tregarth," said Mr Vance. "It is a long while since we have had the pleasure of seeing you."

"A very long while," assented Tregarth. He spoke sulkily, suspecting irony.

"And pray, how are things going with you? Prosperously, we may be permitted to hope?"

At the curious inspection of the two old gentlemen whose appearance brought vividly back such brutal memories, Tregarth began to feel like a moth on a pin, and quickly lost his temper.

"I'm all right. And allow me to say once for all that I haven't come here to be jeered at."

"Jeered?" said Mr Vance, visibly shocked.

"Jeered?" echoed Mr Capper in tones of mental distress.

"Yes, jeered," said Tregarth angrily. "D'you think I can't see through your infernal sarcasm?"

"My dear sir, you do us an injustice. Nothing was farther from our thoughts. To what, then, are we indebted for this visit?"

The two partners had risen from their seats, and stood side by side on the rug with their backs to the fire.

Tregarth wheeled his chair round to face them. "Suppose I told you," he said vindictively, "that I could inform you where Bevington is at the present moment, what would you say?"

The conduct of the two partners at hearing this was more extraordinary than ever. "He wants to tell us where Bevington is," roared Mr Vance.

"He wants to know what we would say," chuckled Mr Capper, digging his thumb into his partner's substantial ribs.

"You seem to think it's a good joke," said Tregarth, flushing angrily. "It's no joke. I can tell you where you can lay hands on him to-morrow if you like; ay, and get pretty well all your money back."

"But, my dear sir . . ." began Mr Vance.

"Just one moment, partner," interrupted Mr Capper. "And what do you want for this delightful piece of information?"

"It's worth twenty thousand to you if it's worth a penny. Say five thousand."

"You are prepared to give the man away for five thousand. Is that it?"

"It's cheap at the price."

"Extraordinarily cheap. You haven't a third name, Mr Tregarth, have you?"

"I don't take your meaning."

"It isn't Judas, by any chance, I suppose?"

"What are you driving at?"

"We're driving at this, sir. That you're a despicable scamp," said Mr Capper sternly, "and the sooner you free this office from the pollution of your breath and your treachery, the better we shall like it."

"But surely . . ."

"That's enough, sir. Edward Bevington has paid his

debt to us in full, with four per cent interest. He has paid us of his own free will, like the honourable man we are thankful to find he is after all. You have shown us, if any proof was needed, who was the real culprit in that deplorable affair. Now go, and be thankful we haven't called in the police."

Tregarth's thoughts in the train going back would be as indescribable as they were unpleasant. He had hurried to the station directly he came away from the castigation of the two old gentlemen. However blind his fury, and to whatever extent his hatred of Bevington had increased, it did not succeed in blinding him to the prospects of his future which his behaviour had thrown into jeopardy. A short calculation told him that he should be able to reach Holborn by the time his enemy came back from lunch. He made his plans carefully and they worked well. His train was punctual to the minute, and he met the chairman of the Debenture Corporation strolling back from lunch. Bevington was unaffectedly surprised to see him, but beyond a curt nod, and a remark of "I thought you were away," nothing passed. Tregarth himself would have stopped, but the other man was not alone, being arm in arm with Sir Simon Whitstable, who was trying to get a seat on the board of the new company, with the mistaken impression that it was a matter of the utmost difficulty, notwithstanding his immense wealth and influence.

But before he could make up his mind what was the best course to pursue, he felt a touch on his shoulder.

"And how is Shropbury looking?" asked Mr Dittany.

"I haven't got away yet."

Mr Dittany quizzed him with an inscrutable smile. "Of course, I knew you weren't in earnest," he said. "Let's put a period to all this nonsense. Neither of us can do without the other."

"Don't deceive yourself, Bevington. If I didn't go to Shropbury it is only because I've got a better plan. You may as well make up your mind to let me have what I want."

"All piffle, my boy. You stand to make a good fifteen hundred out of this Adarah business. You're not going to blow the gaff."

Roger Tregarth was in the mood to wave the sword a little farther, but discretion made him hold his tongue. He breathed a sigh of relief. At any rate Bevington didn't know he had been to Shropbury. He would hardly have treated him so genially if he had.

Mr Dittany took him by the arm. "Come round to the office this afternoon. I believe there's a little cheque for commissions waiting for you."

Tregarth fell into the trap. He was always wanting money. It was not until he perused the statement of account that he saw how he had been fooled, and how Dittany was laughing at him. For the last item on the account read as follows: "By expenses to Shropbury, £3, 10s."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MISS TREGARTH burst tempestuously into the offices of the Debenture Corporation. It was supposed to be a busy time at the *Maison Desirée* in Regent Street, of which fashionable establishment she was the guiding spirit, and Mr Dittany was surprised as well as annoyed at the growing frequency of her visits during business hours. Nevertheless he was either too courteous or too discreet to seem anything but pleased whenever she chose to admit herself through the swing doors of the outer office, and to push her way unbidden to Mr Dittany's private room. Probably there was some method in what Peter Maplin called "her confounded cheek." Perhaps she felt, not without justification, that by publicly laying claim to so much possession of him, she would make it infinitely difficult for him to extricate himself from her toils.

For Hilda Tregarth did not trust her new lover to the extent of allowing him to forget her. As a fiancé he left much to be desired. In vain did she try her hardest to revive the one mad scene that had followed her first confession; her efforts only resulted in heartburnings, for, with all her faults, the evil untutored woman really loved the impenetrable man with a passion that is given to few natures. His never-failing courtesy and good temper made it hard to quarrel with him. His manner was as faultless as his heart was cold. If she had known him only like this, she would have accepted the inevitable as part of the nature of the man; but she had seen the deep waters stirred once—she

knew what possibilities were there, and it bewildered and hurt her that hers was not the power to unlock his heart at her own sweet will.

She suspected his coldness. Jealously she told herself that he had already regretted his promise. She tried every ruse which such women look upon as infallible. She tried coldness and indifference, she tried to move him to jealousy with stories of other lovers. But it was all wasted. She was learning the bitter truth that it is impossible to wound a man who does not love.

On this particular morning she was in high spirits. He was very busy when she came in; so busy that even he could not altogether suppress a gesture of weary impatience as he pushed his papers aside and turned in his chair. He rose politely to his feet and, courtier-like, kissed her tiny gloved hand. It would have been very beautiful and very devoted if she had not craved so madly to be taken into his arms.

"Dear Edward," she gushed, "I felt I must come and tell you the news, you wonderful man. I wanted to be the first. Do tell me I am the first."

"What news?" he asked with a smile.

"That there is a queue a quarter of a mile long waiting at the bank. Men and women tumbling over themselves to apply for your Adarah shares."

"I heard they were going well."

"Going well? It's the funniest sight I ever saw. Fancy so many fools in the world! You clever old darling. There was one old lady in black, with a dress at least ten years old. I stood talking to her for nearly ten minutes. 'Do you think I've got any chance, my dear?' she asked. 'I've drawn out every penny I've got in the world. Take my advice and buy all you can get. It's going to pay forty per cent.' There were clergymen there, and servant-girls, and the weirdest old fossils up from the country. And to think you've done it all yourself."

A momentary look of discomfiture passed over Dittany's face, a shade of pain in his fine eyes. Perhaps it was a tinge of conscience; perhaps it was to

lighten his own uneasiness that he said—"They won't get a tenth part of their applications allotted."

"What a nuisance," she said with delightful playfulness. "It would serve the old frumps right if they lost every penny for being such idiots. Oh, how I wish I were a man."

"Where should I be then?" he asked.

"You don't mean it," she pouted. "You say these charming things as if you had to say them to please me. I know you can be different if you like."

"Have patience, my dear. 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not business more.' To-day of all days in the year to expect me to philander."

"Oh, yes, I know I'm selfish. Have you seen Roger?"

Mr Dittany flushed angrily. "The fellow's a pest," he growled. "One would have thought that his trip to Shropbury taught him a lesson, but he's at his old tricks again, threatening exposure. The worst of it is, that this time he can do what he threatens. I can see no way out at all; not one. A single word to one of the cheap financial rags, and I am a broken man. You must do what you can to help me, Hilda."

She came closer to him and put her two hands into his. "Need you ask it of me?" she said in low tense tones. "Do you know what I would do for you? Roger is my brother, but if you ask me to do it I will kill him with my own hands, and hang for it, to save you from him."

"Hush! You mustn't talk like that."

"I mean it, every word. You don't understand what I am capable of when you are concerned."

Dittany looked at her curiously. Courageous as he was, there was a concentrated venom in her voice, and a dangerous flash in her wild dark eyes, that frightened him. Not at the idea of murder—he could not believe she would carry her threat as far as that,—but at the fierce vindictive nature she showed whenever she lifted the smallest corner of the curtain of her personality.

"We'll find some way out between us, never fear," he

said, contradicting himself in an effort to soften her fury. "But do go now, my dear. If you knew what I have to do you would forgive me."

"Of course," she said. She lingered a little for some semblance of an embrace, and shrugged petulantly when none came. "You hard, cold monster!" she said, half in chagrin, half in banter. "A hundred times a-day I make up my mind never to see you again."

"I should fully deserve it," he smiled. "Good-bye, Hilda."

A clerk came in a moment later. "Some one's called from the bank, sir, and wants to see you about an irregularity in a cheque."

"Show him in."

Mr Dittany stood pulling at his beard in alarm.

"This cheque on account of Mitchell & Jimson's, sir," said the bank messenger.

"Well, what about it?"

"It has been signed on behalf of the directors by Edward 'Bevington.' We don't know the name. You've given us no instructions."

Mr Dittany's face cleared.

"A clerical error," he said; "I'll have another one written out at once."

"We thought we had better ask you before we sent it back."

"Certainly. Thank you."

But when the youth had departed, Dittany snapped his fingers with annoyance. "Am I losing my reason?" he muttered.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN spite of the busy preparations for his departure, it is a significant fact that Neil Wishart never once turned his steps in the direction of Bloomsbury, where his rooms were situated, when he left the office at night.

Nan had welcomed the postponement of his mission with as much fervour as if it had been a respite from the grave. Yet, as the time drew near for his departure, when the actual passage was booked and his trunks were getting filled with his purchases, she seemed to sink into an apathy from which nothing could rouse her. One night he ran towards her.

"Great news!" he cried. He grasped her arm while he fumbled in his breast-pocket with his other hand. "A letter from your dad. He asked me to give it to you."

"A letter?" The hope and expectancy which shone in her face threw a lurid light on the agony of her voluntary exile.

"Here it is. Would you like to walk on and read it?"

"Together," she said. "We've no secrets now, Neil, dear."

"Let's come in somewhere and have a cup of coffee. He's been so different the last day or two, I'm sure it's good news."

They found a café, and when they were seated, Nan opened the envelope with trembling fingers. There was a short note and a long cutting from a newspaper—'The Shropbury Times.'

"DEAR NAN," the note began—"The enclosed cutting will interest you. Wishart will have told you that I have already given way to your prejudices in the matter of Redwood's business. If now your scruples will allow you to take your proper place again at the flat, I will undertake never to mention the affair again. Your affectionate father."

The cutting from the paper was interesting enough to be quoted in full. It was headed "A TOUCHING FUNCTION." With suppressed excitement in her voice, Nan read out—

"A pleasing function took place on Tuesday last at the Grand Hotel. It was really a meeting of creditors, but a meeting of a nature rare in the annals of this age of fierce competition. The occasion, which was one that does honour to the hearts and integrity of all concerned, was a dinner and a handsome presentation of plate to a gentleman who was formerly one of Shropbury's most respected citizens, but who, as George Meredith would say, had fallen under the shadow of a calumny.

"The chair was taken by Mr Lawrence Capper, of the great firm of Vance, Capper, & Co., and the guest of the evening was Mr Edward Charles Bevington, formerly Chairman of Bevington's Limited, the details of whose sensational bankruptcy and its painful sequel will be fresh in the minds of our readers. Letters were read from the Lord Mayor, from the Bishop of Shropbury, and from the chairman's partner, Mr Vance, regretting their enforced absence, and expressing their sympathy with the object of the gathering.

"Mr Capper, in rising to propose the toast of the evening, said it had seldom fallen to his lot to discharge a more pleasant duty than the one which had been entrusted to him on the present occasion. He was bound to say that the pleasure was more than tinged with remorse. Things had been done that could never be undone. (Hear, hear.) If they were to go in sack-cloth and ashes for the rest of their days they could

never atone for the indecency of the haste with which they had assumed the guilt of an upright, honourable man, nor for the irreparable injury they had fastened on one whose vindicated integrity was only equalled by the magnanimity of his forgiveness. (Cheers.)

"Most of them had been in Court that day. They had heard the vindication of their honoured guest. They had listened with approval to the remarks that fell from the lips of the judge. Mr Bevington had come forward of his own accord, and had paid them to the uttermost farthing. (Loud and prolonged applause.) It would have been easy for him to have kept quiet, or to have gone abroad. It would have been natural for him to have said, 'These vindictive wretches have been paid—paid in tears and suffering; their debt is discharged.' But no, gentlemen. With that calm pride we used to know so well, he turned to the task which has been consummated this day, and in the incredibly short space of six months his magnificent abilities have enabled him to heap coals of fire upon our contrite heads.

"He would not dwell further on a matter which was painful to all of them; more painful perhaps to them than to Mr Bevington himself. In begging him to accept this service of plate, he would ask him to receive it not only as a mark of their contrition, but as a token of thankfulness that their old friendly relations—unhappily interrupted for a time—were to be resumed with, he hoped, never a trace of *arrière pensée*. (Loud cheers.)

"Mr Bevington, speaking with deep emotion, in a short but eloquent reply, referred to the necessity of finding some means of preventing such miscarriages of justice as that from which he had suffered. He did not blame any of the present company. If he had been in their position he would have acted exactly as they had done. He meant then, not now. He had learnt his lesson—a lesson that came to them with the stamp of the highest authority of all: 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' If his example made them all (he included himself) a little more charitable, a little more patient,

a little less prone to trample on a man who was down, his misfortune would not have been thrown away. (Hear, hear.)

"Gentlemen, you can imagine what this day means to me; but can you conceive what it means to one who is dearer to me than life itself? I am referring to my daughter. Some of you have met her, and those who have will know the blow to her nature that this calamity has brought. She, gentlemen, is waiting for me now, wondering what news I shall bring back; craving to know if you have realised the truth at last. She will meet me at the door with anxiety in her face, and I shall tell her what you have said and what you have done. I shall tell her . . . (Mr Bevington, who was too much affected to proceed, resumed his seat amid sympathetic cheers.)"

Tell her, Mr Dittany, that you hoped to be struck dead if ever you acknowledge her as your daughter again; tell her that you are prepared to sacrifice her once more if it is essential for your salvation; tell her that the whole dinner and the presentation of the handsome service of plate was an organised humbug, got up on a hint from yourself to one crony who had been staunch, and only acquiesced in because they had been paid in full with four per cent interest to date. Tell her what chance you would have had of a dinner if you had paid them even fifteen shillings in the pound. Finally, Mr Dittany, tell her who is paying for your whitewashing; out of the pockets of what widows and orphans you are recouping yourself over your precious Adarah flotation.

But if the whitewashing was organised, it was at least well organised. Nan winced when she came to the reference to herself, and stopped reading aloud. Why did he spoil everything with these unnecessary lies? she asked herself bitterly. Yet the sound of his sobs came through the reticence of the newspaper report, and the choking down of his unfinished sentence brought answering tears in far-off Brixton.

"What a beast I've been to him!" She lashed herself

with her words, and would listen to no excuses. "Why, you, even you, who have known him only six short months, have judged him better. It's fine to think that I, his own daughter, should be crueler to him than strangers."

"He wants you back, dear. He's hurt, of course, and you can hardly expect him to gush; but can't you see through his letter? Will you go to-night?"

"To-morrow, Neil. I must have time to think. Dear old boy," she turned to him caressingly, "what should I have done without you? You're so strong and so gentle with me. I seem to feel quieter when you are with me, and see things differently. I think things will come right now. At least there will be no need to hide ourselves away like criminals."

"But I say," broke in Neil,—his face was alight with happy enthusiasm,—"hasn't he dished that chap Tregarth? I'd have given a month's salary to have seen his face when he heard about it."

"Does he still come to the office?"

"Now and then. Not so much."

"And that dreadful sister of his?"

"In and out every day. Look here, Nan; when you get home just give your guv'nor a gentle hint that she's obviously after him. Everybody's talking. I don't think he sees it."

Nan was silent, and turned her head away.

"Will you do that, Nan?" Neil continued.

"He says he is going to marry Hilda Tregarth."

"You never told me that."

"I was too ashamed."

"Oh, but, Nan, it can't jolly well be done, you know."

"Poor old dad. It was part of the bargain."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean blackmail, Neil."

"What a couple of beauties! But that's all over now. He's cleared."

"Yes, thank God! We must save him from this, Neil. I don't know how far it has gone since I have

been away. What do I deserve, dear, for deserting my post?"

"Punishment?"

"Yes."

"Well, let me see. I think you ought to be court-martialled and sentenced to perpetual matrimony with me."

"You dear, silly old boy. Take me somewhere tonight, Neil. I'm too happy to think. I think I want to go to a Picture Palace."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE flotation of the Adarah Concessions, Limited, succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its promoters. There had been no hokey-pokey about it. From its striking board of directors, which included such famous names as Lord Cuppling, the railway director, and vast capitalists like Sir Simon Whitstable and Alderman Curtle, right down to the blazing commissionaire in the scarlet uniform, who stood at the door of the sumptuous offices of the new company, everything was done with a thoroughness and a perfection of detail which must have impressed the most sceptical.

The fortunate originator of the scheme had come in on the top of a startling boom. The country was being rapidly opened up, marshes drained, the fatal mosquito freighted with poisonous malaria eliminated, gold discovered in increasing quantities. The West African section of the "House" was, in short, humming with activity.

The personal advantage derived by Mr Dittany from all this good luck was marked and instantaneous. Old Peter Maplin drew a long breath of relief when he reached the office one morning to find the Corporation's account overflowing with funds; to discover that Mitchell & Jimson's shortage had been made good; to see, a week later, his Napoleonic chief drive up in a magnificent car of his own, with a chauffeur in a brand-new uniform.

Now that the press of anxiety and the worry of the Adarah flotation were left behind, Mr Dittany was

occupied with other things. The contemptible little concerns with which he had been content to make a start no longer interested him,—his eyes had been dazzled with the brilliant light of his successful deal; and though the details of Mitchell & Jimson's, of Redwood's, and of twenty other similar concerns, kept the office staff busy, it was next to impossible to get him to glance even at a balance-sheet.

Yet it was not in the man's nature to be idle; indeed, the restless fever was growing steadily on him. It was generally understood in the clerks' office, where most things were known, that he had purchased a large plot of freehold ground on the Surrey hills, down Kingswood way, and that the old gentleman with an Astrachan coat, who kept popping in and out every day with rolls of paper in his hand, was a celebrated architect. Maplin shook his head doubtfully when asked about it. "It may be all right," he said; "but he ain't made a million yet." From which it may be surmised that he knew the price of the plot of land, had some inkling of the scale on which the new residence was to be erected, and did not approve.

To him that hath shall be given. The unlimited credit he had gained in the City made all things possible to Mr Dittany. He dabbled in house property on a large scale—a building estate at Datchet and a block of mansions in Maida Vale—and turned them over with a profit of thousands without having to find a penny in hard cash. If he hadn't yet made a million, Mr Maplin, he was well on the road to it.

People envied Mr Dittany. They little knew the devil that was driving him to all this feverish activity. There were two reasons to urge him on with a relentless spur—one conscious and the other unconscious. He told himself that he must make money if he would frustrate again the blackmailer who was preying on his vitals. He knew no other way; he had only a shadowy idea how even money was to buy off Tregarth this time, but he respected wealth in the abstract as the lever that moves the world.

Unconsciously he sought work as a refuge from his thoughts. He dared not think. Apart from Tregarth's threatened exposure, the Adarah crash was bound to come. There was a time when difficulties only made him take off his coat to fight them; now he had got into the ostrich habit of hiding his head in the sand. Disagreeable things he began to put aside. So far he had been racing along before a tempest of good fortune, but he knew in his heart he had lost control.

Nan had taken up her abode once more in the flat at Palmyra Mansions. She had been quietly happy at first. The newspaper cutting from 'The Shropbury Times' had become thumbed with overmuch reading, and worn in its creases. She had wondered with a kind of resigned impatience how long it would be before her father resumed his own name, but she was careful not to refer to it. If she had not accused herself so bitterly for the part she had played in condemning her father, she would have made a firm stand about the openness of her relations with Neil Wishart, but she could not find it in her heart to hurry him to acknowledge him as her fiancé. The name was never mentioned between them; but, on the other hand, she made no secret that she was still meeting her lover, letting him escort her right up to the door of the flat, and Mr Dittany offered no objection.

Nor could she get him to talk on the subject of Hilda Tregarth. She had so earnestly made up her mind to save him at least from that, that she led the conversation round to the delicate topic several times in the first few days of her return. It was the one thing that stirred him to anger with her, and at last he sternly, but quietly, forbade her to mention the subject again.

It was one of the difficulties from which he was endeavouring to hide himself in the sands of toil,—one of the things from which he could see no outlet. Hilda Tregarth was not the woman to be lightly shaken off. If she had had a grain of self-respect she would have taken mortal offence at his snubs and his cruelty; but the more coldly he treated her, the more clinging and

pertinacious she became. Not that her devotion was without its sudden gusts and squalls of anger. The matter of Nan's return, for instance, gave rise to a tempestuous scene which only the fierceness of his temper quelled. Instinctively she knew the girl to be her mortal enemy. As long as she was safely out of the way she felt the chief obstacle removed ; but from the moment of her return she had not a moment's easiness, and her anxiety was increased by the marked alteration in Edward Dittany's demeanour.

Before Nan had been back a week she found a further cause of alarm. One would have thought that now that her father had been cleared in the eyes of the world, now that he was on the road to even greater wealth than he had enjoyed in his most prosperous days in Shropbury, he would have recovered from the threatened shattering of his nerves, but, if anything, his complaint seemed to grow worse. As before, she heard him wandering about in the stillness of the night ; as before, he was a constant visitor to Harley Street ; as before, an unwonted morbidity possessed him, causing him to break out into querulous demands for sympathy. He received it in full measure now, without stint. He caught the anxious look in her eyes when he pushed his breakfast aside untasted ; he noticed the hundred and one little tender offices she performed to lighten trouble for him. She would not allow herself to think there was still anything on his mind, unless it was an entanglement with Hilda Tregarth. It was the finding of drugs in his room that made her plead for a motor-car. She thought fondly that they would be able to take long rides in the pure, sweet air of the country, just as they used to do at Shropbury. He gave it to her with a caress as he gave her anything she asked, and bought the most luxurious that money could supply. Yet the gift turned to ashes in her mouth, for the only use he made of it was to rush down more quickly to the work that was steadily wearing him away. The car was back from the City before nine, with the chauffeur waiting in the hall for orders. She went out alone once or twice,

but her heart had gone out of it. Her solitary drives were only so many opportunities for brooding.

She would have forced herself to take an interest in the new house he was building. She would have jumped at the hope that the air of the Surrey hills would take him out of himself and make him the man he was. But there was a reticence about it on his part which filled her with fears. What if he did not intend her to share it with him? There was nothing of selfishness in the thought. She felt she deserved to be banished, to be put aside for one who understood him better and did not leave him alone to his trouble, and if it had been any one but that abominable woman, she would have been almost glad for his sake. But in her heart she knew he was unhappy; she knew that he needed her even if he did not want her. Neil Wishart had taught her the distinction between those two words.

She wondered vaguely sometimes about Roger Tregarth. Why had her father not shaken him off? Surely his attempted treachery would have given him sufficient excuse, but Neil had told her that the man was still haunting the office, and still receiving his weekly allowance for so-called expenses. She saw the sister's influence again in this. The sinister figure of that woman had become a nightmare and an obsession to her.

As a matter of fact Tregarth was lying very low at the present time. Long as he had worked with him, he failed altogether to understand Dittany. He had pocketed his fare for the Shropbury journey without the slightest comment, and swallowed the tacit accusation of lying it contained. He imagined that from policy Dittany had decided not to quarrel with him. What he did not comprehend was that impish strain in the man's character which made him fond of the society of any one who had fallen a victim to one of his practical jokes. Mr Dittany lost a big slice of his hatred for Tregarth when he had succeeded in making such a fool of him. Policy there was in his treatment of his old colleague—he was not going to pick a gratuitous quarrel until he had seen some way

out of the Adarah business—but policy alone would not have made him so gracious to his enemy; policy would not have prompted invitations to lunch and tickets for theatres, nor put more and more lucrative commissions in the blackmailer's way.

Hilda was not so patient, nor her motives so complex. She carried the war into the enemy's camp, seeking out her brother, and asking him point-blank what course he intended to pursue.

They sat on opposite sides of a table in a tiny Soho restaurant. For once she winked at his drinking habits, and, under a plea of thirst, urged him to a magnum of champagne. They talked of everything they could think of except the one subject that was filling both their minds; but when the tale-tell flush began to mantle on his cheeks, and his speech to become thick and incoherent, she asked her question point-blank.

"Have you changed your mind, Roger?"

"What about?"

"About that stuck-up girl. You've given up that foolish idea?"

"I never change my mind."

"Strong man! You look like having to. She's marrying young Wishart when he comes back from Africa."

"Who said so? It's a lie," he cried.

"On the contrary, I had it from her father's own lips." She lied easily.

"He won't dare."

"My dear Roger, I've told you before; you're no match for Edward Bevington. Look how he fooled you at Shropbury the other day."

"I never went."

"Didn't you?" She broke into a sarcastic laugh. "How strange! Have you got a fourth name by any chance?"

"What do you mean?"

"It isn't Ananias as well as Judas, is it?"

Roger started up in fury. "Who's been telling you that?" he cried.

"My dear brother, there's no mystery about it. Haven't you heard that when Edward went down to get his discharge, his creditors gave him a complimentary dinner and a presentation of plate? Didn't you know that old Capper was in the chair, and that the guest of the evening sat next to him? Can't you imagine how they would chuckle together over the story of your discomfiture? I heard the whole story from him."

"He shall smart for this."

"Rubbish. You're all threats. What can you do?"

Hilda Tregarth was a clever woman. She had deliberately plied her brother with wine, and as deliberately worked him up into a state of insensate fury. She had made up her mind to fathom his intentions, and to find what cards he had in his hand.

"What can I do?" he jeered. "I can pull him down from his precious pedestal if he doesn't come to heel; that's what I can do. See how many complimentary dinners and presentations of plate he'll get when I let the public know that the Adarah Concessions is a swindle."

"Bosh! No one will believe you. My dear boy, you have been blown on; your reputation's gone."

"Wait, then. Wait till the truth leaks out. Let some of the financial papers get an inkling of the facts."

"They certainly won't take your word."

"Perhaps not. But they'll take Stapleton's affidavit.

"He's too much implicated; he'd never dare to give the game away. Besides, he's in West Africa."

"There's plenty of people who will make it worth his while. Besides, he can easily say he has been deceived himself. You don't take the man for such an idiot . . . what's it got to do with you?" He broke off suddenly, like one hanging over the precipice of a foolish indiscretion. "Take my advice, Hilda, and chuck the chap. He won't be any good to you when I have done with him; unless you can persuade him to bring that girl of his to her senses."

Hilda bit her lip with vexation. She had been on the verge of getting the information she sought. For some time she vainly tried to bring the conversation back to the point when he had taken alarm. He told her outright when she pushed the bottle over to him that he could see through her tricks, and that he wasn't having any. "Go back to the blackguard," he concluded, "and tell him that if he wants to get anything out of me to try his hand himself."

"I've come quite on my own account," she said. "He doesn't care a snap of the finger for you, but I know you well enough to be afraid you'll make a fool of yourself again. It isn't very pleasant for a sister to see her brother the laughing-stock of the whole city. Why should he have taken you into his confidence over this Adarah business if he feared you? If you had got any sense you would see that."

Roger laughed. "Because he thought he was going to get me out to West Africa, that's why. Don't worry on your brother's account, my dear; he can look after himself. I'm not taking any risks this time."

Hilda flamed up suddenly.

"Is that final?" she asked.

"Absolutely."

"Then to-morrow morning I apply for a warrant for your arrest."

"Charming of you, I'm sure."

He flicked the ash from his cigarette with an affectation of nonchalance, but it was easy to see that he was uneasy. "That *will* do the job," he went on. "I should have the opportunity of making my disclosures in open Court."

"Oh no, you wouldn't. They would stop all irrelevant matter. Give me your word that you will keep your wicked mouth shut, or I lodge your letters and your receipt for money to be invested with my solicitor."

"I daresay you could. I daresay, my sweet, gentle sister, you might with luck get me a couple of months. But what are you going to do when I come out?"

"We shouldn't be any worse off, anyway, and we

might be better. Lots of things can happen in two months, and it's more likely to be six, with your record."

"Nothing can happen that will stop the Adarah Concessions from proving a swindle."

"Then you won't promise?"

"No."

"Very well, then. You've brought it on yourself."

They watched each other narrowly, with hatred and suspicion in their eyes, trying to find how much of their mutual threats was bluff.

"You haven't said what you're going to do when I come out," said Roger presently.

She leaned over the table and fixed him with her glowing eyes.

"When you come out I shall shoot you."

"You terrify me, my tragic queen."

Her breath came quickly. "You don't believe me. I tell you, Roger, I love that man. I would do even that to save him. Don't goad me too far, or I won't be responsible for what I do."

Tregarth fixed his eyes on his sister with a curious expression.

"You women are queer creatures," he said. "Shall we go?"

Hilda Tregarth hurried to the office early on the following morning. She told Mr Dittany what had passed, and he listened with patience.

"We'd better get hold of Stapleton," he said when she had finished.

CHAPTER XL.

Two days later Mr Dittany sat in his room inditing a letter which, to judge from the unusual care he took over its construction, was of some importance. It was addressed to Percy Stapleton, Esq., at the office of the Adarah Concessions, Limited, Accra, and it read as follows:—

“ DEAR SIR.—The directors of the Adarah Concessions, Ltd., for whom I have the honour of acting, desire to express their appreciation of your careful and exhaustive report in the matter of the above property, and ask you to accept the enclosed draft for £100, payable at the Bank of West Africa in your town. This I may say is an honorarium over and above the fee arranged between us when you sailed.

“ They also wish me to state that, if your engagements permit, they would be glad to secure your valuable services in this country, and your experience as a mining engineer, in order to advise them *re* the necessary machinery to be sent out, and to undertake the purchase of the same.

“ I am not authorised to say so, but if I may express a personal opinion, I would say that the post offered is certainly lucrative, and possibly permanent. Please cable on receipt of this, and, if possible, state by what steamer you are returning.—I have the honour to remain, yours faithfully,

EDWARD C. DITTANY.”

After Mr Dittany had despatched it, he waited with

what patience he could for his expected reply. He estimated this would take three weeks at the most. He had worded his letter carefully. The message he wished to convey was between the lines. He was not the man to state a bald fact before he knew whether his tool had been tampered with by Tregarth. His plan seemed feasible. Stapleton was probably hard up, and certainly unscrupulous. If it came to bribing, Tregarth would be simply nowhere in the power of the purse. The all-important thing was to see that the man was met on landing.

The reply, when it came, puzzled him. "Stapleton up country. Letter forwarded." What was Stapleton doing up country? And who the deuce had authority to open his letters? Both facts alarmed him vaguely. He was well aware of the standing of Adarah Concessions out there on the spot. The "offices" of the Concessions in Accra was a bamboo hut, the staff at the most one or two Kroo boys. There was no gullible British public to take in, no old ladies in ancient black dresses who had drawn out every penny they possessed to swell the coffers of the iniquity. There it must be known as the swindle it was, not reprobated, probably, for the little town was packed with similar concerns, but still perfectly patent to the shrewd mining crowd of Europeans who formed the white population.

The haste with which he jumped to conclusions was an evidence of the shattered state of his nerves. On consideration, certainly, he could find nothing damning in the letter he had written. Stapleton would understand it well enough, no doubt, but a stranger might not suspect anything. However, it was done now. He could do no more. A big brewery amalgamation came into his hands at that moment, and he plunged feverishly into details, evolving order out of chaos with all his old masterly ability. There was his new house to see to as well, and the offices of the Debenture Corporation had grown too small for the meteoric progress of the business transacted in them, and would have to be removed. So he took all his additional burdens on his

shoulders with the strength of ten, quite forgetting that he was shaping the edifice of his career on the smouldering brink of a volcano.

And then, as if his worries were not enough, Tregarth chose the moment to renew his persecution.

He came in one morning with an evil smile on his face, and a sheaf of papers in his hand. "Bad news, old chap," he began. "Have you seen this? Lucky I came across it before it was too late."

Dittany took some printed matter from his hand. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's a proof copy of an article that's going to appear in next week's 'Hour Glass,' if you don't take steps to stop it. Read it."

Mr Dittany read, with a growing frown between his eyes.

"We should like to ask the gentleman who engineered the recent flotation of Adarah Concessions, Limited," it said, "the following few questions:—

"(1) Is it true that the gentleman who was sent out to report on the property carried in his trunk some remarkably rich specimens of ore?

"(2) Did he accidentally send them back in mistake for the real thing?

"(3) Is Edward Charles Dittany really the promoter's name?

"(4) Did he have such a satisfactory time in Shropshire Gaol that he hankers to return?

"An answer by return will much oblige. Our solicitors are Messrs Dash & Bracket, Lincoln's Inn Fields."

Dittany tore the paper into fragments, and turned fiercely on his enemy. He was rather terrible when he was at bay.

"So you want me to teach you another lesson?" he asked savagely.

"I'm always open to learn," laughed Tregarth. "What are you going to do?"

"Stop it, of course. I can buy up a contemptible rag like that with the loose silver in my pocket."

"Try."

Mr Dittany pointed wrathfully to the door. "You'd better go while you're safe," he said.

"Thanks. Perhaps I will. I only wanted to say I can stop it if you like. They only want my initials on the proofs. It rests with you whether I satisfy them."

Mr Dittany turned to his work.

"I've got to return them at ten o'clock to-morrow; you can have till then." He waited a half minute longer, but getting no reply, he took his leave, looking over his shoulder to fathom if he could the effect his threat had aroused. When he had gone, Mr Dittany raised his head and looked after him. His face was drawn and haggard. He rose slowly from his chair as if his limbs were stiff, and closed the door. Then, coming back to his seat, he threw himself down and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE mood did not last. It was followed by a fit of nervous irritation in which the whole office suffered. He had despatched a telegram to Hilda Tregarth: "Better get warrant and execute it ten to-morrow here." It was a measure of his hopelessness. When she had suggested the plan before, he had pooh-poohed it as impracticable and dangerous. Perhaps if Roger could be arrested as he left the office to carry out his ultimatum there might be a delay in which one could turn round. He did not hope much from it. As he had pointed out to Hilda, letters and proofs could be posted as well from a prison cell as from anywhere else, and, once incarcerated, the man's vindictiveness would be immeasurable. He had too shrewd a knowledge of the shady side of financial life to call at the office of 'The Hour Glass.' He knew that, before they actually went to press, some mean little scamp would crawl into the Corporation's office with some oily offer of suppression at a price. He did not quite know what course he would take in that eventuality; whether he would kick him out of the place and face his inevitable ruin, or bribe him off temporarily, and saddle himself for ever with two blackmailers instead of one; but he did know that to take the initiative by going round himself would play absolutely into their hands.

Neil Wishart had much to put up with at this time. One would have thought that now his chief had cleared himself of the smirch on his name, now that business, lucrative beyond conception, was pouring into the office

every day, especially now that Nan had returned to him, he would have become his old self, jolly and smiling, singing at his work. The exact contrary was the case. Nothing that Wishart did seemed to please him. Although on the immediate eve of his departure, the lad was singled out before all others for displeasure, rebuked in public before his subordinates, almost sworn at. Perhaps Dittany himself could not have given him a reason. He had contracted a vicious hatred of Neil. At the back of his mind, probably, there was a gnawing irritation at the belief that he stood in the way of Nan's assistance; that if he had not won her affection there would have been no obstacle in the way of a saving alliance with Tregarth. In addition to that, Wishart's transparent直ness was a standing rebuke to him. He had no room for saints or financial prudes in his office. He had not forgotten the Redwood affair, nor forgiven the stand made by his secretary. He never forgot or forgave anything. From motives of policy he had humbled himself so far as to come and fetch him back, but to any one who knew him well it must have been obvious that the day of retribution was only postponed.

Taking it altogether, Neil stood it very well. He had the knack of taking rebuke without loss of dignity, steering an even course between sulking and cringing. He had told Nan about the change in her father, and she had begged him to put up with it, telling him her fears about his health. "He doesn't mean it, dear," she said. "He's not himself. We are both a little to blame. He has had so much worry lately, and it's part of the symptoms of neurasthenia to vent one's anger on those he likes best. Perhaps if we had backed him up when he wanted it so badly he wouldn't have been like this."

"I think he positively hates the sight of me sometimes."

"He doesn't, Neil. He likes you. He's always spoken highly of you. Didn't he come and beg you to return?"

"I try to think of that. He's been so awfully decent

to me that . . . I've been going to tell you several times about that Cambridge affair, and the way he took it."

"Hush, dear. Here he comes."

They were standing at the gate of Palmyra Mansions as the new car swung round into the drive. "I want to speak to you, Nan," said Mr Dittany as he alighted. He ignored Wishart altogether, and waited impatiently while she took her farewell.

"I'm surprised at you," he said to her when they had gone indoors. "Standing out there like any common servant."

Nan bit her lip.

"You've never complained before," she said, controlling her temper with an effort.

"I can't always be nagging at you. I expect a daughter of mine to preserve some sense of decency in what is due to a man in my position. Don't let me speak to you about it again."

Nan blinked away the tears that sprang to her eyes.

"I have had a letter from Professor Effington," he went on. "He has read the report of my discharge and the dinner they gave me in Shropbury. I should have thought more of his apologetic gush if he had stood by me when I wanted sympathy, but we shall have to be civil to him. He's in town, and I have written to ask him here to dine to-morrow night. Please see that we make a good show."

The unconscious optimism of the man was never more marked. To make a good show to-morrow of all days in the year! To-morrow, which would see Tregarth come in for his answer; which, at the best, would see the rascal led away under arrest in a fury of spite, and at the worst would set the machinery going which was to blazon his shame to the world. Nan clutched at the faint hope of some improvement in her father's shattered nerves at the sight of an old friend. They had had no visitors lately, and she prayed that this might be the turning-point.

"It will be nice to see him again."

"Very," he said sarcastically. He gave a meaning smile which she did not understand. "What's the girl doing?"

"Do you want her to go out?"

"Send her to the chemist. I want her to get a box of Veronal tabloids."

Nan winced. "Oh, dad!" she said beseechingly; but he took no notice.

The fateful morning dawned, and Roger Tregarth came punctually to the minute. Mr Dittany was pallid and worn, but his nerves seemed unexpectedly steady. He had brought all his enormous forces of control into play, driving his screaming soul into silence while the enemy was before him. Tregarth could see nothing but icy contempt expressed in the glance which met his shifty gaze. Mr Dittany pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he said sternly.

"No need, thanks," answered Tregarth with affected lightness. "Our little transaction won't take us two minutes. Less, in fact. I only want to know whether it is to be yes or no."

"You have determined to give me away."

"Quite."

"You know, of course, that it means ruin to you as well as to me?"

"I'm risking that."

"Do you also know that when you walk out of this office you will be arrested?"

Tregarth paused a moment, and the hot blood surged to his face.

"That's bluff," he exclaimed defiantly.

"Not a bit of it. Hilda took out the warrant yesterday."

"So much the worse for her. I can spoil her game for her as well as yours. Perhaps you don't know her story."

"My dear sir, I don't care a brass farthing what her story is. I know what yours will be if you spoil her game, as you call it."

"Come," cried Tregarth with a foul oath. "I can't stand here arguing all day. Is it to be yes or no?"

Dittany stood irresolute. In spite of his every effort he felt his knees trembling under him, and he knew that his face had gone grey.

"Give me time," he said weakly. Then, with a sudden outburst of temper, "Good lord, man! how am I to persuade the girl in a moment?"

"You haven't tried. Have you told her the position? If I give you another week, will you send for her here and let me tell her in front of you? No; of course you won't. You're trusting to luck to find some other way of making a fool of me."

"You're like a madman, Tregarth. Can't you see that, with the best will in the world, I've got no chance of persuading her until that fellow is out of the way?"

"Wishart?"

"Yes."

"When does he go?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"I don't see that I shall be much better off when he's gone. You ought to have sent him out when I first suggested it. You might have implicated him then."

"Don't take me for an utter fool," replied Dittany testily. He went to a drawer of his safe and took out a private letter-book. "That's his own handwriting," he said, turning over the flimsy pages and selecting one copy for the other to read. Tregarth inspected it curiously, an evil smile mounting to his lips. It was a letter addressed to Stapleton, dictated of course, and taken down in all innocence by the inexperienced dupe. It referred to the spurious samples, and it dwelt on the absence of any need to go farther inland than Accra; in short, it was a letter that would commit any man who had written it. "Sign it yourself, Wishart," Dittany said; "I'm busy."

"What an unmitigated mug the chap must be," was Tregarth's comment. "But," he went on, "you've fairly played into Stapleton's hands."

"Don't worry about that," said Mr Dittany. "Stapleton never saw it. You see how it stands?"

"Perfectly."

"Are you satisfied?"

"You seem to be trying. I'll give you a bit longer."

Mr Dittany called Wishart into his room when Tregarth had gone. After his period of bad temper he was really quite affable.

"Do you play Bridge?" he asked.

"A bit," replied Neil wonderingly. "Not a great player, you know."

"I have an old friend coming this evening, and I wondered if you would care to make a fourth."

"At the flat?"

"Yes."

"Rather! Thanks awfully."

"A sort of send-off, you know. Don't think I'm making a convenience of you."

CHAPTER XLII.

MR DITTANY left the office at an unusually early hour in the afternoon and drove straight home. He found Nan sitting alone. He had let himself in quietly, and caught sight of her through the crack of the open door as he hung up his hat and coat in the hall. Something in her appearance smote his conscience. She was sitting back in a luxurious Chesterfield chair with her hands folded in her lap. She was so quiet that he thought at first she was sleeping, but he caught her in profile and saw that her eyes were open. He was startled to see how old she looked, and how miserable. Was this how she spent her days? When he came to consider he had really never given the matter a thought. He was so busy himself that he supposed the time of other people to be equally taken up. Of course, on reflection, it must be rather a dull life for her. Perhaps he had been selfish. He rather smiled over the fantastic notion of being selfish where Nan was concerned, but he could not altogether acquit himself of thoughtlessness. He crept on tiptoe over the thick carpet, still unnoticed, and put his hand suddenly over her eyes. Nan gave a cry of alarm and sprang to her feet.

"Guess what it is, and you can have it," laughed Mr Dittany.

"Dad; how you frightened me," she cried. "What are you doing home so early?"

"Didn't you hear me come in?"

"I heard the door shut, but I thought it was Alice."

She turned to look at him with a sort of wonderment. The strange change which had come over him filled her with a vague hope. She had it in her mind to ask him what had happened, but he interrupted her.

"I came home early," he said, "because I was afraid old Effington might be here. You know how erratic he is."

"Is he likely to come soon?" she asked eagerly. She was fond of the Professor, and had laid great store on the effect that an old friend would have on her father. "I'll run and get ready."

Mr Dittany said not a word about bridge, or his invitation to Wishart. Perhaps he wished to spring another surprise on Nan. He stood smiling to himself while she was busy in her room, but the smile was not altogether a genial one; it was sarcastic and not a little cruel.

He welcomed Mr Effington very warmly when he came. The Professor was visibly nervous. He was an extraordinary man in appearance—very short and very broad. He wore round spectacles, had a shock of curly hair, and an under-lip which looked as if it were perpetually about to argue with you.

He took up his stand on the rug with his back to the fire, his ridiculous legs stretched widely apart. Nan came running in a moment later.

"Here we are again!" she cried delightedly. He looked so much of the pantomime clown that she nearly added "Joey."

"Why, bless my soul!" he ejaculated; "what a woman it is!"

The little man seemed quite overcome by the warmth of his welcome. He knew he had not played a very creditable part in the Shropbury tragedy. He had, like all the rest of the world, cut his old friend when he was convicted, and if they chose to forget it, he could not. But Dittany had a unique faculty of putting people at their ease.

"My dear Professor," he said gravely, "I've given the matter a lot of thought, and I'm sure you are wrong.

I am more than ever convinced that Force and Matter will be ultimately found to be convertible terms."

"Bless the man, what a memory he's got! Do you hear that, Nan? If he isn't taking up our last argument where we left it off. And he's every bit as pig-headed and sure as if he really knew something about the subject." Then, suddenly realising that it was a delicate way of hinting that there had been no lapse in their friendship, and no gulf to be bridged, he blew his nose violently, and grasped his friend by the hand.

"God bless you, Bevington!" he said with emotion. "I don't deserve it—I don't deserve it."

Nan left the two men to steady their feelings, and soon after she returned there came a knocking on the door.

"Who can that be, dad?"

"I quite forgot to tell you. Another old friend I have asked round."

The neat little maid knocked at the door.

"Mr Wishart, sir," she announced.

Nan sprang up in delight, and rushed across the room to meet him.

Neil entered smiling, but stiffened suddenly when he saw the little man standing on the rug. "Let me introduce you to Professor Ellington," said Mr Dittany.

The Professor bowed frigidly.

"We have met before, I believe," he said.

He seemed positively to bristle as he glared up through his round spectacles, and there was an actual menace in the determined way he clasped his hands behind him. A sudden constraint fell on the party like a breath wafted from an iceberg. Neil's attitude was more difficult to define, and his nervous embarrassment might have been due either to conscious innocence or equally conscious guilt. Perhaps it was really neither. The feeling uppermost in his mind was the thought which came to him in a flash that, with all his firm intentions and all his futile efforts, he had never yet succeeded in broaching the difficult subject of his Cambridge tragedy to Nan. He seemed to realise in a

moment how it would look to her now that the exposure came from a third party, and came as it were by pure accident. With a spasm of relief he remembered he had told Dittany; so much would in any case be put to his credit. He stood there blushing and perplexed.

"Yes, I know Professor Effington," he stammered "That is . . . we met at Cambridge. That matter I told you about, you know."

He could tell from the anxious dread in Nan's face that he was acquitting himself abominably. He could only wait for Mr Dittany to give him a helping hand from the morass in which the unfortunate *contretemps* had engulfed him; but Mr Dittany was unexpectedly dense.

"Dear me," he said. "Nothing wrong, I hope? We haven't put our foot in it, have we? Not strained relations, or anything of that sort?"

"It is necessary, my dear Bevington," said the Professor dryly, "that relations should exist before they can be strained. In the present case, my relations with Mr Wishart ceased to exist some time ago. This is one of those remarkable and unfortunate coincidences which occasionally happen. It rests with Mr Wishart to say which of us is to leave the field to the other. I think he will probably realise that it will be inconvenient for both of us to share your magnificent hospitality at the same time."

"Of course . . ." began Wishart hurriedly.

"Stop," interrupted Mr Dittany quietly. "Surely Nan and I can act as peacemakers. We're not curious. We don't ask you the nature of your dispute—I am sure it is honourable on both sides—but we are entitled to ask you—is it entirely irreconcilable?"

"Absolutely," replied Mr Effington with a grim snap of the lips.

"You know what it is, sir," put in Wishart.

"Do I?" asked Mr Dittany indifferently. "I have no recollection you had ever told me you had met the Professor."

"He told me," said Nan wonderingly.

Neil turned a grateful glance to her, but her intercession seemed only to cause him more uneasiness.

"I may not have mentioned his name, sir," he went on; "but, if you recollect, I told you the reason I had left Cambridge."

Mr Dittany searched his memory with a very palpable effort. "No," he said at last; "I can't call it to mind." Then, with his most genial of smiles, he turned to the older man. "Come, come," he said, "I don't believe in these ancient animosities. I don't want to seem inquisitive, but can't we have it out in the open? Is there any secret about it?"

"My lips are sealed," old Effington replied. "It rests entirely with Mr Wishart."

"Tell everything," Neil blurted out. His manly honesty was gradually overcoming the nervous confusion of the first few minutes, and he was showing to greater advantage.

"I do not know," began the Professor, addressing his host with the air of delivering a lecture, "what position in your household or in your business this young gentleman occupies, but . . ."

"He is my secretary," said Dittany.

"Nothing else?"

As he asked the question he turned a shrewd glance at Nan, and caught the embarrassment in her face.

"I was rather afraid so," he went on.

"Why *afraid?*" queried Nan hotly.

"Because, my dear young lady, I am very certain that such a foothold could only have been secured by a careful suppression of facts."

Nan jumped to her feet with clenched hands. She looked as if she would have flown at the speaker, but Wishart interrupted.

"Go on," he said contemptuously. "Have it all out, sir; this isn't a lecture."

"You will gain nothing by impertinence, sir; I fully intend to have it all out, as you vulgarly express it, especially now that I fully understand how my old friends have been deceived. This gentleman, Beving-

ton," he continued, turning to his host with a scornful wave of his hand in the direction of Neil Wishart, "was expelled from his University—'sent down,' as we say in our slangy way—for the sordid offence of theft, aggravated, I may say, by circumstances of such pettiness and treachery to a companion, and such meanness of spirit, that words can hardly express the contempt which must be felt by every right-minded man."

"Oh, it's an abominable lie!" cried Nan.

Wishart held up his hand with a restraining gesture, and turned expectantly to her father. If he could not exonerate himself, he could at least prove he had not deceived the man who employed him. But Mr Dittany at first gave no sign. He was regarding his secretary with a look of righteous disapproval.

"This is very painful, Wishart," he said after a moment.

The lad pleaded eagerly as he saw his last hope in jeopardy. "But you knew," he urged.

Mr Dittany shook his head impatiently.

"You mustn't try," he said, "to saddle me with things I have never heard till this moment."

"But you said it was rough luck, and that you believed the accusation was false. You must remember. You can't have forgotten."

"You will find, Wishart," said Mr Dittany didactically, "that however difficult it is to remember the actual details of a conversation, one can never forget a state of mind. I am quite willing to believe you may have said something of the kind—indeed, now you mention it, I do recollect saying something was rough luck, your being out of a berth, I fancy—but that I didn't in the least understand to what you were referring I am positively certain. Otherwise the trust and confidence I have had in you would have been, to say the least, diminished. Of that I am sure. Has he told you, Nan?"

Nan looked piteously from one to the other.

"He told me . . ." she began; and then stopped. She was bracing herself up for a lie which would at the

least mitigate Neil's offence. However much she blamed and doubted him in her own heart, she had the instinct to throw over him the cloak of her protection against his enemies and accusers. Her father interrupted.

"I can see he hasn't," he said. He spoke with the air of a man to whom the whole business was unutterably painful. "Wishart," he said, "a year ago, if this had arisen, I would have dismissed you from my house and from my employment. Now I am a different man. You know my story. You know how charitable and broad-minded I must have become. You know how fully I must realise that accusations may be backed up by infallible proof and yet be utterly false. If I am any judge of a man, I say I do not believe you to be capable of the offence with which my old friend Effington charges you. If I blame you at all, I blame you because you did not see fit, or did not have the courage, to tell me the whole story. Even in that I would not have dared to blame you as far as regards business. I myself did not go about telling people what had happened to me. I could have overlooked that. But I *do* think, Wishart, that if I had been trying to engage the affections of a girl who doesn't know the world as you and I do,—who is good and pure in a way that we can hardly conceive,—I *do* think I would have had the moral courage to have told her everything. Bad as I am, I believe I would have been driven by very shame to give my secret in exchange for hers. She set you the example, even . . ."

"He did start to, dad—several times, and I always stopped him."

"Even at the risk of giving away a confidence which might send her own father to gaol. That is what is so difficult to overlook."

During the touching appeal, spoken more in sorrow than in anger, Neil kept his eyes on the carpet, and stood with bitten lip. He was white and wretched, but there was no confusion in his face when Mr Dittany had made an end of speaking, and he looked up to answer him. He spoke very quietly.

"That I told you, sir, I am quite sure. If you don't remember it, it is part of the misfortune which has always pursued me in this miserable business. That I didn't tell you, Nan, is the behaviour of a cad."

"Come," said Mr Dittany in a kindly voice, "you mustn't be too cast down. I'm sure Nan will accept that as an *amende*. We understand the difficulty. Come into my study for a few minutes. There are some things I want to say to you in private. Effington, I should have thought you would have learnt by experience not to be too hasty in jumping to a conclusion. You'll excuse us for a few minutes."

Mr Dittany's broad-minded charity never showed up to greater advantage than during the short interview with his *protégé*. He laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "It's a most unfortunate affair, my boy," he said. "I'm a man of the world, and I quite understand. Incidentally, I may say I don't believe you to be capable of such a thing. I don't blame you for not telling me . . ."

"But . . ."

"Just a moment. I was going to say . . . but never mind. I've said it once, and we don't want to go over it again. You're going away to-morrow, and, all things considered, it's the best thing that could have happened. Stop out there three months or so, and live it down. I'll make it my duty while you are away to get to the bottom of the accusation. You have been very foolish. In a case like this you ought to have left no stone unturned to clear yourself. A stiff lip and unquenchable pride are very good things in their way, but they are no weapons against slander. Will you promise me to do your best for the firm, and justify the confidence I have in you?"

"You're awfully good. If only you would try to recall . . ."

"I wish I could. It was my carelessness and inattention, but I'll make up for it. If it's possible to clear you, it shall be done. Now slip off quietly. It will be too painful for both of us to go back to

the others. You can say good-bye to Nan in the morning."

Neil gripped the warm hand that was held out to him. He was too dazed to think clearly, and he went slowly down the stairs like one in a dream. The only thought he could grasp was an instinctive relief that he was going away.

Nan had heard him go, with a hand like Death's clutching at her heart. She had not spoken since he had left the room with her father, and the perplexed Professor gloomed moodily over her as she sat with clasped hands on the settee gazing into vacancy. She, too, was not thinking, was not capable of thought. A blank grey wall of despair was before her. As yet she did not blame or excuse or reason. For the moment Neil to her was like a mirage which had vanished. He was not Neil; there never had been a Neil. She did not know if she loved the man who had just shut the door so quietly behind him, or whether she was sorry or glad. The only thing which seemed positive and real was that never in the world would she see him again; never hear the tone of his voice, or feel the grasp of his hand. She wondered vaguely what she was made of that she felt no pain at his going. When Mr Dittany entered the room again she looked at him with eyes that did not see. He was startled by the white vacuity in her face. She looked what she was—one in a trance, a sleep-walker. He was as much at a loss as his friend Effington as to what was the right thing to say to comfort her. He had smiled to himself at the success of his treachery till he saw her, but now there was a vague feeling of disquietude.

Effington put his thoughts very bluntly.

"It's a pretty thing, Bevington," he said, "when a man who promotes companies has to teach a professor of theology the doctrine of charity."

CHAPTER XLIII.

NAN went straight to her room after Neil had gone, leaving the two old cronies together to pass the ruined evening as best they could. To do them justice, it was not nearly so much spoiled as it would have been to many. The girl heard the subdued murmur of their voices far into the evening, interrupted for an hour while they adjourned to a more distant room to the dinner which had been prepared for the celebration of their reunion, but resumed again in an incessant stream as soon as they had returned; now sinking to an almost inaudible growl, now rising in heated argument. Nan knew them well enough to be sure that she and Neil were the last of all topics to engage their discussion, and in her present state of numbed indifference it did not seem out of proportion that it should be so. The sound of the Professor's voice brought back memories of Shropbury with painful clearness. She thought of the scores of similar arguments on metaphysics she had suffered in the old days. In her mind she could see old Effington emphasising the points of his dialectic with the stem of an ancient briar pipe; could see her father —no mean antagonist—leaning back comfortably, cigar in hand, listening to his friend with his quizzing, incredulous smile, waiting for an opening for one of his logical thrusts. It was a strange side of Edward Dittany's character, which had recently been rather in abeyance. But for the tragic event of an hour or two before she would have been watching anxiously to see the effect of this revival of his intellectual side on her

father; but now she lay back on the pillow with burning eyes piercing the darkness of the room.

She was curiously conscious of something having snapped within her mind. In a way she knew she could never again be the same girl, though in what way she would differ she could not tell. The overpowering sensation was that she had lost all ability to feel. Some sinister wickedness had fallen upon her, and she wondered if, unknown to her, she had shared her father's nature all the tortured months through which she had passed.

She was too weary to think, and she put off the necessity by telling herself that Neil would write to her with his explanation, and that she must postpone her judgment till she heard. The one gleam in all her misery was the recollection of her father's kindness, yet in a way it added to her bitterness to ponder on the injustice she had done him. She could not have said if she slept. She rose in the morning cold and half stupefied, and she heard her father go before she was up.

Mr Dittany had left nothing to chance. He guessed that Neil Wishart would write as soon as he got home, and though he had laid his plans so carefully and apparently with such success, he was not going to risk a revulsion of feeling on Nan's part. He was therefore up early, before the post came, and pocketed the letter which he found among his own correspondence. Nothing now remained but to pack his secretary off before he had a chance to write again, and to let him leave the shores of England with the belief that he was unforgiven. A tactful word, drawn with seeming reluctance from his charitable lips, would be quite enough to clinch the matter. He knew the value of a light touch on a man who is raw.

He had thrown all scruples to the winds. No longer was there any hesitation about furthering Tregarth's suit. Roger's visit had scared him. He did not know if he had changed his mind after all, but in any case the disaster must be stopped.

Part of his fears were allayed, for when he reached the office, although the hour was early, Tregarth was

waiting for him. He followed Dittany into his private room without a word.

"Well," he began, "I've done my best to stop them."

"Done your best! Are you an utter fool? If you put a weapon like that in their hands, do you suppose they're not going to use it?"

"You should have done what I asked you at first."

"Well, you've got to stop it. Better let them think it was a trap for them. You know Wishart goes to-day?"

"So I believe."

"You can thank me for absolutely settling his hash with Nan."

"How?"

"It's a long story. To cut it short, when I first took him on, he made a sort of confession that he had been mixed up in a scandal at Cambridge two or three years ago. He was supposed to have stolen some money from an undergraduate's room—I don't believe it; he hasn't enough originality to be a thief,—but there it is. You remember Effington?"

"Yes."

"By a curious coincidence, though I didn't remember the name, I recollect perfectly well old Effington telling me about the case. I confronted them at the flat last night, and you can imagine the result."

Tregarth smiled cynically.

"I think you're the devil, Bevington," he said admiringly.

Mr Dittany was haunted by a doubt.

"Don't run away," he said, "with the idea that I did it for your sake. The young cub stood in my way once, and I never forgive that."

Tregarth lit a cigarette nonchalantly.

"It seems to me, old chap," he said sarcastically, "that other people have stood in your way from time to time. Myself for instance. Am I to take it as a threat?"

Mr Dittany regarded him contemptuously for a moment.

"I don't treat you as a sane individual," he said. "I

deal with you as an irresponsible lunatic. I have to humour you if I don't want my house burnt down."

Tregarth flushed slightly. "Thanks," he said quietly. "As long as I get my way I don't mind how you regard me."

"Well, see to that 'Hour Glass' matter. I'm busy now."

"I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

Tregarth moved his chair nearer, and looked round mysteriously.

"About young Wishart," he replied in a low voice.

"Well?"

"Do you know that he knows who you are?"

"Perfectly well. Where did you get the information?"

"He called at my rooms after your daughter had considerately told him everything, and threatened to punch my head if I didn't cease to worry her. I gathered that he knew."

"Well?"

"He's going to West Africa."

"We all know that."

"Then,"—Tregarth's movements became more mysterious than ever,—"unless you're a bigger fool than I take you for, he won't come back."

Even the calm Mr Dittany looked startled. "What do you mean?" he said unevenly.

Tregarth shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands.

"A nod's as good as a wink," he said enigmatically. "Where's that medicine chest you bought him? Is it packed yet?"

Mr Dittany nodded to a package on a shelf, and Tregarth rose from his chair and moved towards it.

"Stop!"

Dittany whispered the exclamation hoarsely.

Tregarth came back to him inquiringly. A devilish smile played about his lips. "All right—if you object, I just wanted to have a look at it."

There was a silence for a moment. Of the two men

Tregarth was much more at his ease. He flicked the ash from his cigarette. "May I borrow your desk to write a few letters when you go out?" he said.

Dittany nodded. He did not trust himself to speak, he was trembling violently.

"Suppose we say now," went on Tregarth coolly. "Then I can get on to 'The Hour Glass.'"

Mr Dittany went hurriedly through the outer office, and Tregarth, locking himself in, was occupied busily for nearly twenty minutes.

CHAPTER XLIV

FOR a man of his calm strength, Mr Dittany spent a peculiarly agitated day. There was much to be done at the office, and appointments to be kept; yet he could not bring himself to drag his footsteps back. No sooner did he try to steel himself with a superhuman effort to return to his work than the picture of Tregarth's evil smile lighting up at the sight of the box of drugs and specifics which Wishart was to take with him to West Africa rose before his conscience-stricken vision. Though nothing definite had been suggested, he could see in his mind stoppers unscrewed from bottles, powders emptied out, and others substituted. One by one he telephoned the men he had arranged to meet and put them off. In vain he tried to deaden the edge of his torture with brandy. In vain he braced himself up to rush back while there was time to stay the iniquity.

Sitting in the lounge of an hotel he had not scrupled to open the letter he had intercepted from Wishart. It was a letter worthy of the writer; plain and straightforward, explaining without trying to excuse, blaming himself without cringing. All he asked forgiveness for was his unpardonable silence. "If you love me," he wrote simply, "you will not ask me to explain away the accusation. You won't want to know my defence; you will believe such a crime was impossible. If you are the girl I picture you, I should insult you by putting my case. I am going away to-morrow night, Nan, as you know. You won't let me go without seeing me, will you? You won't send me away without one word

to say you still trust me. If you do, I shall understand, and I shall never come back."

The letter went on to ask her to wire him where he could see her in the afternoon, and wound up by heaping coals of fire on the head of the wretched man who sat there reading it. "I shall never be able to forget your father's kindness," it said. "If only he could remember I had told him, things somehow wouldn't seem so bad, but he's had so much to think of that I can't blame him because the affairs of a miserable lover have slipped his memory. Wire directly, dear. I shall only exist till I get your message."

It was strange that such whole-hearted praise of himself should make Mr Dittany furiously angry; strange that he uttered a deep curse as he tore the letter into shreds and threw the fragments in the fire; strange that it should have the effect of making him resolve to let the youth go ignorantly to his fate.

It was nearly four in the afternoon before he compelled himself to return. If he could have followed his inclinations he would have stayed away till the evening, in the hope that Wishart would have taken his departure; but the thought that perhaps the lad would go to the flat on the chance of seeing him to say good-bye made him retrace his steps.

Neil was waiting for him, fidgeting in the outer office. Even Dittany was staggered by the look on his face. Instead of the bright, fresh-coloured youngster he knew so well, he saw a middle-aged man. The cheeks were drawn and thin, and there were unaccustomed lines round his eyes and mouth.

He did not trust himself to say much. He was consumed with a burning anxiety to get him away.

"What time does the train for Liverpool go?" he asked curtly.

"Six."

The monosyllable was spoken almost in a sob

"And the boat goes . . . ?"

"At eleven to-morrow."

"Well, don't let me detain you."

Mr Dittany paused; then struck with the grey hopelessness on the boy's face, he added hurriedly, "We shall soon see you back."

Why didn't the fool go? Dittany snapped his finger and thumb with ill-suppressed impatience. He held out his hand. "Good-bye, Wishart," he said, "and good luck." There was another pause. "Something you want to say?" he asked petulantly.

"Only that I haven't heard from Nan."

"Did you expect to?"

"I wrote and asked her to see me."

"The thing has been a shock. You must give her time."

"I want you to take a message, if you will."

"With pleasure."

"Tell her that I quite understand."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more. Good-bye, Mr Dittany."

Neil Wishart turned miserably to the door, and Dittany, listening in a crouched attitude as if he were about to spring, heard him bidding his farewells to the clerks in the outer office. Some little ceremony was in progress. He could hear the croaking voice of old Maplin, punctuated with subdued cheers. "We're going to miss you," the accountant was saying, "and the extra work it'll give us is the least part of it, which is saying a good deal. The chaps here want you to accept this as something to remember 'em by."

And he could hear Wishart's reply, and the broken tone in which it was uttered. "It's awfully decent of you fellows. Good-bye," was all he said.

The farewells were echoed from one to the other. He knew that hands were being shaken, from old Peter Maplin himself down to the smallest office boy; and then, with a low general cheer, the door shut.

Wishart had gone. The banging of the door jarred the broken nerves of the man who heard it in the luxurious private room, and jarred them to a degree incommeasurable with the merely physical shock. Something besides that heart-broken secretary had

gone down the stairs into the street; something vague and indefinite which Dittany would have called back if he could. It was the last remnant of what little goodness he possessed that had gone out through the portals of the office, the last shred of conscience, the last atom of virtue. In letting the lock click in its socket without speaking the word which would have saved him, he had shut the gates of mercy on mankind. Henceforward for ever he would be a murderer as well as a thief.

For Mammon is a hard taskmaster, and requires the uttermost farthing.

CHAPTER XLV.

ONE tiny fragment of comfort only had Mr Dittany that day. He chanced to see a copy of 'The Hour Glass' on a bookstall, and Friday being the day of publication of that hugely circulated periodical, it was moist from the press. He turned from page to page hurriedly, devouring its paragraphs eagerly from cover to cover. There was nothing in it to concern him. For one short week at least he was safe, and, living from hand to mouth in his intrigues as he was, a week seemed an eternity. Perhaps, even, Tregarth had succeeded in stopping their scurrility.

He found himself irritated at the reliance he was beginning to place on Tregarth. He felt that if he did not take care the man he despised as much as he feared would be ousting him from his post at the helm of things. He had got his way about Nan; already Dittany knew that further resistance was out of the question; but he thought bitterly of the weak line he had taken, and he cursed himself for his pusillanimity in leaving Roger alone with the chest of drugs. In his heart he realised that cunning was taking the place of strength in his armoury of weapons, and that cunning was the implement of cowards. He still had Nan to face. In his present mood his one inclination was to fly, but he had not yet sunk quite so low.

Nevertheless he stayed late at the office. He tried to persuade himself that he had to make up the arrears of his day's idleness, but he did no work. He was on the rack of overwrought nerves. When the last of the

clerks had gone he found himself terrified at the stillness of the office. Against his will he raised his head anxiously every time he heard steps on the stairs, and breathed a sigh of relief when they went past the door. At the sudden shrill ringing of the telephone bell he started like a frightened horse, and had to steady himself by an effort of will to take up the receiver. He almost groaned aloud when he heard the well-known voice of Hilda Tregarth. She was in one of her playful moods.

"You naughty man," she chided. He caught the thin effort at witchery over the wire. "Why have you neglected me so?"

"Business, Hilda," he replied. "I'm worked to death."

"Am I always to take that excuse?"

"For the present, I'm afraid."

"But your health, dear. Can't you see me now if I come round?"

Her importunity was the last straw. His hands clenched tightly as he strove to keep his irritation under control.

"No; not now," he answered testily.

"You mustn't be cross with your little Hilda."

Mr Dittany slammed up the receiver and, pacing over the room like a madman, packed his papers in a heap with trembling hands and banged the lid of his desk, paying no heed to the renewed clamorous ringing of the telephone bell.

CHAPTER XLVI.

HIS anger had one good effect; it gave him the touch of courage needed to enable him to face Nan. He jumped into a cab at the door, fearful lest the terrible woman he had just been speaking to should rush round to catch him before he left.

He found his daughter alone and sitting in the darkened room. She moved wearily when she got up to switch on the light.

"You're late," she said indifferently.

"Yes."

"Have you dined?"

"No; I want nothing. Have you?"

"All I want."

Mr Dittany was fencing for an opening. He could not understand her mood at all. Tears or reproaches he had indeed expected, but not this icy indifference.

"Has any one called?"

She looked at him quickly.

"No one," she replied. "Who would call?"

"I thought . . ."

"I know whom you mean. No; he hasn't been."

"You know he has gone?"

Nan caught her breath with a gasp which she could not altogether control.

"Gone?" she echoed blankly.

"Yes; sailed. You knew he was going."

"Oh, yes; of course. Aren't you taking your coat off?"

Mr Dittany glanced absently down his figure and

fumbled at the buttons. Nan laughed at his clumsiness. There was an unexpectedness and a shrill uncanniness in the sound which startled him.

"My dear dad," she said lightly, "it's not like you to be absent-minded." She took the coat from him, and wheeled a big chair to the fire, placing his slippers beside it. He laid a hand on her shoulder, and she responded to his caress with a kiss.

"I'm so glad, dear," he said. "I thought perhaps . . ."

"What's the use?" she exclaimed, interpreting his pause. "I thought myself . . . but there! Let's forget. You can forget, can't you, if I can?"

"We can try, Nan."

"It's been a game of misunderstandings. Up to an hour ago I thought he would have written, or come to see me; but he hasn't, so there's an end of it. A chapter ended, a curtain down. The Great Dramatist has such amazing curtains, hasn't He? One wonders if it is art to stop the music on a discord. You always said I mixed my metaphors."

She busied herself about the room while he watched her with puzzled anxiety. There was a high pitch of excitement in her tone which was unnatural, yet she was outwardly calm; he could detect no trace of hysteria.

She went from the room for a moment to hang up his coat. "I made the mistake, dad," she said when she had returned, "of putting another before you. I have been punished. I ought to have known. I ought to have trusted you."

She knelt at his feet and buried her face on his knee.

He stroked her hair. "Let's talk of something else," he said. Although he spoke so gently, he was far from feeling the tenderness he expressed. He was possessed of a mad desire to lean against the walls, to bow himself against the supports of the narrow limits which stifled him, and bring the building crashing down on both of them. Nan did not comprehend the mood; she only

knew that the hand she fondled was trembling like an aspen leaf.

"Poor old dad," she said, looking up. "We'll start all over again, won't we? I'm going to help you in future and not stand in your way."

It was the opportune moment to state his wishes, but he could not bring himself to seize it. Nan misunderstood the absence of any response. She attributed it to his entanglement with Hilda Tregarth.

"Can't I?" she continued eagerly. "Let's begin by having no secrets. Have things gone so far that you must marry that woman?"

Where was the strength of which he had been wont to boast? Where the grim resolution which was accustomed to beat down all opposition to his wishes? Was he to be afraid of every one? Not only of the crew of blackmailers who had battened on him, but of his own daughter, and of himself?

He affected to laugh away her fears.

"She's extremely pertinacious," he said.

"But why?" Nan persisted. "I don't understand. It's not like you to be so weak."

Some of the old fire was burning in the ashes, and spurted into flame at the word he hated.

"Weak!" he cried scornfully. "Whatever I may be, you can't call me that. It would be injudicious to offend her just now; that's all."

There was a feverish eagerness in his daughter's face which made him believe the question was of even more consuming interest than it really was. If he had more insight he would have known she was in that state of mind when she must either talk and plan, or go mad.

"But hasn't the danger passed? Is there still any reason why we should be afraid of those people?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

Nan was silent for a minute.

"I don't want to know anything about it," she continued at last. "You'll think I'm doubting you again. You've always been right, and I've always been wrong, dad. If you tell me they can do you harm,

I believe you, and I will help you all I can. You don't want to marry Miss Tregarth, do you?"

"God forbid!" he exclaimed fervently.

"Then don't, dear. Whatever happens, even if it means what you call ruin, get out of her clutches. It would be bad enough for me, but I'm not thinking of myself."

Mr Dittany pushed her away and rose impatiently from his chair.

"It's all very well for you to talk, child," he said irritably. "I've got great schemes just coming to fruition. I can't let them slide, and I can't stand against the animosity of both brother and sister. One of us—you or I—have to make the sacrifice."

Nan had risen to her feet. Her breath came quickly.

"You mean," she said, "that if I consent to marry Roger Tregarth it will still save you?"

"Yes," he said, without looking at her.

Nan walked over to the fire and, resting her hand on the mantel-shelf, gazed into the flickering flames. When she turned again to face her father, there was the glow of martyrdom on her cheek.

"Dad!" she cried in a high staccato voice.

"Well?"

"If I say I will do it, the sacrifice won't be in vain, will it?"

Mr Dittany kept silent.

"There will be no more worry for you; nothing else to bother about?"

And again he made no answer.

CHAPTER XLVII.

ON the upper deck of the s.s. *Bendigo*, Neil Wishart stood amid a small throng of passengers leaning over the rail, and watching with idle curiosity the novel and animated scene as the great vessel paid out her moorings in the open roadstead. A crowd of surf-boats and tiny longshore craft paddled industriously backwards and forwards beneath, their occupants standing recklessly on their frail thwarts to vociferate the sale of fruit and fresh vegetables. Oblivious of sharks, little naked boys, with skins varying from light brown to the deepest ebony, plunged in after the coins which the passengers threw into the water, catching them infallibly long before they sunk to the bottom, and bringing them up between their flashing teeth, with shouts of glee and hoarse cries for more.

Looking away over the bay he could see the town quivering in the tropical heat, every white-painted house and every clump of palm standing out with aggressive clearness. Behind it, the ground rose in wind-blown hillocks of red sand, desolate and forbidding.

Neil was bronzed and well with the sun and wind, but his face was drawn with the lines of a man who had seen much suffering. He stood apart from his fellow-passengers, his trunks tied and strapped ready for landing beside him.

Such moments touch the deepest depths of loneliness for a man who has left all he loves behind him. It is the true time of parting, not the going on board, not the

waving of handkerchiefs and the final embraces. The voyage itself is a dream and a forgetting, a little folding of the hands to sleep between two days of bitterness. When the time for landing comes the burden of exile has to be shouldered, the friendless future to be resolutely faced ; and God help the men who, like Neil, have lost the friends they have left, not only below the horizon of distance, but in the clouds of coolness and misunderstanding.

During the bare fortnight of his journey Wishart had buoyed himself up with the hope that the message his heart had craved for would be awaiting him when he reached his destination. He had looked in vain for it at Liverpool, but they had told him on board that the Saturday mail would reach Accra two days before him, and his spirits rose again. The launch which came out to bring the passengers off carried letters for several of his fellow-travellers ; but even when the purser passed him by, he tried to console himself with the fact that they were all letters addressed to the ship, and that Nan, if she wrote, would mail hers to the office of the Adarah Concessions.

The formalities of landing seemed as if they would never end. There was the customs to pass, and the quarantine officer, the settling of accounts, and the waiting for the inevitable last passenger, who was not ready. But at last they made for the shore, carried forward in huge, hissing strides on the shoulders of the great lazy ground-swell which rolled in indolently from the broad Atlantic.

He had expected to be met on landing by Percy Stapleton, and he stood despondently for a time waiting for him, shaking his head violently at the crowd of Kroo porters who competed for his luggage and threatened to carry it off piecemeal by main force. Although it was barely ten o'clock the sun was already beating down on him like a furnace, scorching and blinding him with its heat and light. He accosted a European who stood idly by, dressed in a suit of duck which had perhaps once been white.

"Can you tell me where I shall find the offices of the Adarah Concessions?" he asked civilly.

The man spat on the ground and laughed aloud.

"Ain't we grand?" he said. "Hear that, Fred?" he called to a passing companion. "Gentleman wants the offices of the Adarah Concessions."

The gentleman called Fred seemed to find the inquiry highly amusing.

"Oh, lordy!" he ejaculated.

Wishart's temper was slowly rising.

"Can you tell me, or can't you?" he said angrily.

"Keep your temper, sonny," replied the man to whom he had first spoken. "It's Mister Stapleton you want, I suppose?"

"Yes; do you know him?"

"Oh, we *know* him all right; don't we, Fred?"

"Well, where shall I find him?"

"Just come off the boat?"

"As you can see."

"Thought you must ha' done, or you wouldn't be so green. If you'd been here more'n ten minutes you'd ha' known where to find him. He's in Jenkin's saloon, a dollar to a rotten banana."

"And where's that?"

"See that mule?"

'Yes."

"Well, it stands back from there. The name's on the door. Want a hotel?"

"I shall want one."

"Try Brisket's, if I was you." The man was getting more friendly. He told Neil where Brisket's was to be found, and what Brisket charged if you let him; also what Brisket would take if you didn't let him.

The man was so obviously a common loafer that Wishart had no hesitation in asking him point-blank if he would take his traps up to the hotel. The question brought on a paroxysm of laughter, in which "Fred" was invited to share. Wishart had yet to learn that white men, even of the lowest type, never put a finger to manual labour in that land of blacks. When the

merriment had subsided, his informant caught hold of a huge nigger who went past.

"Here," he said with an oath. "Take boss's things up to Brisket's, and be slick about it, if you don't want . . ." The rest of the objurgation is unprintable, and was accompanied by a playful attempt at a kick.

Neil walked up the road to where the mule was still standing. His heart was sick with a sense of disillusionment. Heaven knows what sort of idea he had formed of the conditions he would find when he came out, or whether he had formed any definite ideas at all, but nothing certainly resembling this. As he made his way to Jenkin's saloon, walking fast, as he would have done in London, he saw indolent men sprawling in deck-chairs on cool verandahs, sipping drinks and smoking black cigars. They were all in white drill suits, and they were all men; those two facts were impressed on his mind. Women, or rather white women, seemed to be as rare in that land of the sun as energy. Some of the bearded men he noticed would be busy enough after sundown, but he did not know that yet, and put them all down impatiently as lotos-eaters.

He found Jenkin's saloon easily enough, thanks to the stationary qualities of the mule, who had served as a sign-post. He was hot and perspiring when he got there, and covered with a thin red dust. His temper was not amiable. He was wondering why the mention of the offices of the Adarah Concessions should have been greeted with such uproarious mirth, and why he should have been directed to a drinking saloon to find the company's headquarters. In far-off Holborn he had passed vouchers for fifty pounds a quarter for these self-same "offices"; and he supposed that in a land of cheap rents there would be something substantial to show for the expenditure.

He recognised Stapleton immediately. With the addition of a Panama hat with an outrageous brim, he was attired in the universal garb. He was lounging in the company of five or six men of the same stamp as himself. The room in which they sat was open on one

side to the winds of Heaven, but darkened by heavy Venetian shutters. A "boy," who looked like a study in white and ebony, was lazily serving drinks.

"Hullo, youngster," said Stapleton. "So you've got here?"

He made no attempt to rise, and his utterance seemed a little thick, but he held out a hot hand for the other to shake. "Come and join us," he added. "What'll you take? This is Mr Wishart, you chaps; introduce yourselves; it's too damned hot for me to bother."

Neil was a man who got on well with men as a rule. He had mixed in his time with all sorts, and had learnt the art of being affable without making himself cheap; but here he felt quite out of his element. He caught the cynical smile on the lips of the strangers, and the glances of supercilious amusement which were exchanged between them. Without exactly knowing why, he felt like an unwelcome intruder. He knew he had stopped the idle buzz of talk.

"This is the gentleman," Stapleton said, "who's come out to take charge. Well, here's to the health of the Adarah Concessions—very limited."

Some one behind him gave a short laugh.

"Where are you staying?" asked some one else.

"Brisket's," replied Wishart. At the mention of the name there was a general shout of mirth.

"You all seem easily amused out here," retorted Wishart.

"We have to make the best of poor materials," Stapleton said.

"What's the latest at home for the Grand National?" some one asked.

"I don't follow racing."

"What do you follow—gold-mining? For the Lord's sake don't tell us you're interested in gold-mining."

The tone of the sneer was unmistakable. Wishart wheeled sharply round. "Look here," he said quietly, "if you want to be offensive, say so, and I shall understand. I haven't asked for your company, and if you

can't be civil to a stranger, I don't want it. I've come to see Stapleton here on private business."

There was an uneasy laugh all round the group, and an older man took up the office of peacemaker.

"No offence, my boy," he said. "You're fresh to it and don't understand. The worst thing you can do in Accra is to talk shop. It's bad form."

"I haven't spoken a word of shop."

"No; but you come down on us like a sirocco. It makes us perspire to look at you. The hardest work we do here is to keep cool. You're not drinking. Try a 'Cummerbund.'"

"What's that?"

"Something that goes all round you."

"I'm in your hands."

Neil could see what sort of crew he had fallen amongst. He had no intention or inclination to take up the habit of drinking in a country where the evils of the vice were magnified a hundredfold, but, on the other hand, he was man of the world enough to see the necessity of not making himself an outcast at the very start. His mind had been made up that he would try to live down his sorrow in hard work. He thought he would be able to toil as he had toiled in London. He drew pictures to himself of the duties with which he had been entrusted: superintending the landing of the mining machinery, convoying it up country and installing it, hiring native labour, and doing the hundred and one things that fell to the lot of the foreign representative of a great and prosperous company. A group of enfeebled men in a drinking saloon was not a good beginning. He sipped his drink and smoked for a while, trying to break down the barrier which separated him from his new companions, and presently he contrived to get a quiet word with the man he had come to see.

"When can I have a talk with you?" he asked.

"What about?"

"About business."

Stapleton laughed. "There isn't any," he said.

"When can we make a start?"

"I say, youngster," replied Stapleton, staring at him hard, "you're pretty raw for a clerk of Dittany's, you know. What are you up to? What's the game?"

"I'm beginning to wonder. I've come out here to look after the Company's interests, I suppose."

"All bunkum, my dear boy. There aren't any interests to look after. You've been sent out to look after *me*. Own up now. It's a little tender solicitude on Dittany's part to see that I behave myself, and don't blow the gaff. Well, I don't bear you any animosity on that account. Before you've been out here three weeks they'll want to send some one else to look after the two of us, if you have any sense."

Wishart thought for a moment before replying.

"You're labouring under a mistake," he said. "I'll show you my written instructions if you like."

"Not now."

"As soon as possible, if you don't mind. When I've seen you I'm to go up country."

"What? To Adarah?"

"Naturally."

Stapleton gave a low whistle, almost of dismay. "Hear that, you chaps?" he cried. Wishart caught the glance of incredulity that passed from one to the other, and the raised eyebrows. Instead of raising his suspicion that something was amiss, it had the effect of stiffening his resolution. He rose to go.

"Where's Brisket's?" he asked impatiently.

"I'll come with you," Stapleton said.

The conversation buzzed freely enough when the two had gone.

"What are they playing at?" asked one.

"Looks to me," said another, "precious much as if some one wanted to get him out of the way."

"A bit stuck up," said the older man who had first intervened to make peace; "but he's a likeable cub. Boys," he said, bringing down his fist on the table, "we've got to look after him. We don't want that sort of dirty work, by God!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ON the morning following Neil Wishart's departure from England, Nan Dittany rose early. Lately her father had been leaving for the office soon after eight in the morning, and it was necessary if she wished to speak to him before he left.

Mr Dittany looked up surprised when he saw her waiting for him at the head of the table.

"Why, my dear," he exclaimed, "what's the meaning of this? The beginning of the new *régime*?"

"Something important I want to say before you go," she said. Her face was very white, but she struggled to smile bravely.

"Let's have it, then," he answered. A dread shot through his heart. He seemed to know what was coming. It was rather strange he should fear the consummation of all his intrigues.

"I have been thinking very seriously all through the night," she said, "and I have come to a very serious decision."

"Yes?"

"I want you to ask Mr Tregarth to come and see me this afternoon."

"Nan!"

"Don't put it off. It has not been quite easy, and I want to cut off my retreat."

"You will tell him . . . ?"

"I will tell him, dad, that I will marry him."

Mr Dittany pressed his hand over his eyes.

"But . . ."

"Hush, dear. It's all right. I shall make some conditions—in your interests. You mustn't worry. I don't think I care—very much. You will take my message, won't you?"

And before he could answer she had fled from the room.

CHAPTER XLIX.

IN her new rôle of fiancée Nan Dittany surprised herself as much as she astonished her friends. There was a keen excitement and restlessness in her manner which might have led one to suppose she was disporting herself on the very pinnacle of happiness. It was well for Dittany that the continued success of his many schemes enabled him to bear with ease the burden of the extravagances into which she suddenly launched him. She became merciless in her demands on his purse. Her dress bill mounted to hundreds in the first few weeks. There were expensive dinners and seats at the theatre night after night. She insisted on a ruinous box at the opera for the whole season; she dragged her father for extended week-ends to Paris; she made him break his lease at Palmyra Mansions and take a flat overlooking Hyde Park at twenty guineas a-week; she stipulated for *carte blanche* in the furnishing, and ransacked Bond Street with all the success which an artistic temperament and an unlimited banking account could ensure.

Nor did Mr Dittany complain. Nothing that he could do seemed to him good enough for the imperious girl who lorded it over him with such unscrupulous aplomb. The greater inroads she made on his funds, the more he set himself to make good the deficiency. He found himself stating his profits in terms of her enjoyment. If he cleared eight thousand out of his brewery amalgamation it represented the furnishing of his Hyde Park flat; when he turned over fifteen hundred on a property deal it signified a rope of pearls, and so on. Peter Map-

lin entered up his private drawings with a heavy heart. "He ain't always going to have a run of luck," he muttered to himself.

Yet the luck continued in a way that was perfectly astounding. The man's name was looming big in the City, that was the long and the short of it. Men gave him unlimited credit, and worshipped his infallible judgment. The very way they followed his speculations was sufficient to make these successful. If he touched an investment, there was a run on it which sent it up by leaps and bounds.

Yet the man was not happy. Some deep insight was showing him that all was not well with his girl. Even at the expense of her reproaches and suspicions he often felt he would give anything he possessed to get back her old gentle tenderness. He missed her bursts of loving affection; the cold cheek she offered him when he came in and went out was a poor substitute for the warm arms thrown round his neck and the kiss on his lips, and her clever worldly sarcasms jarred on him when he thought of the unselfish emotions which used to leap quivering to her tongue.

The relative positions of the two seemed to have become reversed. It was he who watched now with a tremor of anxiety in his heart, she whose conscience was atrophied. If she could alter thus far in so short a time, to what might the corrupting influence of the money he worshipped lead her eventually? She insisted on entertaining profusely as soon as they were installed in their new dwelling. There were smart people there perpetually, with a fair sprinkling of titles; and if Nan was select in her choice of women, many of the men were notorious,—elegant dandies about town, club men and guardsmen, who were all famous for treating morality with the lightest of touches. Against his will Mr Dittany drifted into the habit of watching his daughter's behaviour; it was a token of his fears that he could sink so far. Yet he saw nothing to confirm his anxiety. Nan had developed a beauty of a startling order. Her perfect features and wonderful eyes, her exquisite taste

in dress, her marvellous self-possession, and her dazzling wit, were combining to make her the rage of London. It was quite natural that she should have such men at her feet, that monocled eyes, watery with age or hungry with youthful adoration, should be ogling her right and left. Yet her discretion was as marked as her powers of fascination ; she seemed to have an absolute passion for never being left in the company of any one man.

Roger Tregarth was much at her side in those days ; her "mascot" as she contemptuously called him. He had become very much the tame dog. He seemed bewildered at the change of circumstances, and dazzled by her beauty and popularity. One would have thought that the marked coolness with which she treated him would have angered him, but he did not seem to notice. He carried her wraps and fetched her carriage with the obsequiousness of any flunkey. People wondered greatly at her choice. He was so obviously not a gentleman, and so equally obviously scarcely a man, that it was common talk that Nan Dittany had thrown herself away.

Perhaps in nothing was the alteration in the girl so clearly shown as in her campaign against the sinister influence of Hilda Tregarth. She had started by making the point very clear to Roger. "I want you to understand," she had said, "that if my father marries Hilda, I don't marry you. Two of you in one family would be more than I can stand." It was one of the stipulations she had promised her father she would make in his interest, and it made Roger an active ally against his sister.

Hilda was not the sort of woman to be easily shaken off. There had been a time, not so far back, when Edward Dittany would have blazed his defiance at her, but his nerve seemed to have gone. He temporised, and made promises which he did not keep, and there is little doubt that, but for the support of Nan, he would have succumbed through very weariness of the unequal combat. There had been a time also when Nan herself would have waged warfare in the open ; would have

displayed her plans and trusted to the power of righteous indignation. But that, too, was very far back, though not in point of time. Now she armed herself with all the information Roger could give her. She learnt her place of business; she routed out such haughty women of her acquaintance as dealt at the *Maison Desirée*; she prepared a careful list of invitations; she pretended to side with the unfortunate woman in her clamorous demand to share the hospitality of the new flat and to meet Edward Dittany's fine friends.

The rout when it came was complete. Even Roger, who for his own interests was in arms against her, winced when he saw what an exhibition his sister made. It would not have been so bad if she had held her ground and brazened it out, but she was a woman who could not see that there was no disgrace in working for her living, and her confusion when she found herself sitting at the same table with three of her principal customers would have roused the pity of any one with a spark of sympathy. Probably Lady Bridgepoint put her finger on the crux of her distress when she exclaimed to a little group of friends, "And she has my frock on. The utter cheek of the woman!" Whatever the cause, she went all to pieces, calling her customers "madam" with the exact show-room intonation, and giving ground to them with servile deference whenever they came past her.

Nan was quite merciless. The news of the borrowed frock soon trickled out, and when she heard it she made a point of complimenting her in extravagant terms on her bewitching taste.

It is difficult to say whether Mr Dittany saw through the feminine manœuvre. At no time was he a man to whom the squabbles of ladies caused the slightest feeling of discomfort. He watched them as a naturalist might watch a battle of crows, with some amusement and a considerable amount of instruction. Their subtle power of saying civil things which dealt mortal wounds pleased the vindictive side of his nature. He had a good deal of the instinct himself in spite of his masculin-

ity, and would have indulged it freely but for the fact that he never allowed his pleasure to interfere with his interest, and never made unnecessary enemies. When the last of the guests had gone he asked Nan with a yawn what had been the matter with Hilda. She answered chaffingly, with the little hard laugh she had so successfully acquired—

"It means, father," she said, "that you'll have to do your philandering out of doors in future, for she'll never come here again."

Perhaps if she could have seen Hilda Tregarth at that very moment, could have seen the tiny clenched fists and heard the dry sob of impotent passion, she would have wondered whether she had not been too successful, and if a woman of her temperament was likely to be subdued by scorn, or driven to a tragic revenge.

But for one thing, Mr Dittany would have reached the haven of his desires. Nothing more had been heard of 'The Hour Glass,' Roger Tregarth was no longer dangerous, the network with which Hilda Tregarth had enmeshed him was nearly cut through by his daughter's skilful fingers, business was prospering on every hand. Yet the old sleepless nights had returned, the recourse to drugs, the untasted breakfasts. Nan wondered that there was no change in him, and wondered at herself that she had no pity. If she could have diagnosed herself accurately she would have seen that her own malady was, in its way, as serious as his. She had lost the power to feel. During those weeks and months her father's nature was strong in her. Even her approaching marriage, now only two short months ahead, gave her no concern, no horror or shrinking such as she would have felt so recently. Whether she ever thought of Neil no one could have said. Perhaps she did. Perhaps it was the dread of thinking of him that drove her into that maddening stream of gaiety. Perhaps when people marvelled that even her magnificent constitution could stand the strain of the life she led, she was trying to jade herself into oblivion so that the silent nights might pass as quickly as the days.

Unwittingly her social success was helping her father. The men with whom she brought him into touch flocked round him for investments and for seats on the boards of the companies he formed one after the other, and their names, many of them, were great and substantial.

Yet, in spite of all, the nights for Mr Dittany were more terrible than they could possibly have been for Nan. For if she thought of Neil Wishart, so did he. The vision of that fever-stricken swamp came back to him again and again, and with ever-increasing clearness. If he dozed he saw a lad flushed with fever stretched out on a truckle-bed in the corner of a wretched hut; he saw the dusky natives coming and going; he heard the stricken moan for water; he saw the hand reaching out for quinine. Ah, merciful heavens, not that! He would sit up among his soft pillows and art hangings, and groan softly to himself while he wiped the beads of sweat from his brow. He longed for the day to come when he could forget a little in the throng and hustle of work, but things were not much better there. Mail days were an anticipated torture, and every wire that came into the office left him trembling when he had opened it.

Yet so far all was well, for weekly letters had begun to come from Africa—first a short one announcing his arrival at Accra, and a week later a long one from Adarah containing a conscientious report of the company's property.

"I have carefully gone into the matters you spoke of," he wrote, "and I am sorry to say there is a great deal of preliminary work to be done before a start can be made. It is the wet season out here, and the Concession is one big swamp. It has a very bad reputation for unhealthiness, and I doubt if white men could stand it for more than a few weeks. I am not an engineer, but it seems to me that, at the cost of a few thousands, the stream which causes all the trouble could be dammed off at the north of the estate and diverted into the Tchadchu River. The same thing has been done very successfully on the Grand Baru

property which adjoins ours, and the rate of mortality has dwindled to the normal. I understand that the engineer who carried out that work is at present in Accra, and I shall be glad if you will authorise me by cable to get an estimate from him."

The letter, after dealing with other suggestions, wound up with the question whether Mr Dittany was aware that, in spite of the money expended, no offices had yet been erected in Accra.

Mr Dittany knew it quite well, and cursed Wishart's energy and conscientiousness. Why couldn't the fool let things alone? Why must he poke his nose into a nest of hornets?

Neil had left Accra in spite of the utmost efforts of his new-found acquaintances to dissuade him. When they saw their remonstrances were of no avail, they came in a group to the station with him, dinning suggestions in his ears.

"Mind the grass snakes."

"You'll see where the mist comes to—sleep above it, mind."

"Never go out without your puttees. They only strike below the knee."

"Just a couple of goes of whisky-and-soda after sundown."

What a commentary it all was on the formidable dangers he was called upon to face. Not a hint or word of advice from one of them but what had reference to disease or death. They told him how to cut away the flesh round a snake-bite in the same tone that a man in other countries might recommend a good hotel; they taught him how to distinguish malaria from typhus, as if it were the choice of two country roads.

Wishart smiled his thanks and left by the train that went to Kumasi. For seven or eight hours he sweltered in the intolerable heat, and landed at a wayside station more dead than alive. His friends' kindness had taken a more substantial shape than mere advice. He was met by a big man in a drill suit and a white pith

helmet. "Ye'll be Muster Wishart," he said in a broad Scotch accent. "I'm Mac."

When Wishart heard that his new friend had ridden through the heat of the afternoon eight miles from the Grand Baru station merely on receipt of a wire from Accra, he was overwhelming in his thanks.

"Hoots, mon!" replied Mac modestly. "That's naething oot here. Ye're staying wi' me the nicht, and a'll pit ye on your road the morn."

There was a storm that night the like of which Neil had never seen. Mac merely closed the shutters, and they talked as best they could between the crashes of thunder.

Mac listened to his plans with a grave face. If he thought anything he was careful not to say it, for he was a Scotsman, and discreet.

A thick reek of steam rose from the heated jungle, penetrating through every cranny of the doors and windows. When the storm had muttered away into the far distance, another kind of roar broke on their ears.

"Gorillas," said Mac, catching the startled look of inquiry. "They're fearsome beasts when they're washed out. Ye'll need to gie them a wide berth."

It was a fitting introduction to his new life, and it brought out all the fighting instincts of the man.

Yet there are terrors in life worse than gorillas and the crash of the elements. At that moment, in far-away London, where life and property are as safe as civilisation can make them, Mr Dittany was sitting crouched up in a big chair before the drawing-room fire. It was only the third day since they had been installed in their new residence, and Nan, coming in late from a big reception at Lord Cuppling's place, was astonished to find every light burning.

"Why, father," she said, "what's the meaning of this? I thought from your illuminations you must have company. Don't you know what the time is?"

"I can't sleep," he said.

"I should think not, with all this glare." She

noticed he was in his dressing-gown. "You've been to bed I see?"

"Yes."

"We don't want all these lights going."

"Let them alone!" he cried hoarsely.

Nan paused inquiringly with her hand on a switch.

"I've been to bed," he said, shuddering. "There's something in the room: something—beastly."

She walked over to him.

"What sort of something?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. He glanced fearfully over his shoulder as he spoke, and felt for her hand as if it would give him courage.

"It came on to the bed," he went on, "and coiled itself up at my feet like a dog—or a snake. I tried to move it with my feet, and couldn't. It was heavy—and loathsome. I reached down with my hand, and it wasn't there. I turned on the light, and there was nothing,—nothing, except the place on the quilt where it had been. I tried to sleep, and it came again. I couldn't stand it. I shall sit up."

Nan's lips curled with disdain.

"Your nerves are in a rotten state," she said. "Why don't you have advice?"

A shudder went through his frame, but he made no reply.

"Would you like me to call one of the men?" she continued.

A gleam of anger spurted through his terror.

"Do you think I want *them* to know?" he asked querulously.

Nan went to the sideboard and mixed him a glass of brandy and water.

"Drink this," she said coldly. "I'm going to bed."

CHAPTER L.

WHEN, one morning, Dittany received an urgent cable from Wishart, he sent for Tregarth. He had got more and more into the habit of sending for Tregarth. Although in its way a sign of growing weakness, it was not altogether weakness. Unscrupulous though he was, there were degrees of villainy in which he was out of his depth; where he needed the support of a swimmer stronger than himself in unrighteousness. In all his ordinary matters of business he still relied on himself alone, and he would no more have dreamt of asking his colleague for an opinion than he would have consulted the office boy. But where the Adarah swindle was concerned, and especially in the hideous problem of Wishart, he handed over the reins dumbly.

Roger Tregarth was very much his old self just now. When he was away from Nan, he made up for his obsequious slavery by adopting an air of jaunty aggressiveness. He was dressed immaculately. Under the lash of Nan's sarcastic tongue he had gradually shed the little vulgar extravagances his soul loved, and her father's increased allowance enabled him to do the rest.

When he swaggered into the office on receipt of Dittany's summons there was a marked difference in the two men: the one flippant with a careful carelessness, the other sitting motionless, as pale as death, with unaccustomed lines furrowing his broad brow. When the door was shut, Dittany took a cable from his desk. Tregarth, pausing ostentatiously to tap a cigarette and light it, took it from his hand and read it.

As he perused it his indifference vanished, and a scowl came over his face.

"Insist on being relieved from post cable permission return Wishart," was what he read.

"So the blessed saint and martyr has found us out," he said with a sneer.

"Yes," replied Dittany, nodding gravely.

"What are you going to do?"

"What can we do?"

"You know what it means, of course?"

Mr Dittany nodded again. "The end," he said.

"Yes; for you, and for me."

"How much has he discovered?"

"That's what I'm wondering," Tregarth replied. "He knows, of course, by this time that the thing's a swindle."

Dittany tapped his fingers restlessly on the table at the pause.

"What else?" he asked irritably.

"You sent Stapleton money, didn't you?"

"A hundred pounds."

"The mistake of your life. A man's conscience is always more acute when he's flush. He's been buying scruples with it."

"I don't follow you; what's Stapleton got to do with it?"

"If we don't want to come up at the Old Bailey we'd better put all our cards on the table. A thousand pities we didn't do it at first. I wrote Stapleton."

"To say . . . ?" Dittany asked the question huskily.

Tregarth shrugged his shoulders. "You know what our idea was," he answered vaguely.

"You suggested . . . that?"

"As discreetly as I could. I didn't put it in black and white; but he would understand."

Mr Dittany wiped the gathering sweat from his forehead.

"*You did it,*" he cried, leaning forward and gripping the arms of his chair. "It's on *your* head. Stapleton's your friend, not mine."

"Not so fast, old fellow. If I wrote, you clinched it. If I said you would make it worth his while to see that Wishart went into the swamp, you made it worth his while. What sort of construction do you think people would put on the coincidence of a hundred pounds coming out so opportunely; what sort of answer would you give to a clever counsel? You're in it up to the neck."

"Stapleton would never . . ."

"If this cable means anything, it means that Stapleton has split."

"But he says 'cable permission.' If he knew everything, he would return without permission."

"A dodge to make you commit yourself. If you refuse permission, you give yourself away."

"And if I give it, he returns."

"He does that in any case."

The two men paused, and searched each other's eyes.

"For God's sake suggest something, Tregarth," cried Dittany in an agony of impatience.

Even Roger had gone a shade paler.

"There's only one thing clear to me," he said.

"What?"

"That Wishart must not return."

In the pause that followed they could hear the beating of their own hearts.

"How . . . ?" began Dittany; but he gulped down the rest of the question.

"Give me a foreign telegraph form."

Tregarth scribbled a message and passed it over.

Dittany read it aloud. "Sending substitute relieve you Wait his arrival next boat Write reasons."

"Who's the substitute?" he commented.

Tregarth tapped his breast suggestively with his forefinger.

Dittany rose to his feet trembling. "You!" he said in a whisper.

Tregarth shook him by the arm. "Come!" he said. "The less said the better. You don't know anything about it; your nerves are not good enough. Better

leave it to me. Let me have a hundred at once, and make what excuses you like to Nan. Quick; where's your cheque-book? Don't be a fool, man."

Fate was really much kinder to Mr Dittany than he deserved. With shaking fingers he had written out the cheque at the imperious command of the rascal who stood over him. He had let him go from the office without a word of reprobation, knowing well what evil designs were in his heart. He had become an accessory before the fact.

It was not on Wishart's account that he suffered. Then, as always, he was thinking of his own safety. Hanging had no more terrors for him than a long term of penal servitude, and there was always the chance that Tregarth's contemplated crime would cover up the tracks of his tortuous ways. However much the remains of his conscience made him shudder at the awful pass to which his wickedness had brought him, the alternatives were as bad, and much more sure. As the hours wore on he began to dread the night. He thought of the loathsome Thing which had coiled itself on his bed, and knew with a shudder that it would visit him again. And then, as before, Nemesis, like a cat playing with a mouse, gave him a reprieve and a hope of escape.

A messenger brought in another cable. It had been sent to the office of the Adarah Concession, and came from Stapleton. Technically, Stapleton was in the employ of the Concessions, though in practice everything of importance was sent round to Mr Dittany. His face lighted up with a fierce joy as he read it, and he rang his bell violently.

"Take this wire," he said, writing hurriedly.

It was to Tregarth. "Come back at once," it read; "great news, everything right."

"And ask Mr Maplin to come in here," he added.

He laughed aloud while he waited.

"Maplin," he said excitedly, "run down at once to Fream & Wedderburn's in Throgmorton Street, and if

you find out on your way that the news in this cable is correct, buy me ten thousand Adarahs."

"Sell, you mean?"

"Buy, you fool. Read it; it's been decoded."

Peter Maplin first looked carefully at the date and the place of despatch. Having satisfied himself that it had been sent that very day from the Concession, or as near it as a man could wire, he adjusted his spectacles and read it aloud.

"Great discovery of gold in the Grand Baru adjoining our property Reef runs North Easterly direction immediately through our Concession cropping up at Buli No great depth Have sunk shaft and verified Stapleton."

He gave a low whistle when he came to the end. "I'll go at once," he said.

He was successful in his mission. He realised the position of affairs on his way in the cab, and with his customary shrewdness kept his excitement well under control. He made his inquiries about the Grand Baru in the street, very casually, as if he were a probable buyer, and he soon found that, although only rumours had leaked out, the price was mysteriously rising. Nosing here and ferreting there, he came to his decision in a very few minutes, and acted promptly. No one seemed to realise that Adarah Concessions were concerned, the geography of West Africa not being the street's strong point. Fream & Wedderburn were frankly astonished at the order. "Guv'nor bulling them?" asked Wedderburn.

"Well, we can't afford to let 'em sag," was the indifferent reply.

Wedderburn shrugged his shoulders. "He ought to know what he's doing; but they've been dropping pretty freely."

"He knows all right," replied Maplin slyly. "Put a thousand on for me while you're about it."

"You'll have to take 'em up. You're not a Dittany, you know."

"I dessay I can do that at a pinch," answered Maplin.

And the old accountant, who, with all his faults, had never been known to break a personal undertaking with his friend Wedderburn, got his contract-note by the night's post, and woke up fifteen hundred pounds richer than he went to sleep.

Mr Dittany was much too excited to work, but, when he heard the confirmation of the news from Maplin's lips, set out himself for the City. In some mysterious way the news had leaked out. His cab was stopped by the traffic at the end of Threadneedle Street, and a glow of satisfaction suffused him as, leaning out of the window, he heard the hubbub on the pavement, and saw the headlines on the papers—"GREAT BOOM IN WEST AFRICANS." He heard excited men yelling out the name of ADARAHS as he alighted at his broker's office. He saw a patient constable trying in vain to disperse the clamorous groups of hatless brokers and jobbers who, evicted from the House by the inexorable closing time, pursued their chaffering in the crowded roadway. He smiled a little contemptuously at the stirring scene. These men seemed to him nothing but the puppets whose strings he was pulling. He had no feeling of thankfulness to a Providence which had found him such a dramatic way of escape. Already the nightmare of the previous days and nights of agony was forgotten. He began to take credit to himself for his foresight and business acumen.

Fream was in the office when he got there, and Wedderburn came in a minute or two later. Overwhelmed with business though they were, they found time to grasp the great man cordially by the hand. He took their tacit admiration very calmly. He could see he had become a very great personage indeed in their eyes, and although outwardly the perfection of sang-froid and modesty, inwardly he was bursting with the consciousness of his power.

"Rattling good stroke, Mr Dittany," said Fream. "Any more news?"

"Nothing definite. What price did you buy my parcel?"

"Eighteen and six."

"And they are now . . . ?"

"Two, seven, six, was the last quotation."

"You're holding on ?" asked Wedderburn anxiously.

"That's what I've come about. They can't stand long at that, but they ought to go a bit higher yet. Many orders?"

"Full up."

"Good; buy another ten thousand when the House opens, and when you've done it let the Market know it was on my account. I'll be down at half-past ten to watch the tape."

"What limit?"

"Fifty bob, if you can't get them for less."

"More orders," said Fream, opening a wire. "Buy two thousand. Same old story." To-morrow was evidently going to mark an epoch in "Jungles." "Great man that," commented Mr Wedderburn when he had gone.

"He'll get there. Who is he? Never heard of him till old Maplin brought him along."

Mr Dittany sang aloud on his way home in the cab; so loudly, in fact, that the driver pulled up on the Embankment to ask if he had called him.

CHAPTER LI.

NAN received her father's news with a kind of haughty aloofness which jarred on him. "I wish you wouldn't be so jumpy," she said. "You get on my nerves. There's no happy medium about you nowadays. You're either seeing snakes on your bed, or you have bought the city of London. How much have you cleared over it?"

"I don't know yet; fifteen to twenty thousand perhaps. It means a good deal, you know. I can push on with the house at Kingswood."

"I know the style; the kind you get out of a box of bricks, labelled Rococo, with pine-trees a foot high at regular intervals, and bright red gables blushing at their own audacity. Why don't you buy Lord Kilton's place? It's in the market, and the poor man's so hard up he'll let it go for a song."

"I know. Bad drains mitigated by draughts."

"Well, of course, if you like to pose as an American pork-butcher. It's your money, and I haven't got to live there."

"I don't know what's coming to you, Nan. I *did* think this would please you."

"Oh, I'm pleased."

"What's the matter with you? Are you satisfied, or bitter?"

Nan laughed, but made no reply. She looked very proud and very beautiful as she stood before him drawing on her gloves. She was ready dressed for some ball or dinner—her father had long since ceased to ask her where she was going.

"Is Roger calling for you?" Mr Dittany asked. With a vague fear he remembered he had not been in the office to see him when he came in response to his wire.

"Roger?" she repeated in some surprise. "Didn't you know? He's wired off. I thought it was on your business; it came from Liverpool."

He felt a sinking at the heart, but he kept his countenance.

"I'm not sorry," Nan went on. "I'm going with the Bridgepoint people, and they hate him. Do you know what's called him away?"

Some malicious spirit must have whispered in her father's ear. Something in her cool sneering manner angered him beyond control, and he put out all his powers to hurt her.

"Your dear friend Wishart has got us into a mess," he replied venomously. "He's gone down to straighten things out. The boy seems to be rather a picturesque rascal. It seems the samples he sent over are spurious."

Nan turned to the mirror and busied herself with her hair.

"Roger told me something about it," she said slowly. "And is it true?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I should think you've lost your faith in him."

"In all men," she replied without turning round. "It seems to me that if they're not blackguards on one side of their character, they are on another."

"And you include your father?"

"I didn't except him."

She faced him suddenly with glowing eyes.

"You've been found out, dad," she said, "but I know now you're no worse than those who haven't been. I often wonder," she continued, "whether the things the Law gets hold of are half as bad as the things a man doesn't even know about himself."

"And the women?"

Nan laughed lightly.

"The women are chartered malefactors," she said; "they have a rotten time if they're not."

CHAPTER LII.

If Neil Wishart's breast was not exactly filled with hope when he left the hospitable shelter of Mac's abode, he was at least fired with a very settled resolution to quench the bitter disappointment of his life in strenuous and conscientious work. Before setting him on his road his host had offered to show him over the Grand Baru Estate, and he jumped at the chance of learning something of the methods which had earned for it the reputation of being the best managed mine in that part of the country. The storm of the night before had cleared away much of the oppressive heat which had caused him such distress since he had landed; the air seemed no longer like the moist atmosphere of an orchid-house. The vivid green of the jungle, the brilliant exotic plumage of the birds which flitted from tree to tree, the wonderful vistas that opened up to his astonished gaze as they ambled along on their patient mules, all combined to banish for a while the depression which had settled on his spirit.

He learned much during that memorable day. He saw how streams had been diverted, how swamps and stagnant pools had been drained, how roads had been cut through the virgin forest. He observed the inverted cans of kerosene which dripped their contents continually over the breeding pools of mosquitoes; he peeped into the native compounds, and wondered at their cleanliness and sanitation. He watched the niggers at work with pick and cartridge at the face of the quartz quarry, and marvelled at their content; and at

the happiness expressed by their flashing teeth and broad grins of recognition.

The sight filled him with encouragement. If the taciturn man at his side had been able to effect this transformation in eighteen short months, he could do it too.

But there is a difference in seeing a thing done and in seeing it yet to do, and his heart sank when he reached his destination. Mac had insisted on lending him two of his native carpenters, both Kroo "boys," who could talk English. He pooh-poohed Wishart's attempt at thanks.

"Dinna fash yoursel', mon," he said. "I'm no' wanting them for a week or two, and ye can charge their wages up to your Company."

Once off the Baru Estate there were no roads. Neil's luggage and stores were brought up in the rear on the heads of a file of black porters, and the little expedition trekked silently and laboriously through the tangled undergrowth of the interminable woods.

It is a great test of a man to set him down for the first time in his life alone with God's creation. Neil had fellow-creatures with him, men who could speak his language after a fashion, men who, Mac had assured him, were staunch and competent. Yet he knew by instinct they were only children; that they looked up to him for the white man's infallible courage. He realised in the first hour that it rested with him whether he earned their respect or their contempt; and he played his part.

It was not an easy part. He slept in a native hut that first night, with his revolver under his pillow and his rifle within reach of his outstretched hand. Strange sounds came from the jungle outside, all the more terrifying because he was ignorant of their origin: piercing shrieks from colonies of monkeys disturbed by some stealthy beast of prey, the raucous laugh, almost human, of the prowling hyenas, and the distant hollow booming of lions. But with the daylight he set himself to the task before him, choosing some rising ground for the

site of his bungalow, and marshalling his men for their duties.

It was then that he wrote his first letters to Mr Dittany, riding in once a-week to the Grand Baru station to catch the mail which his friend Mac was sending to the coast. And so a month went by.

It was when he was returning from one of these visits that the strange event happened which was to alter the whole course of his resolve. For the first time since he had taken up his post John MacAlister—his friend "Mac"—had been absent from his bungalow when he called. He had wondered at his absence, and felt more depressed at it than he would have thought possible. Unconsciously these weekly excursions into something approaching civilisation had become the one thing to look forward to in his hopeless task. The old country had forgotten his very existence seemingly. He had long given up all hope of hearing from Nan, but even his employers had apparently sunk into oblivion. Not only had Mr Dittany not cabled in response to his early suggestion, but for two weeks he had not even written.

And now Mac was away. Wishart had detected an air of subdued excitement at the station, a whispering between the native clerks, and a twinkle in the eye of the white accountant. He had chatted for a while, and left with a sense of acute loneliness. The sun was low in the sky before he came away, but he knew the path thoroughly by this time, and the night had ceased to have any terrors for him.

He was picking his way cautiously round the foot of a bluff of rock with the great red sun glaring angrily in his eyes, when he heard a sound which made him rein in his mount and stand in his stirrups like one petrified. On the top of a low cliff was a deserted native village. He had often noticed it, and his men had told him in whispers there was a "bad man" there—a ghost as he understood it. As he strained his eyes in the direction from which the sound had come he could see no sign of human life; yet he could have sworn that the cry was a

shriek of pain. And while he listened he heard it again—and it was his own name!

“Wishart!”

“Hullo!” he shouted; but there was no response. Hastily tethering his mule, he scrambled through thorns and thickets to the summit of the little cliff, and stood hesitating among the derelict huts. A low moan enabled him to locate the place, and he made his way quickly to it. It was pitch dark inside, and the sun, which had been shining in his eyes, prevented him from seeing anything for a minute; but presently he made out the shape of a human form lying on a mattress in the corner, and before he could step to the side of the rough bed the roof rang again with the echo of his name.

“Wishart!”

“All right, old chap, I’m here,” he replied. “Who is it? I can’t see you.”

His thoughts flew to the men he had left behind him at Accra. One of them must have found his way up country and had seen him passing. The atmosphere of the hut was horribly foetid, and, heated as he was with his ride, the closeness seemed intolerable. He dragged aside a ragged piece of canvas sacking which had been hung over the narrow entrance, and in doing so let in a shaft of light. The man on the bed sat up suddenly. He was a ghastly sight. His hair was matted and unshorn, and with a straggling growth of beard, accentuated the feverish hollowness of the wasted cheek. Wishart gazed at him as if he had seen a ghost.

“Good God!” he cried. “Why, Blair!”

The sick man stretched out his emaciated arms.

“You’ve come at last,” he said huskily.

“My poor old chap, you’re bad. I don’t understand. What are you doing here all alone? Why were you expecting me?”

The man tried to speak, and pointed to his throat.

“I understand. Water. Wait a bit; I’ll see what I can do.”

He knew that a native village would be near a stream of some sort, and, taking up a broken calabash from the

floor, he hurried out. He found a spring at the foot of the cliff. Blair held out both hands for it, drinking it to the last drain. He sank back exhausted.

Wishart sat down perplexed at his side. "Does it hurt you to talk?" he asked. "But no, never mind. I'll go and get help for you. Will you wait a few hours?"

Blair caught him by the sleeve. "Stop," he said; "I can't last. I'm done in. I heard you were in Accra—too late. I was taken sick—coming up—told me you'd gone—to Baru. I tried to get there. Got as far as this. Heard you passing. Oh, my God!"

He fell back again, tossing his burning head from one side to the other.

"Let me get you some more water," said Wishart. He made another errand with the calabash, and, rinsing his handkerchief in the tepid water, laved the man's brow with it.

"That's Heaven," whispered Blair. "Don't go. It's been on my mind all these years like some filthy disease."

"What has?"

"The money. It was bad enough to sneak it—but to let you in."

"You mean . . .?"

"I mean I took it. Oh, don't look at me like that, Wishart. I've suffered for it—and now I've died for it. A chap can't do more."

Neil was pacing the narrow floor like a caged beast. The sun had dipped below the horizon and the darkness was settling down with the suddenness of the tropical night, but there was just light enough for the dying man to see him. His hands twitched convulsively as he watched him moving about in the shadows of the hut. Wishart stopped suddenly.

"We can't help it now. You've done your best. Buck yourself up. You've got to live now to undo what you've done."

"I can't. I'm done. A pencil?"

Wishart gave it to him.

"There are candles in my wallet. Light one. Paper?"

Wishart obeyed silently. His face was very grave as he stood trimming the flickering wick. When he had placed the light at the side of the bed he tore a leaf from his note-book. Blair tried to write.

"I can't see," he gasped. "Write what I tell you."

Neil took the pencil and paper. There were long pauses in the recital, which made the dictation easy. "This is the statement of a dying man made in the fear of God and for the easing of his conscience," were the words he wrote. "I, Reginald Blair, took the money from Andrew's room, and allowed Neil Wishart to be falsely accused of it."

"That's all. Hold me up, old man. There!"

"I shan't use it to shame you, Reggie,—only to those who matter."

At the sound of his name the other looked up and smiled.

"I've been an awful rotter, old man."

Neil sat quietly holding the hand that had stolen into his until it went cold and limp. Then he covered the face with the coarse sacking which had served as a coverlet. There were the sounds of steps and voices outside the hut, and he turned to face them.

"Come on," he heard some one say; "there's a light in here."

Percy Stapleton stood in the doorway.

"What on earth . . . ?" he began.

Wishart silenced him, pointing to the mattress. Stapleton advanced into the hut and looked at the dead man's face. He recoiled in alarm.

"You silly ass!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know better than to nurse a case of raging typhus. Get out of here. Scamper back and get a carbolic bath if you want to live twenty-four hours."

"I suppose there's nothing else to be done."

"I should think not. I knew the man. One of the worst characters in Accra, and that's saying something."

They had got outside beneath the stars.

"Stop it!" said Wishart fiercely.

"Why?"

"Because he was a pal of mine."

"Sorry. But pal or no pal, you shouldn't be such a fool. I've been hunting for you everywhere. We thought you had come to grief, and we shouldn't have found you if we hadn't heard your mule squealing. It's a wonder you didn't have to walk back. It was a hundred to one on the hyenas getting him. You've heard the news?"

"What news?"

"About the find on the Grand Baru. This is Hutchinson. You've met him in Accra."

The three clambered back to the track at the foot of the hill, where a group of blacks were waiting with their mounts.

"I've heard nothing," replied Wishart.

"We've struck it rich; that's all."

"Oh?"

"You take it pretty quietly," said Stapleton, gripping his arm. "Don't you understand, man, that if it's true, we're the richest property on the coast?"

Neil climbed wearily into his saddle.

"I'm glad, of course," he said; "but it doesn't concern me much. I'm going home."

"Why?"

"Reasons of my own. What about that poor devil in the hut?"

Stapleton clicked his tongue impatiently. "Send some niggers out in the morning to bury him—if there's anything left. You're an idiot to go now. Your fortune's made if you stop."

They rode in silence for awhile.

"There's something about you, Wishart, I don't understand," Stapleton said.

"There's a good deal I don't understand myself," was the answer Neil made.

Wishart sent his wire asking to be relieved from his post; and got his reply, telling him to wait for his substitute. The message when it came was a bitter disap-

pointment to him. He would not trust the confession that meant so much to him to the post, and he would not break the force of his exoneration by writing to Nan before he returned. He sent another wire, and received another reply, which was more satisfactory to him. The second cable came from his father—"Need not have explained," it said; "knew it false long ago; come home immediately."

The days passed like weeks, chequered only by the arrival of the mail from home. There were two letters in it—a long one from old Mr Wishart, and a shorter one from Dittany. The stern old man, whose momentary wrath had been sufficient to send his son for all those years into exile, unbent in a way that Neil had never known. He told the story of his search, his self-accusations, and his mental torture. "I had your second cable," he wrote. "Do your duty, my boy, but come home to me as soon as you can honourably do so. You have only your father in the world, and he is getting old and lonely."

Neil found the date of the arrival of the steamer which was to release him from his imprisonment. He had intended going to Baru Junction to meet the man who was being sent out, but when the time drew near he could no longer contain his impatience, and set off for the long journey to Accra.

He watched the passengers disembark with a growing sickness at his heart. There was no one there answering to the description of the man he so eagerly sought.

For while he waited, Tregarth, who had anticipated his move, had cunningly landed at Cape Coast Castle, and was already wending his way through the hill country at the back of the Concession.

Wishart would have sailed by the next boat, but the honour which held him in thrall made him resist the temptation, and with the hope deferred which maketh the heart sick, he returned to the country which had become one long inferno to him.

Roger Tregarth arrived at the Concession some twenty-four hours before the man whose life he

sought. He knew the ways of the country, making himself comfortable, cursing the native servants, and ordering them about as one in authority.

"Massa Wishart gone down Accra," they told him.
"Be up plenty soon."

"Which way does he come?"

They told him he came from Massa Mac's station, and he inquired about the road.

They offered to escort him, but he told them with the appropriate curses that he could find his way.

He slept in Wishart's room that night, and when he had retired he took from the small valise he was carrying a heavy army revolver, which he examined to see if it was properly loaded. It was a weapon that any one might carry in that region, but he smoothed the barrel with a curious expression on his face.

He would not run the risk of being too late for the man he was going to meet, but started off before the sun was scarcely up. Well before noon he had reached the bluff where Blair had died.

"This ought to do," he said. "He's bound to come past here."

CHAPTER LIII.

NEIL WISHART did not return to the station that day. He accepted an invitation from MacAlister to put up with him for the night, and hear all the great news. He was glad to get away the next morning. Gold, gold, gold; nothing but gold could be discussed, until the word nauseated him. He left at sunrise, taking with him two of his own men who had been waiting at the Junction to take up the newcomer's traps. His heart had completely gone out of his work; he cursed the fate which was sending his men back empty-handed.

He ambled quietly along with his head on his chest, trying to make up his mind what course he would take if there was no reply to the urgent wire he had sent from Accra. As he neared the deserted native kraal his thoughts flew to poor Blair and his fate. He had sent men back to bury his old friend. His conscience was already smiting him that he had suffered the rough interment to take place without being there to see the end; he had not been long enough in a country where death is so common, and where men are smuggled into graves as soon as the breath is out of their bodies. He had just made up his mind to climb the little hillock and to see that the last duties had been carried out in a fitting way, when one of his Kroo "boys" came running back, pointing with outstretched finger to the string of huts on the summit.

"Massa!" he cried excitedly. "White boss up dar."

"Where?" asked Wishart, reining up.

He followed the direction of the man's finger. Sitting

on a boulder outside one of the huts, in the full glare of the sun, he could make out the figure of a man gesticulating wildly, and brandishing something in his hand. He was not superstitious, but his heart thumped a little wildly at the notion that Reggie Blair had come to life again, and was still raving in the delirium of fever.

He jumped from his saddle and, handing the reins to the nigger, clambered hastily to the top. When he had breasted the ridge he came to a sudden halt, for he found himself face to face with Tregarth, and saw he was covered by a revolver.

"Why, Tregarth!" he cried; "what's the game? What are you doing here? Put that thing up, you fool. I'm Wishart; don't you know me?"

Roger shouted with maniacal laughter. "I've got you at last," he shrieked with a string of obscene oaths. Wishart saw the danger, and just had presence of mind enough to skip aside as the madman discharged his weapon. The shot went wide, and before he could pull the trigger again Neil had closed with him. Over and over they rolled together in the loose rubble. Physically there was no comparison between the two men, but the frenzy of insanity gave Tregarth a fictitious strength which all the athletic training of the other could hardly subdue.

Yet it was soon over. With a superhuman effort Wishart succeeded in wresting the revolver from the madman's grasp, and Tregarth succumbed suddenly, as if he had fainted. The Kroo "boys" had climbed the hill at the sound of the firing, but had hung timidly back while there was a chance of their master being overpowered. Seeing Wishart rise safely to his feet and the stranger lying apparently dead on the ground, they came forward bravely. Tregarth's lips were a curious purple colour and flecked with froth. His eyes were closed, and the veins of his neck hideously swollen.

"Take him in out of the sun," Wishart commanded. "He's had a stroke. No, not in there," he added, as they made for the hut in which Blair had died. "Water, one of you. You'll find a spring down there."

They carried him in like a log, and Neil drenched his head and shoulders. Presently he gave a huge sigh and opened his eyes.

"Feel better, old chap?" Wishart asked. He bore no grudge for what he put down to a touch of the sun.

Tregarth made no reply. He lay very still, but there was a cunning vindictive look in the eyes which followed the other about the hut.

Wishart was in a quandary. His medical knowledge was very small, especially for a region where it is the one thing needed. He thought suddenly of Stapleton, and scribbled a note. "Dear Stapleton," he wrote, "Tregarth has turned up here raving mad; tried to shoot me. Come out at once. You'll find a medicine chest somewhere in the bedroom. It's never been opened yet. Bring it along with you. Perhaps you could get Dr Wilson to come out from the Mission."

Percy Stapleton came with a very grave face. He seemed to have something in his mind which he was reluctant to impart to Wishart. Two Ashanti carriers followed with the chest of drugs, their brown skins shining like satin in the rays of the noonday sun. Neil chafed under the obvious want of sympathy in Stapleton's manner.

"What's this all about, Tregarth?" he asked sternly. "Are you sick or shamming?"

The man made no answer, but glared spitefully at his questioner.

"Go easy, old chap," Wishart said, "he's bad enough. You ought to have seen him three hours ago."

"Don't be so damned innocent, Wishart," said Stapleton irritably.

"What on earth . . . ?"

"Come outside here," he whispered. "Got that revolver? Don't let him get it again."

"He may be bad," Stapleton continued when they were out of hearing. "I don't know his symptoms. If you ask me what I think, I believe he came out here to murder you."

"Murder me?" There was blank incredulity in the tone.

"Don't ask me why. Perhaps you know. A woman in the case very likely. Is that it?"

"That is so," replied Wishart. His face had become very stern and set.

"Read this letter," went on Stapleton. "It went astray, or I would have had it in time to warn you."

A rising anger kindled in Neil's face as he perused the letter, but he handed it back in dead silence. Stapleton took his arm.

"Put a couple of the boys to watch him, and let's get in the shade. I don't fancy those huts; they're saturated with plague or the niggers wouldn't have cleared out."

They had "tiffin" together under a group of palms down by the spring of water, and talked till the sun began to lose its heat.

"We've got to make up our minds to do something," said Wishart at last. "We'd better see if we can get anything out of him."

Whatever doubts they had about shamming were dispelled when they entered the hut. Tregarth was rolling about unconsciously in a high fever.

"Where's that chest?" said Stapleton. "It's a temptation to let him go, but I suppose we must do our best." He inspected the row of stoppered bottles. "Here we are," he said, unscrewing one. "Quinine. We'll give him a strong dose. He's been out here before, and he's used to it."

Wishart held the sick man's head while his companion forced open his lips and poured the contents of the calabash slowly down his throat.

"Let's come away," Stapleton said. "We can do no more now. I'm too fond of myself to sleep out here, and the boys won't stop in a haunted place for all the gold in Africa."

They had mounted into their saddles, and were just gathering the reins in their hands when they heard it. It came on the sunset air like the scream of a fiend in torment, and stopped as suddenly as it began. They

clambered hurriedly off and rushed back. Tregarth was dead.

"What's wrong!" asked Wishart in a hushed voice.
"My God! look at the chap."

It was a terrible sight. The dead man's spine was curved like a bent bow, and his limbs were drawn up into horrible shapes. Stapleton looked at him for a moment. Then he went slowly to the medicine chest. He took a crystal from the bottle he had used and put it on his tongue.

"Strychnine!" he said, as he spat it out.

The two men searched each other's eyes.

"Where did you get that chest?" Stapleton asked.

"It was in Dittany's office for a week before I took it away."

"I thought as much," replied the other.

And when they had buried the man in a shallow grave, they rode silently away.

CHAPTER LIV.

MR EDWARD MITCHELL came in from his bit of garden and knocked the clay off his boots in surly silence. His wife threw anxious glances over at him from time to time as she busied herself with her household duties. Their castle in the clouds had been ultimately pitched at Enfield, and, as castles in the clouds will do, had developed drawbacks.

"Finished, father?" asked Mrs Mitchell.

"Finished? No. How can I finish with the days short like this. It's coming on to snow, too." Then, with sudden violence, he ejaculated, "Ugh! Rotten hole."

Mr Mitchell had taken on a most unaccountable habit of grumbling since they had moved from Hackney. It was so unlike his usual cheerfulness that his wife was at a loss to know how to get into the new groove. Her attempts at comfort only seemed to exasperate him, and she had taken refuge in a kind of aggressively cheerful acquiescence in the trivial causes of his complaints.

"I won't deny that Hackney was a deal better in a many ways," she admitted. "You didn't notice the snow there, in a manner of speaking. But there!"

In one way, however, she was not at fault. She fed her man on the best her limited means would allow, and she was rewarded by always finding him more amenable to reason when he had put on his pipe.

On this particular Saturday evening Mitchell was more morose than usual.

"Been worried, dear?" she asked, after many ineffectual attempts to carry on a conversation.

"Worrited? No! I only wish there was something to worrit about."

"You didn't always talk like that, father."

"No, because I didn't know when I was well off."

"At all events, you ain't got the Saturday wages to find every week. You ain't got that, my dear."

"I only wish I had. It was a master's job after all, and not a blessed navvy's."

"And you hadn't got a seat on the Board."

"Look here, old 'un," he said impressively, "just stow that sort of talk. If it was any one but you, I should say you was pulling my leg. Don't you never mention that there Board to me again."

"What's happened?"

"Nothing's happened, and nothing isn't likely to happen this side of the grave. Only that I shall sink and sink and go on sinking till I'm a common workman earning his two quid a-week like any Dick or Harry of 'em."

"But you got the shares, Ted?"

Mr Mitchell laughed bitterly.

"Yes, I got the shares all right," he said sarcastically. "And what are they worth? Half shares, says Dittany to me when he talked to me so plausible like. 'You have a thousand shares out of two thousand,' he says, 'which, worked out on paper, is a half.' And before you can say Jack Robinson he comes along with this here amalgamation."

"But you still got your thousand shares?"

"Yes, I still got 'em all right; but a thousand shares out of fifty thousand is a fiftieth, and there's a pile of what they call preference shares to come in first and suck up all the profits. And what's the good of my being on the Board? Who listens to me, I should like to know? When Dittany ain't there—and he never is nowadays—Jimson bosses me. Only to-day he cursed me up and down as if I was one of the men in his yard."

Wors'n that; his men wouldn't stand it. I tell you it's enough to make my old dad turn in his grave to see what's come to the business he loved so."

Mrs Mitchell was cudgelling her brains to think of the correct antidote to so much pessimism, whey they heard the little garden gate creak on its hinges.

"Who can that be?" said Mitchell, getting up from his chair and pulling the blind aside. "It's too early for the post. Lordy! It ain't half snowing. Some one's in a hurry. Run and see who it is, my dear."

His exhortation was in response to a thunderous knocking on the door.

Mrs Mitchell flung it open, letting in an icy blast filled with whirling flakes. "Does Mitchell live here?" said a deep voice.

"Yes, sir," replied the wondering woman. Then, as she recognised him, "Law, if it ain't Mr Dittany. Do come in, sir."

Dittany strode quickly into the room, impatiently shaking the snow from his beard and shoulders. He shook hands very ardently with Mitchell and seemed to be looking about for a chair. His height filled the little room, and the heavy ulster he was wearing gave him the appearance of a giant.

"Won't you take off your coat, sir?" asked Mrs Mitchell nervously. "You won't feel the benefit of it when you goes out."

"I will not take off my coat, madam," he said aggressively. "And allow me to tell you, once and for all, I will not be ordered about by you or by any one else."

The unexpected violence of the sudden attack came like a bombshell. Mrs Mitchell shrunk timidly back, and her husband bristled with a quiet dignity.

"Those ain't the words to use in my house, Mr Dittany, sir," he said. "No one's ordering you about."

"I'm a man," continued Mr Dittany, fixing his manager with his eye for the first time, "who, when he

says a thing, means it. I brook no interference with my wishes."

"That, sir, I very firmly believe."

"Then, if the cap fits, wear it. You think because you see me yield a point that I am weak."

"I've never thought so. What's it all about, Mr Dittany? What have you come to say? Have you got a grievance against me, or what?"

Mr Dittany sat down suddenly on a chair, and toyed with his broad-brimmed hat, frowning heavily.

"I have come," he said at length, "because I know what you are thinking. I read men like open books, Mitchell."

"Go on, sir," said Mitchell sourly.

"Everybody thwarts me, Mitchell. You thwart me, Maplin thwarts me, and so does Wishart and my own daughter. Tregarth—by the way, they say Tregarth is dead."

"I'm sorry."

"It's a lie, Mitchell; a damnable lie. He's too cunning to die."

"Will you come to the point, sir? In what way have I thwarted you as you call it?"

Mr Dittany's eyes had taken to wandering again. They left the face of the man he had been frowning at to gaze on the walls and ceiling. When he had finished his aimless inspection he looked over his shoulder with a shudder.

"It's a rotten thing, Mitchell, to have snakes on your bed; greasy, slimy, loathsome snakes."

Mitchell grimaced expressively to his wife. He shook Mr Dittany by the arm.

"You ain't well, sir—that's what it is. You've been overworked."

At that moment there was a low, nervous rat-tat-tat at the door. Mrs Mitchell flew to open it.

"Is he here?" cried a feminine voice. "Is Mr Dittany here? Oh, thank God for that! I'm Miss Tregarth. Let me come in. He's mad. He's not safe."

Hilda Tregarth forced her way past the woman standing in the narrow hall.

"Edward!" She almost sobbed the words. "Come, dear. We shall miss the train."

And the man whose lightest word had made and unmade his fellow-men, succumbed like an infant, and was led away into the silent carpet of snow.

CHAPTER LV.

NEIL WISHART had two tedious days to wait for the boat. Stapleton came back to Accra with him, and opened the secretary's eyes to many things he had not known, so that Neil spent the intervening time before the vessel sailed in concocting letters to Mr Dittany, which he tore up as soon as he had written them.

In the end he wrote simply, "Dear Mr Dittany, I am returning by the same boat that brings this mail, and hope to be in England by the 18th. There are one or two questions I want you to answer. First, why did you want to get me out of the way by sending me to South Africa? Secondly, why did you go to so much trouble to engineer the interview with Effington? Thirdly, where was the medicine chest I took out with me for the few days before I sailed? In this connection it will interest you to know that the only man to be treated from it was Tregarth, and that he died within five minutes after drinking down a powder labelled quinine. I reserve my comments till I see you. I propose calling on you at your flat on the Saturday evening, between eight and nine. Neil Wishart."

There is nothing a brave man feels a greater contempt for than an attack on his life for unworthy motives. During the ten days or so he was on board he had to remind himself perpetually that Dittany was the father of Nan; that, for her sake, whatever he had to say must be in private, without the possibility of a scandal. But he was utterly firm in his resolution that the exposure should be made before the girl. He exaggerated in his

new found suspicion. There was no sort of doubt in his own mind that Dittany had tampered with the drugs with his own fingers. If a man could stoop to the manipulation of a vicious plot like the Effington business, he was capable of anything.

What puzzled him altogether was the motive. Dittany was quite a strong enough man to forbid an affair openly, without having recourse to medieval plottings and poisonings. The thing was quite incomprehensible to him. He knew that he would have a task in bringing the man to book. He could imagine the lies, the twistings and turnings, the brilliant reasoning and the infallible logic. He had always hitherto listened to the sirens, and had always come off worst. But this time his cause was just and certain, he was armed with righteous wrath; no prevarication, no ingenious excuses would turn him one hair's-breadth from the course he had mapped out. He would ask his categorical questions, and pin the man down to a simple answer.

Neil Wishart was not at his best in analysing motives, even his own. But who shall blame him for thinking that his own motives were high and unsullied? In most cases of moral reprobation we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. The feeling of overweening virtue in our breasts should always warn us that all is not quite so unselfish and disinterested as we fondly flatter ourselves. Neil would perhaps have been surprised if he had been told that all this moral indignation, all this swelling of the breast, came from the desire to right himself with Nan; that not the engineering of the Effington exposure, not the sending him to West Africa, not even the tampering of the quinine, had half so much to do with it as the bitter recollection of his humiliation before the woman he loved. When he told himself he would not publicly expose Dittany for his daughter's sake, it was chiefly because public exposure seemed a small thing beside the delight of standing on the floor of the flat and proving that, after all, he was a man, and not a cringing criminal.

Wishart had heard nothing of Nan since he had sailed.

Not one little word of any sort had managed to trickle through to the swamp where he lived and brooded. Nothing of Nan's engagement to Tregarth, nothing of their removal to the Hyde Park flat. Stapleton had told him a good deal, but he had omitted to tell him that, acting on instructions, he had intercepted and destroyed the few letters which had come from home. Something of shame, and an awakened conscience, had come to the young engineer. He could not bring himself to admit the whole part he had played in the despicable plot. Not that there had been many letters. A few stray communications sent on from his apartments; a line or two from the chaps in the office, and a long screed from old Peter Maplin, who had taken a most unaccountable fancy to him. That was all, but they never reached him. In the mental pictures he drew, he imagined the quiet life going on in the old rounds at Palmyra Mansions. He could see Nan brooding as he was brooding, with Mr Dittany—that profound humbug—going out and coming in with the most admirable respectability. In his wildest thoughts he would never have believed that a new society queen had arisen in London, and that her name was Nan Dittany.

He would not have believed it, because he was not complex enough. His blacks were very black, and his whites very white. There were no half-shades in his temperament. He knew when he was happy and when he was miserable. The fact that Nan could hold her own so brilliantly and with so much gaiety of spirit would have been utterly incomprehensible to him, and it was perhaps well for his peace of mind that he remained ignorant.

His father met him on landing at Liverpool. He recognised the tall, spare figure standing among the group on the dockhead, eagerly scanning the row of tanned faces on the rail. He waved vigorously to him, but every one was waving, and his signal passed unnoticed. For the first time since he remembered tears came into his eyes. He had not known his affection for the old man was so strong, nor, till he saw the lines of

that stern, sad face light up into a smile, had he any conception of what he himself signified.

The two grasped hands almost in silence. The fine, sensitive face of the older man quivered with the suspicion of emotion, but their talk was of the things which do not matter.

"You've grown quite into a man, Neil," was the nearest approach to the personal note; and a little later, as they waited at the customs barrier, "You oughtn't to have left me without a word."

"How could I do anything else, guv'nor?" was the reply. He felt his arm pressed affectionately. That was all. For the rest, they spoke as Britons will speak under almost any circumstances, of the weather and the political situation. On the journey up they discussed West Africa, and the prospects of that much-maligned country, for old Mr Wishart was a man of many interests and much and varied information; but never a word did they utter of the reasons which had driven Neil there. His father's valet was waiting at the dock station with heavy rugs and a greatcoat. Nothing which thoughtfulness could suggest had been left undone; nothing had been neglected which a father's love could plan.

Neil thanked him. "Nonsense, my boy," was the reply. "I know what you youngsters are. You can't step out of the equator into an English February without some precautions."

The carriage was waiting at Euston, and on the box sat the old coachman who had taught Neil to ride his first pony. Perhaps it was not the correct thing to do, but Neil stood by the flanks of the near side horse and, reaching up, shook hands cordially with the old servant. The old fellow nearly blubbered his greeting, and drove out of the yard with dim eyes.

"You haven't taken to a car yet, guv'nor?" Neil said as they took their seats inside.

"Not yet," Mr Wishart replied. "Joe's too old to learn chauffeuring, and it would break his heart to be turned down. Did you notice the harness? He's done

nothing but polish brass since I told him you were coming back."

At night, when they had dined together in the old unchanged room in the Belgrave Square mansion, Neil told his father much of his wandering life. Not all; he said nothing of the treachery of Dittany, or the hatred of Tregarth. But he told him in his nervous boyish slang of his love for Nan, and of the misunderstanding which had arisen from Professor Effington's revelation.

"I would like to see her," his father said. "Put your business affairs in order, my boy. You'll have to leave the City, of course. I'm getting old, and I want your help very badly; but don't leave your employer in the lurch. Straighten things out with him, and then bring her to see me."

"I've made an appointment to-morrow night," Neil said; and he could not quite conceal the grim snap of his lips when he said it.

CHAPTER LVI.

IT would not be true to say that Nan Dittany had failed to notice any alteration in her father's demeanour during the last few days. Occupied though she was in her own affairs to the exclusion of everything else, it was too eccentric to pass altogether unobserved. But she felt no alarm. His mutterings and his unaccountable outbursts of laughter annoyed her. They "got on her nerves," she was "bored to tears"; they and she were half a dozen things similarly expressed in the stupid cant of a Set which can tolerate anything in the world but tedium or sickness. The strangeness of his manner affected her like the antics of a drunkard. She felt that she wanted to shake him into sensibility.

She tried to believe she was having a "good time," that she had found her true *métier*, and was enjoying her life to the very brim. Tregarth's strange absence made her wonder, it is true; but the only acute sensation she felt consciously was the dread of his sudden return.

Perhaps if she had seen more of Mr Dittany, her abnormal callousness would have been shaken to its foundations; very likely the reflowing of the tide of sympathy whose ebb had left the sands of selfishness so desolately bare, would have roused her to a sense of the danger of her position; but the two were meeting only on the rarest occasions. Nearly always he was away before she was up in the morning, and by the time he reached home she had left for one of her incessant social functions.

It was left to the servants to notice there was anything amiss. Evans, the butler, ventured to approach her one morning as she sat indolently over her late breakfast-table. He coughed nervously.

"I beg your pardon, miss, but is your father intending to travel?"

She looked up quickly. "I've heard nothing. Why?"

"Because, miss, he asked me to—ahem—to make inquiries about getting to West Africa."

Nan put down her half-lifted cup and stared at the man.

"West Africa?" she repeated. "What on earth do you mean?"

"It wasn't altogether that, miss. It was a train he asked me to look up."

"Well, what about it?"

"Only that one doesn't go to West Africa by train, miss. I thought, if you will be good enough to excuse my saying so, that he seemed just a little strange in his manner. You'll excuse the liberty."

Nan thought for a minute. "I'll see him myself when he comes in. He's been overworked lately; perhaps he can be persuaded to go away for a holiday. It's not necessary to mention the matter to any one else."

"Thank you, miss. Certainly. Of course not. I thought it was right to mention it." And Evans went away with the air of a man who has had a load taken off his mind.

It was an opportune day. Her father came home early on Saturdays, and she would have an hour to spare between the time she returned from the matinee and the reception at the American Ambassador's. But when the time came she waited in vain. The hands of the massive clock were on the stroke of eight, and she stood, fully dressed, impatiently waiting for the sound of his voice. When the sonorous chimes had finished their plangent vibrations, she pressed the bell.

"Has Mr Dittany returned?" she asked.

"No, miss."

"I can't wait any longer. Have the carriage round in a quarter of an hour."

"It's snowing very heavy, miss."

"Then I'll take the car."

"Very good, miss. I suppose . . ."

"Well?"

"You wouldn't like one of us to run round to the office to see if he's all right?"

"Certainly not. He would think we were mad."

The function at Dorchester House was one of the events of the season. Every one was there. There was a cachet in the invitation which made every social aspirant struggle up the noble staircases, and pant and perspire in joyous discomfort. There were diamonds which would have put Aladdin's cave to shame, and dresses and old lace worth a king's ransom.

It was the pinnacle of Nan's success, and she entered into her heritage with a beauty and a self-possession more than regal. As usual, the men who knew her surged round her, and those less fortunate hunted frantically for mutual friends who could admit them into the magic circle of her charm and wit. Even the great man who stood at the head of the staircase, shaking hands with all who were presented, went out of his way to add something to the greeting which convention prescribed.

"You will make me the most unpopular man in America when I lay down my office, Miss Dittany," he said. "My countrymen are obsessed with the belief that their women are the most charming in the world; and now I shall have to contradict them."

Nan laughed in that inimitable way of hers.

"Then you must comfort them," she said bewitchingly, "by assuring them that no one can say such graceful things as their Ambassador."

She had scarcely passed on her way when a stately servant in gold-embroidered livery and powdered wig approached her deferentially with a card on a silver salver.

"Are you Miss Dittany, madam?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied inquiringly.

"A gentleman waiting to see you."

"But I can't see any one now. It's preposterous."

She took up the card. "Neil Wishart!" she exclaimed involuntarily. She went deathly white, but recovered herself instantly. "Tell him I can't possibly see him now."

"He says it is most urgent, madam."

"Where is he, then? Show me the way."

The man conducted her slowly down the stairs, and through intricate passages, beautiful with statuettes and exotic palms. The hubbub of the throng above sounded more and more distantly on her ears, like surf beating on a beach, or the fading of a dream. She found Neil in a small ante-room. He was pacing the room when she entered. His heavy ulster was thrown open as if to get air, and there were lumps of snow on his boots; his outdoor dress seemed almost vulgar after the elegant men she had just left.

He turned to front her as she came in. His face was set in stern lines, and bore the marks of trouble. The servant, announcing her, discreetly retired, and closed the door.

Neil came forward quickly. "At last!" he exclaimed. "I thought you would never come."

"What is it?" she asked. Her voice was hard and staccato. "Why do you choose this time and place of all others? Surely you can see . . ."

"I know," he said. "It was necessary. There was no one else to send, and I offered to come. Your car is outside. You must come at once."

Nan laughed with a forced lightness. She who thought she had forgotten the man standing before her felt her control slipping away, and her laugh was the antidote for the tears which were gathering so near the surface.

"Quite melodramatic," she cried gaily. "Would you mind explaining yourself?"

"Not now. I'll tell you going along. Only come."

"Really, Mr Wishart . . ."

Neil stood biting his lip. There was something obviously on his mind which was hard to utter.

"Is it—is there something the matter?"

He nodded gravely. The girl caught the contagion of alarm. She stamped her foot impatiently.

"Don't stand there like a deaf mute," she snapped.

"What is it? What has happened?"

Neil swallowed down the choking in his throat. He could not meet the fierce questioning eyes.

"Your father is dead," he said thickly.

CHAPTER LVII.

NAN stood quietly looking at her old lover,—so quietly that he wondered at first if she had heard. She was like one who wakes slowly from a profound sleep. The colour which had leapt to her face at the blow struck by his words ebbed again, and left it white. There were no tears; her bitten lip was the only threat that they might presently flow. Her slightly forward stoop, her hands held out stiffly with half-flexed fingers, gave her a resemblance to the statue of one about to run from a mark.

Neil watched her with profound compassion. He knew nothing of the change which had come over her since he went away. He knew her old devotion for the father who had been so unworthy of her, and he chided himself bitterly for the brutal haste with which he had broken the tragic news. But he had been driven by temperament and by her manner to do it that way, or not at all.

Once, from her rhythmic swaying, he thought she was about to fall, and he rushed forward. She steadied herself lightly on his arm.

“Nan!” he cried, “Nan! Don’t look like that, dear. I’m a beast. I ought to have broken it to you more gently. Are you well enough to come?”

“Dead? Did you say he was dead?”

Neil did not recognise her voice. There was a deep, tense ring in her tones such as he had never before heard.

“Let’s go at once, dear,” he said soothingly. “There are rugs and things in the car.”

Nan suffered herself to be led away. The servants escorted them in relays to the great gates of the main entrance with as much wonder expressed on their stolid faces as their good training would allow them to show.

"Madam's cloak?" one suggested.

"We'll send for it to-morrow," Neil replied.

He wrapped the girl tenderly in the heavy rugs.

"Thank you," she said very quietly. "It was thoughtful of you to bring them."

"It's so beastly cold," he said. He didn't know what else to say. There was something about her he failed to understand. She seemed from her matter-of-fact way of speaking her thanks to be indifferent; but he would not believe that. Rather he put it down to numbness from her shock. She spoke again as they swerved into Piccadilly.

"When did you get back?"

"Last night."

"Don't you feel the cold after a climate like that?"

"Rather."

There was silence again.

"I suppose," she said, "there'll be no need to marry Roger now." She spoke half to herself, but Wishart started from his seat.

"Marry!" he cried. "Roger who? Not Tregarth?"

"Yes," she replied, with complete indifference. "Didn't you know?"

He put his hand over his eyes for a second.

"I see," he said. "No; there'll be no need."

"He has disappeared into space; but if he comes back I suppose I shall have to."

"He won't come back."

"Do you know that?"

He thought he detected a tremor in the voice. "Yes, I know it," he replied softly.

Again he thought she had not heard,—she was so quiet. He ventured to raise the edge of the rug which was muffling her face, and found her weeping. With all the denseness of a young man he misunderstood the springs from which her tears took their source. She

had shed none for her father; she was weeping for Tregarth. He had forgotten her previous question. He did not recollect she had mentioned her marriage as something from which Mr Dittany's death had given her a way of escape, and he had no conception of a woman's soul.

It was no time to think of himself. Wishart led her silently into the hushed room where the lights were turned low. The sound of servants whispering came from the passage outside. Nan took one of the big, limp hands, and threw herself on her knees at her father's side. There was a clean white bandage round his broad and placid brow. She asked what it was, and Neil had to tell her he had shot himself; they had found him dead in his office.

While they watched together they were disturbed by a sudden commotion outside. They could hear the shocked protestations of the servants, and a woman's voice insisting hysterically that she *would* come in.

"It's Miss Tregarth," said Neil, going on tiptoe to the door; "shall I get rid of her?"

Nan had risen to her feet.

"Let her come in," she said.

Hilda Tregarth had forced her way past the servants. She came in with trembling limbs and hair all dishevelled.

"You shan't keep me out," she cried with agitation.

"Hush, my dear," said Nan. "I don't want to. You have more right than I. Come away, Neil. There's something I want to say."

She closed the door softly behind her.

"I want you to come to-morrow," she said eagerly. "I have no one to help me or advise me. Will you?"

"Of course," he said gravely. "I will stop now, if you like. I don't like leaving you with that woman. Shall I wait till she's gone?"

"No, no; I want you to go. There are times when one must be alone. Go now, please."

He had gone for more than an hour when Nan went

back to the room where she had left Hilda Tregarth. In the interval she had disrobed herself of her jewelled splendour. Her dark luxuriant hair was plaited down her back, and she had put on a plain dressing-jacket. Something inexpressibly soft and tender had come into her face. She laid a gentle hand on the shoulder of the kneeling woman.

"Come, dear," she said softly. "You can do no more."

Hilda rose slowly with stiffened limbs. "If I could only cry," she said wearily.

She fondled the clasped hands of the man lying there.

"Poor hands!" she said; "so empty and so cold to-night."

"You must stay with me till the morning," Nan said, closing the door silently. "It's too late to go now."

And Hilda threw her arms about her neck and kissed her, while the tears for which she had craved scalded her cheeks.

CHAPTER LVIII.

NEIL came the next morning, and Nan, who was writing letters, greeted him with a rather pitiful smile. "I have so wanted you to come," she said.

"You knew I would."

"I've no one to tell me what to do. There are letters of his I have taken. There will be an inquest, Neil. I want you to read them with me, and tell me if it is necessary to give them up. There is one from you among the others; I haven't looked at it. I didn't know if I ought to."

"It bears on it, Nan. I have been thinking it was my letter which drove him to this."

"Oh, I guessed there was something dreadful in it. Take it back. Burn it. Surely we have given you enough trouble. Why should your name be mixed up in it?"

Neil hesitated with the letter in his undecided hands. Beneath the sunburn of his face she could see the working of a grey despair. "Won't you sit down?" he asked.

She threw herself restlessly in her chair. With a subtle instinct she realised the barrier that had come between them, and knew it was her promise to Tregarth. Yet his question, when it came, struck her suddenly like a blow in the face.

"What made you promise to marry that man?" he asked.

She hid her face in her hands.

"To save *him*," she said weakly. She inclined her

head in the direction of the room where her father was lying.

"But . . ."

"I know what you will say," she cried with sudden ferocity. "Very well; it *isn't* true, then; it's not an honest answer. If so, I would have done it before when he was in equal danger. But you left me alone. I had no strength but what I had from you, and you failed me."

"Nan!"

"You went away without a word. Not a line of explanation, not a single request to know if I sided with your enemies. You thought I didn't believe in you."

"But . . ."

"You had no excuse. Do you know what it is to win the love of a woman, or do you think it is a balancing of debit and credit?"

"Will you listen for a moment?"

"Oh, I know you will make excuses. You will say I left you in the lurch; that I ought to have stood by you, and said that you *had* told me. You will say that the first word should have come from me."

"Nan, hear me."

"Well?"

"I make none of these excuses. What I say is that I wrote you, and that the letter was not allowed to reach you."

"Oh, when, Neil?"

"An hour after I was purposely shamed in front of you."

A look of pain passed over the girl's face as she raised her head and gazed blankly at him with dawning comprehension.

"You mean . . ." she began, trembling.

"It's rotten to have to speak badly of him . . . now. He wanted to part us. He may have been right, but he needn't have gone out of his way to blacken me in your eyes; he needn't have broken a fellow's pluck down or sent him on a wild-goose chase to the other end of the

world. He needn't have opened my letters and left you to think I didn't care. He needn't . . ."

At the pause in his bitter agitation, Nan rose to her feet and stood holding the back of her chair.

"What else?" she asked as he stopped suddenly.

"Nothing else," he answered firmly.

"Yes, Neil," she said; "there *is* something else. I want to know. I'm not a child. I'm not even the immature girl you knew three months ago. I am asking you to tell me. What else was there?"

"Nothing that matters, Nan. I can't tell you."

"Neil, listen to me. There were things about my father I never understood. I don't doubt he would have done the things you have just accused him of, if you stood in the way of his ambition or his needs. But I do know this, Neil—that he would not have taken his life because you threatened to expose such tricks. Whatever he was, he was a brave man."

Neil bit his lip in determined silence.

"There is something else—something dreadful—behind it; and I ask you to tell me," she went on.

He made no answer. "What is in that letter?" she asked.

"Don't ask me now," he urged. "Perhaps some day I will tell you. Answer my question first. Why did you promise to marry Tregarth?"

"I have told you."

"Would you carry it out? If he came back to you, would you fulfil your promise?"

"I should have to," she answered miserably.

"But you would not want to?"

"How can you ask?"

"Why so much honour? You found no difficulty in breaking your promise to me."

"Neil!" The cry seemed wrung from her. "You can't be cruel to me at such a time as this."

"I don't want to hurt you," he replied, softening. "But I want to know how we stand. If I ask you to—to break with Tregarth, I want to be sure that you are not doing something that will hurt you; I want to

know that it isn't something that doesn't matter to you—not a change you are making lightly without a thought. How do I know? How can I tell you are not indifferent as to whom you marry?"

"I don't quite deserve that," she said humbly.

"You found reasons for breaking with me," he went on. "There might be found reasons for breaking with him. If so, would you do it? That is all I want to know."

"Oh, if only there were!"

There was no doubt of the sincerity of the cry. It came from the very depths of her heart.

"There are reasons," said Neil gravely.

Nan looked at him inquiringly.

"Tregarth is dead," he said.

"Dead!"

Her bosom heaved with the flood of emotions which surged over her. Watching her, he saw her face take on a light of eager hope.

"Oh, I am wicked," she cried at last. "Why didn't you tell me at first?"

"Because I would never have been sure," he said.

"And you are now?"

"And I am now."

He took her in his arms and kissed her quietly on the lips held up to him. There was no fierce rapture in the embrace. There was a sadness in the reconciliation, and tears were nearer and more holy than caresses.

"I want to see your letter, Neil," she said beseechingly. "We can never be quite happy if I don't know. Secrets are the only things that can kill love. Surely we have learnt that."

He gave it to her. "I would have spared you if I could," he said.

Nan read it with a trembling lip and gave it back to him.

"I know all now," she said. "All except the poison." She pleaded earnestly, "Oh, Neil, he couldn't have done that. It was cruel of him to try to part us, but he couldn't have done that. It was all a misunderstanding."

Neil took the letter, and, tearing it into fragments, threw the pieces on the fire.

"For your sake, dear," he said. "It shall never be mentioned to a living soul as long as I live."

"It's more than we deserve," she said. She talked rapidly and incoherently. "When you came to me last night you tore a veil from my eyes. I have been walking in my sleep. I thought at first it was the news you brought, but now I know it was you. It has been one long unreal trance since the night you left me. You will never leave me again, will you, Neil?"

"You know that," he said brokenly.

"I think I should die," she said, with simple thoughtfulness. "Did you ever read," she continued, "when you were a little child, the story of the enchanted princess?"

"I seem to remember it dimly," he replied, smiling.

"You know, she had to sleep till her prince came and wakened her with a kiss."

"And if her prince couldn't have had her?"

"She would have gone back to the dreams where she would find him."

They talked on and on—sadly as befitted a house of mourning, but with a tender love that was half tears. Neil at last took poor Blair's confession from his pocket. Before showing it to her, he narrated the incidents which had led up to it, while the shadows of horror and sympathy chased each other over her sensitive face. At the end he put it in her hand.

"Is it necessary?" she asked.

"It's the last explanation between us," he said.

She put it away from her firmly.

"No, Neil," she said. "I have thought many things, but I don't think I once thought in my heart you needed any vindication. I should feel I was unworthy of you if I looked at it."

There was no scandal at the inquest. An overwhelming weight of evidence went to show that for several days the dead man's mind had been unhinged. His business affairs were all in order, his various concerns

shown to be flourishing, his wealth undisputed. When the trouble was over, Neil took Nan to his father's home, and old Mr Wishart welcomed her with a smile on his grave face.

"You'll be good to my boy," he said. "He's been through it, Miss Dittany."

"Won't you call me Nan?"

"Nan, then. He won't be rich as your poor father was rich, but he'll have enough if you love him. With love you can be very happy. It's the people who try to climb who get all the bruises."

Nan kissed the old man's cheek.

"I would follow him through the world if he had nothing," she said.

THE END.

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