

THE
VALIANT GENTLEMAN

M. J. STUART



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CHAPTER I

“AND I hope you are ashamed of yourself, Felix!” said his aunt with venom.

She stood over him, which—for she was a small woman—was not impressive, and terrorised him frankly, as pigmies have a habit of doing with their menfolk. From the chair on his left came a gurgle of quick laughter, where his cousin, Maud Dennison, swung slim ankles and derided the pair of them.

“Are you sure that you are ashamed of yourself, Felix? Are you wholly and utterly sure? She will forgive you if you are, Felix. She came here for that purpose. I know——”

“Be quiet, Maud!” Her stepmother swung round upon her wrathfully. “You have no business to be here, and you know it. Have you anything to say for yourself, Felix?”

“What about?” said the culprit weakly, and then, quelled by her eye, abandoned his position hastily.

“Of course you mean about the Lovatts. I knew you did; but I couldn’t help it. I really couldn’t.”

“Oh!” said his aunt with emphasis.

“I am not sorry for you,” she added rather unnecessarily, “in the least.”

Receiving no immediate answer to this, she allowed herself to relax a little, and her eyes travelled reflectively round the soft-toned, soft-cushioned room, which was Felix’s particular pride, and a masterpiece of comfort.

“She has been here, of course,” she stated with depressed certainty.

“She has.”

“And alone, I suppose?”

“Afraid so, beloved aunt.” Felix grinned up at her with a large display of fine teeth. “That alone would blight any woman’s reputation, wouldn’t it? I rather wonder, under the circumstances, that you care, unchaperoned—Maud doesn’t count——”

“I am not asking,” said his aunt, refusing to be

drawn from the main issue, “whether these visits were paid at reasonable hours, assuming that there is a reasonable hour for that sort of thing. As to that I express no opinion. I do not, thank heaven, belong to this generation, and am not competent to judge.”

“The hour was quite reasonable,” Felix assured her. “Four or five o’clock in the afternoon as a rule. But if it had been four or five o’clock in the morning, as Lovatt charitably supposes——”

“Oh, we all know what a saint you are, Fe!” Maud Dennison uncrossed her ankles and leaned sideways, slipping a cool arm round his neck. “Tell a fellow now! Felix, where *were* you on that night of infamous memory?”

“Where we said we were. On the Embankment, watching the sun rise.”

“Yes, I know. But really?”

“Maud, you unprincipled little Sapphira!” Felix stirred, exasperated, under the encircling arm. “Don’t you even know the truth when you see it? If I wanted to invent a lie I’d make up a better one. Jan was fed up with dancing, and I wanted a breath of fresh air, so I took her out to see the sun rise. It may have been unusual, but

I'm hanged if I see that it was immoral. It just happened."

"And you didn't make love to her? Not the teeniest, teeniest bit?"

"Not the teeniest bit. There, young woman, you've got the truth. Hang on to it."

"But you must have been in love with her. Oh, Felix, are you?"

"Aunt Anne"—the goaded Felix turned to higher authority—"will you turn this impossible young person out of the room, or shall I have to take up my chair and walk? I will not be baited by two women at once! 'Tisn't fair!"

"You should be more careful to keep out of hot water," said Mrs. Dennison unsympathetically. "Maud, I have already told you that I would be very much happier if you would go somewhere else. I know by bitter experience that it is wholly useless to try to exert an authority which I do not possess, but——"

"Rats!" said Maud defiantly. "I am going to stay and stick up for Felix."

"Thanks, but you needn't trouble."

"Very well, I shall stick up for Jan then," said Maud with fine impartiality. "I don't care who I

stick up for. Have you settled to get married when she has been divorced?"

"Good heavens! Don't anticipate things like that! She isn't going to be divorced."

"Oh!" Maud made round eyes at him. "My dear Fe, you don't seriously imagine that you have a chance of getting out of it?"

"Of course I do. I haven't done anything rotten, neither has Jan. We may have been a bit imprudent, but what do you expect? She's only a child."

"A fairly sophisticated one," said his aunt grimly.

"No, the sophistication is only skin deep." Felix rose to his feet with a jerk. "Look here, Aunt Anne, I know what you and everybody else will be saying about Jan for the next few weeks, and it's damned unfair. She's the openest thing that ever breathed. There's never been any secret about the way she lived—out at all sorts of hours with all sorts of people. If Lovatt didn't like it he should have told her so, or else he should have gone about with her. What sort of justice is there in marrying a girl of nineteen and then turning her loose on the world, and ignoring her

existence as if he were her aged grandmother, or her aunt by marriage? The situation has been grotesque. If he were sixty, or deformed, or bed-ridden, I could understand it. Of course, Jan has been spoiled, and, of course, she has been run after a lot more than was good for her, but that's all the trouble amounts to."

"But I like Anthony enormously," said Maud the irrepressible. "He has eyes like a nice dog—a terrier, I think. Jan thinks so, too, because I asked her. She said she always wanted to pull his ears and feed him with sugar, but he was never about for her to do it. When you are married to her, Fe, take care always to be about. I don't think Jan likes being left by herself so much. Doggy eyes and standing from under are all very well in their way, but they end in divorce suits, though I don't know where Anthony found the spirit. It isn't the sort of thing one would have expected from him."

"Very well," said Felix defiantly, "if I am to be all the goat there is, say so and get it over; but I won't have either of you running down Jan. She's the sweetest, straightest boy-woman that the Lord ever created, and she has got to go through hell. And it isn't fair."

“I love you, Felix,” said Maud impulsively, and kissed him. “You are the first scandal that ever happened in our family, and it is very shocking, but I don’t care, and I wouldn’t sell my relationship to you for all the paper money in the Bank of England. Oh, all right, Mother! I’m going.”

She departed, leaving a certain breeziness behind her.

“Thank heaven, that child will be married in a few weeks!” said Mrs. Dennison. “Your *esclandre* is most vilely timed, Felix.”

“Well, I didn’t stage manage it, you know.”

“I suppose not. You know that you’re not to be the only co-respondent, of course?”

“As if that made any difference!” said Felix scornfully.

Followed a pause. A regretful sigh from Mrs. Dennison heralded a softened mood.

“You are in love with her, I suppose. I may be plagiarising Maud, but I should like to know.”

“So should I,” said Felix thoughtfully. “No.” He caught the motion of her lifted eyebrows. “That isn’t caution. It’s the simple truth. I really don’t know.”

He strolled over to the window and stood there, looking out into the street, his hands thrust deep

into his pockets, his reddish brows knitted into a thoughtful frown.

“I think I’m not,” he decided finally. “We are pals, and one doesn’t seem to fall in love with a pal. But I can’t imagine living in the same house and not doing it. Lovatt is off his head!”

“He may be,” Mrs. Dennison assented grimly, “but not for that reason. He is crazier over his wife than you will ever be, my uncertain young man. But the main point is that he will get his case.”

“Pessimist!”

“My dear boy, look things in the face. A British jury isn’t kind to Jan’s sort, for one thing, and Jan has been behaving madly. There is no other word for it. The modern girl? Yes, I know, but you can’t modernise primitive things like wedlock, and human jealousy. I say nothing against young Holland. From the little I have seen of him he seems a decent enough sort of boy, but as for the Waring man——”

“I know,” said Felix tersely. “He’s a rotter.”

“A fact which your unsophisticated Jan ignores?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He is clever in a sort of a way, and an interesting beast. Beloved aunt,

why are you trying to make a case against Jan as though you didn't like her? I know that you do."

"I do," Mrs. Dennison admitted ruefully. "I like the way she looks at one with her eyes wide open, instead of all that eyelash work one gets such a lot of. I like the way she shakes hands. I like her habit of telling the truth, and paying when she loses a bet. If she had been a child of mine I would have slapped her, and loved her, and taken better care of her than her deplorable family appear to have done. Well, you may be right about her; in fact, I think you are; but if you weren't I should still say that there were extenuating circumstances. I knew Jack Desmond before you did, Felix, and the mere fact of having him for a father would extenuate most things, the handsome scamp. He sold that poor, lovely baby to Anthony as jubilantly as if she had been a bundle of shares in a mythical oil company. That marriage of theirs was the most pathetic, blindfold thing I ever attended. All the love on one side, and nothing but childishness, and *joie de vivre*, and the most outrageous loveliness on the other—not an atom of training, of course, and just enough worldliness to make her snap her fingers at any sort of common

sense. In my day there was less anxiety among the sheep to act like goats. I don't know that we were any the better for it, but at least it was easier to tell one from the other. As it is, I would hesitate to condemn the worst of my acquaintances, but the many-headed argues the other way about. Be good to the child, Felix. She'll need it. It can't be much fun to be married, and divorced, and ostracised all before cutting one's wisdom teeth. Anthony is in the wrong about this, but he will get his decree; also, incidentally, he will get any sympathy that happens to be going."

"He is welcome to it," said Felix bitterly.

"Not much of a comfort, I suppose. Oh, heavens! why won't young people learn to take life as it comes. Well, I suppose there is nothing for it but to go through with the business." Mrs. Dennison shrugged her shoulders dejectedly, and rose, pulling on her gloves.

"There are moments," she added wistfully, "when I am reconciled to being an old woman."

CHAPTER II

“AND so you are to have your freedom again,” Jan wrote, and bit viciously at the tip of her quill. “Much good may it do you, my very dear enemy! I wish I had the strength of mind to wish you well and part friends, but I haven’t. The utmost magnanimity will run to is just a little bit short of ‘Go to Hades!’ I am returning your deed of settlement, which doesn’t interest me, also your letter—in pieces. *Au revoir.*”

“Yours till the decree is made absolute,
“JAN LOVATT.”

She signed her name with a flourish, then paused dubious whether or not to strike out the second half of it. Deciding in the negative, she laid down her pen, gathered up half a dozen fragments of torn paper and pinned them ostentatiously to the sheet before she folded it to slip into the envelope, and reached for the sealing-wax. Then she turned to Felix, who, entering a few moments before, had been bidden to sit down and wait her pleasure.

“I can talk to you now if you like, my dear.”

“And what, may I ask, was that?”

Jan rose to her feet, clasping her hands behind her back in the lively imitation of a defiant wren.

“Felix, he has the impertinence—the impertinence after all that has happened—to offer me money!”

“Well, why shouldn’t he? I think it’s a fairly obvious duty.”

“Is it? Well, I have thrown it back at him as hard as I could. Will you ring for tea, please, dear?”

She turned away, and stood leaning her elbow against the mantelpiece, studying the hearthrug with sombre, reflective eyes. Not yet or for many weeks to come would Jan learn to accept her destiny with anything approaching resignation, but the first mood of anguished protest had passed. Indignation and wounded pride were still too keen to betray the deeper underlying ache. She was obsessed by a burning sense of injustice.

“I’ve been given the name and been punished for it,” she cried bitterly, “but I haven’t had the fun of the game, ever, ever. No!” in response to the mocking devilry in the blue eyes, “I’m not saying that I wanted it. I didn’t, I didn’t! Felix, you *know* I didn’t!”

“You didn’t want it with me certainly.”

“Or with anybody. Felix, say it!”

“Or with anybody,” he concurred obligingly.

“But look here, there’s no reason on earth why you shouldn’t have the game now if you feel like it. I’ve eight hundred a year. Not riches, perhaps, but enough for two to play on in a limited sort of way. Would you care to marry me, Jan?”

Jan stared at him a moment wide-eyed, and then flushed painfully to the sleek, dark hair, cut square above her eyebrows. Her twenty-two years had left her oddly childish in speech and expression, and she was as transparent as a healthy boy.

“I suppose you *had* to say that,” she whispered miserably, and Felix nodded cheerfully.

“Right. I had to. That was a duty proposal only, and, now that we’ve done it and got it over, I’ll do it again for the love of the thing. Will you marry me, dear?”

“I was wrong,” said Jan indistinctly. “You didn’t ‘have to.’ I forgot—the circumstances. When a woman has two—or three—lovers——”

His hand shot out, closing over her wrist, and stopped her in the middle of the sentence. From his easy position, sprawling among the cushions of

his chair, he looked up at her, pleasant-eyed, and shook a reproachful finger.

“Don’t say things like that, Jan. You don’t have to. They mean nothing, and they sound darned bitter. That’s the worst thing that can happen to man, woman, or child, and you’re all three in your way. Yes, if I were asked to define you I should say, ‘A valiant little gentleman.’ Live up to it, Jan. It’s high praise in its way. Now, as to your objection, I have the best of reasons for knowing that a British jury may err, and as there was no more between you and Waring, or Holland, than there was between you and me——”

“There wasn’t.”

“Bless you, don’t I know that? If there had been, I’m no Galahad myself, but I know there wasn’t, and, on my honour, I’ll never mention the name of either to you again. The subject is closed. Well, Jan?”

“I won’t.”

“Won’t you? Why not, infant?”

“I don’t love you, Felix.”

“Thanks!” Felix received the information with a mocking inclination of the head. “Is love absolutely necessary to our *ménage*, little woman? We’ve liking, comradeship, a mutual knowledge of

each other's defects. Not bad, that, to start house-keeping on."

"It isn't enough, and if it were—Felix, if we married everybody would say that it was *true!*"

Felix shook his head regretfully.

"I hate to discourage you, my dear Jan, but that is one of the things you have got to face. Our marrying or not marrying won't affect it. If I were the only co-respondent it might, but, as you pointed out just now, the fact that I'm not does complicate matters from that point of view. Now I am going to be rather brutal and hit you about the head. You won't like it, but as it's for your good I hope you will grin and bear it. Firstly, have you any money?"

"Do you mean private income?"

"Yes."

"None. When I've paid my bills I shall have about one hundred pounds in hand, and even that is Tony's money, strictly speaking."

"Can your people afford to give you an allowance?"

"Perhaps they could," Jan acknowledged dubiously, "but I'm pretty sure they won't if they can help it. There are six of us, you see; besides—they believe *it.*"

“That’s new, isn’t it?”

“Not very. You see, daddy—it isn’t his fault really—but he always believes what other people believe.”

“Ah! That means, I suppose, that you couldn’t go back home to live?”

An emphatic shake of the head.

“Well, then, have you any means of earning a living?”

“I’ve not been trained for anything in particular.”

“That means that you haven’t. In our highly civilised country you have to be jolly highly trained before you can earn thirty shillings a week. Do you see where we are drifting, Jan?”

“It’s fairly obvious. You mean that I haven’t any choice; that I’ll have to marry you or starve.” Jan turned away, one foot beating a nervous tattoo on the carpet. “Very well, I’ll starve.”

A soft chuckle answered her.

“Am I as repulsive as all *that*, Jan?”

She whirled upon him in consternation, and flung herself upon the arm of his chair, one arm thrown in careless caress about his shoulders.

“That—but of course I did not mean that. How could I? Don’t you see, Felix, marrying for—for

a living is as bad as—as what they say I've done, and if it weren't I'm smirched—smirched from head to foot. You might as well marry a leper. If I let you do it people wouldn't come to our house—not decent people. They'd pretend not to see us in the street. They'd—oh, you know it all. If you loved me perhaps I might let you sacrifice yourself for me, because then, perhaps—just perhaps—I might be worth it to you, but I know you don't."

"Oh, yes, I do, in a reasonable sort of way."

"Felix, how absurd! But it's true, and of me, too. My dear, I won't live with you on such terms. It would be more—more honest to get my living in the streets, because then I suppose I should be giving something for value received, not—not sticking a friend with a horse."

"I hate your metaphors," said Felix severely. "However, if you feel that way about it I won't press the point. Now do you still think it contemptible of Lovatt to offer you money?"

Jan shook her head slowly. A furrow creased itself between her straight brows, and the bright, uneasy colour made its appearance again, reddening even the soft curve of her neck. Jan had tem-

per, and the compressed line of her mouth betrayed it.

“I won’t take money from Tony!” she said in a fierce undertone, and the sharp tattoo with the slipper began again, rapping out defiance with every staccato tap-tap. Felix regarded her with quiet amusement which masked a very real concern.

“What a little fury you are, Jan! Why won’t you? That would be money for value received with a vengeance!”

“Just because,” said Jan between her teeth. “Oh, it’s pride, of course, but aren’t I to have any pride? He has whipped me through the streets at a cart-tail for nothing—just nothing, and now, when he considers that I’ve had sufficient punishment for what I never did, he expects me to accept an allowance to make up for my bruises. I’ll see him damned first!”

Felix regarded her soberly for a moment, and poured himself out a cup of tea before he answered her. He drank it in slow sips, watching her intently over the rim of his teacup, spooned out the sugar, and crunched it thoughtfully. When the last of it had dissolved on his tongue he shook his head at her.

“Look here, Jan, it wasn’t for *nothing*. Things don’t pan out like that in this world. You aren’t the only one in this, you know.”

“I know I’m not.” Jan’s hot flush deepened again at the implication. “Oh, my dear, my dear, I’m sorry to drag you into this. If I could have monopolised the dirt I would, but I’ve been so helpless in it all. If I’ve been talking of myself all this while, it isn’t that I don’t know. Do you mind it terribly?”

“Oh, I suppose I shall have a rather highly-coloured reputation for a time, but what of it? I shall like a little notoriety. It would be much more reasonable of you to throw things at my head for having landed you in this mess. It takes two to make a flirtation, you know, and heaven knows how far I would have gone if you had shown the faintest sign of wanting to accompany me. Probably the limit. My name isn’t Percival, and you are a lovely little devil. No, the person I referred to when I pointed out that you weren’t the only one in this was Lovatt. I was watching his face when I wasn’t engaged in giving my own little recitation. He has a fair control of his features, but most of the time he was pretty nearly as white as you were. You have broken that fellow’s heart, Jan.”

“Heart! He hasn’t got one.”

“Well, you should know,” Felix admitted equably, having further recourse to his teacup. “At the same time, I’m willing to bet considerably more than I can afford that in this case you don’t. He has one all right, and it’s busted. You see, Jan, no man living would have brought on that case at all unless he believed at least half of it. It’s no good arguing with belief. Either you do or you don’t. And if you do about a thing like that it’s the very devil, with seven horns and a tail. Do you think he enjoyed threshing out all the abominably intimate detail before those ghouls of lawyers? I may say that I, personally, intend to sandbag every lawyer I meet from now on. No, my child, you may have been whipped to make a London holiday, but the man who did the whipping was not to be envied his job. His own fault, of course, but does that make it any easier to put up with? You know it doesn’t. Try to think as kindly of him as you can, little Jan!”

He paused, looking up at her, his pleasant, red-brown face crinkled into a kindly smile which almost obscured the friendly eyes under the tufted eyebrows. He was fond of Jan. The youthful, crude directness of her, the simplicity, the warm-

hearted generosity, appealed to him even more than her slim body. A very little and he could have fallen tempestuously in love with her.

“If Lovatt could only see us now,” he reflected, with a moment’s dancing malice, “I suppose he would say that his case was proved up to the hilt, and here have I been turned down twice in one afternoon. Drat the fellow!”

His subdued chuckle recalled the gaze of Jan’s wide grey eyes.

“Do you blame me, Felix?” she demanded, with a hint of trepidation, more than a hint of defiance.

“Blame you? Good heavens, no! But look here, infant, I want to give you some nice ponderous advice for your good. Tear up that letter to Lovatt. Take the allowance he offers, and go on the Continent for a little while. There are heaps of places in Norway, for instance, where one can be perfectly happy and healthy and never meet a soul one knows. I know you don’t want a seem to run away, but there’s no earthly good to be got by facing this thing out, and without money you can’t face it out, anyway. The majority of people have the most childlike faith in a judge and jury, and are probably right to have it in nine cases out of ten. It’s a hopeless business to try to persuade

them that you are the tenth case. Go abroad and let it be forgotten.”

“I can’t,” muttered Jan under her breath. There was a wincing pride that was almost agony in the grey eyes. “Felix, I didn’t tell you—quite everything. Tony makes his offer conditional on my promise not to see him—or write to him again—ever while we live.”

There was a silence, broken by Felix’s low whistle, and for a moment his good-natured blue eyes flickered angrily.

“That’s nasty of him,” he observed curtly, and then, “Well, Jan, I suppose it isn’t absolutely unusual. Do you want to see the fellow, by any chance?”

“Of course I don’t, but I’m damned if I’ll promise not to, and admit that I’m in the wrong.”

Felix rose to his feet and considered her, his hands in his pockets, his head tilted aslant. There was a suspicious brightness in her eyes that had not been there before, and the soft curves of her mouth were tremulous.

“Jan,” he challenged suddenly, “I believe you’re in love with the fellow still!”

“You beast!” choked Jan, and turned abruptly

away, rubbing her wrist across her eyes, more like a naughty schoolboy than ever.

“I’m not, I’m not!” The voice came with broken ferocity over a drooping shoulder. “No one, no one could go on liking a man who wants to—to bribe one to keep away from him. I—I detest the thought of him!”

“Jan, my Jan!” crooned Felix, motherlike, and gathered the little body to him.

It came a rigid bundle of muscle, and Jan, after a long, shuddering gulp, raised her face to him, flushed and smeared in places, but fierce-eyed still behind the wet lashes.

“I wasn’t crying,” she whispered tensely. “I—was only tired, and I hate you, and I want you to go now, at once—and I won’t be hugged!”

And she made her slim body as unyielding as a broomstick.

Felix, that Solomon of an understanding heart, released her with an amiable shrug, and reached for his hat.

“It’s all right, Jan,” he assured her soothingly. “I know your nerves are torn to pieces. Anyone would cry. And look here, dear, my offer holds good for the next six months. Wire me at any

time you feel like it, and I'll come to you wherever you are and bring a special licence with me; and even if you don't feel like marrying me you'll send if you get in a tight place, won't you, Jan? What else is friendship for, I should like to know? And we are friends, aren't we?"

He paused at the door, smiling his wide, all-embracing smile, and Jan nodded energetically without turning her head.

CHAPTER III

JAN had dismissed Felix on an impulse of regal courage. In the days that followed she knew many panic-stricken moments when the temptation to recall him was almost too great to be borne, when the vague terrors of poverty and loneliness haunted her into the early hours of the morning, and she lay shivering, her face pressed close against the rumpled pillow.

Desmond had visited her earlier in the week, affectionate still, but obviously embarrassed at the thought of a possible demand for shelter.

“It’s the girls who make it so difficult,” he explained. “If they weren’t growing up—but as it is it wouldn’t be fair.”

“You mean I’m not to come home?” said Jan slowly. She sat staring down at the floor, her hands pressed tight against her breast to still the waves of shame which were sweeping over her. “If you say that, I won’t come, of course. It would be awkward. I suppose people wouldn’t like meeting me.”

Then, the question had to get itself asked:

“Daddy, it is only that, isn’t it? You don’t—you can’t believe *it*?”

His eyes avoided her, and the next moment she was down on her knees beside his chair, wrenching at his coat with passionate, supplicating hands.

“Daddy, daddy, you mustn’t believe it! You mustn’t! You shan’t!”

Afterwards it was difficult, if not impossible, to raise the question of an allowance, and Desmond, who constitutionally never had any money, was content to let it lie.

“I tell you what you are, you are too proud,” said Jan to herself when she reviewed the situation. “Too proud, and yet you lose hold of yourself like a baby. It is ridiculous!”

She pounced upon the largest sofa cushion, up-ended it for conversational purposes, and pressed her young cheek against the taffeta.

“What am I to do, you fat and stupid thing?” she demanded fiercely. “How am I going to earn a living? What am I good for at all at all? I haven’t the nerve to be a film star; besides, I don’t believe I can act; and I haven’t the height to be a mannequin. It will have to be something where I can use my looks, because they are the only real

asset I've got, and it will have to be something where I needn't be recognised. That's the heart of it, you silly bundle of feathers. I don't see how I can put myself on the labour-market without seeming to make a ghastly sort of advertisement out of the things that have happened to me. I've simply got to avoid being recognised, and how I'm going to do it after being photographed such a lot I simply don't see."

She paused for breath, and hit her confidante over the head.

It was later in the same day that Mrs. Dennison rang her up to demand a visit.

"I am an old woman," she prefaced her invitation rather unnecessarily, "and there are times when I can't bear myself for another hour. Besides, I—I'm fond of you, Jan."

She was, and, being of the school which kisses, she took Jan in her arms and gave her two brief pecks in exchange for the touch of velvet-soft lips.

"If you had been my daughter," she said irrelevantly, "you would have been different here and there, but I wouldn't have altered you much." She held Jan off for a moment, with hands on her shoulders, and then shook her head wistfully. "You're taking this badly, my dear."

“Am I? I thought I was taking it rather well.”

“Oh, well. You know what I mean. To heart.”

“I suppose so.” Jan sat back on her heels, balancing herself with hands outflung on either side, and raised the straight, fearless eyes that Mrs. Dennison loved. “Do you think I make too much of it? Perhaps people don’t really avoid me; perhaps everyone doesn’t really know about it; but I feel that I’ve been branded all over my face, all over my neck, under my clothes. Sometimes when I think of what was said in that horrible court I feel as if I shall never have any real clothes again. All those eyes looking through me, and into me, and thinking—thinking——”

Jan’s small face was flooded with bright colour, and she bent her head, tracing the pattern in the carpet with an absorbed finger.

“I never knew—a pillory—was like that,” she muttered hopelessly.

There was a little miserable silence. When Mrs. Dennison spoke again her voice had a catch in it.

“My dear, if I say I’m sorry I suppose you’ll hate me for flinging the obvious at you, and beyond that I simply can’t think of anything to say. I do

think and believe that you make the scandal out as worse than it really is, but I'm not idiot enough to talk about the consciousness of innocence being a support, because——”

“It doesn't help. Not at all.”

“I can't even imagine that it might make things worse,” Mrs. Dennison admitted dispassionately. “If heaven had not seen fit to remove my dear George—in my day we talked a great deal about marrying for love, but very few of us attempted it—well, I should have seen to it that he had his reasons for a complaint after, if not before, he made it. A most unpleasant man, my dear, with a passion for having his own way, which I never saw my way to gratify. But perhaps that is hardly to the point. I was wondering, Jan—my old dragoon of a doctor has forbidden me to spend another winter in England, and I shall have to take my wearisome old self off to some place where the climate is warm and dry—not necessarily anywhere fashionable. If you care to see me through the dark months I'll be very grateful to you, Jan, and you needn't feel that your independence has been bruised because you spent a little part of your springtime on a querulous old woman.”

“Did Felix ask you to do that?”

“In so many words, no. Aren’t I to be allowed to have a fondness for you myself, child?”

“I wonder if you know how grateful I am,” said Jan. She folded her arms about the thin knees and laid her chin upon them, gazing up with grave, candid eyes. “Aunt Anne”—Jan had adopted Felix’s relative almost at the first meeting—“it isn’t independence only, and it isn’t that I don’t love you for all your sweetness, but I can’t live on you like that. I’ve got to stand on my own feet and work, with my hands if I can, and find out if there really is anything worth having deep down at the bottom of everything that is selfish and frivolous and worthless. Jan Lovatt is going to die, and be rolled up and put away in a drawer out of sight. I don’t know how I’m going to do it quite, and I don’t suppose it’s going to be easy, but if I really fight my hardest, and sacrifice all the nice, safe cushioniness which has turned me into the horrid little parasite I am—well, it will be something, won’t it?”

“Are you afire for martyrdom, child?”

“I don’t think so.” Jan’s lips quivered a moment with sudden mirth. “I’m planning to live in a cheap boarding-house and have kippers for tea, and there isn’t anything very heroic about that, but

I'm certain I don't want to sponge on you, or victimise Felix, or blackmail Daddy. I've been living on other people all my life, and somehow it has got to stop."

"And what about me, you self-willed young woman? Don't I need you?"

"Dearest one, it's sweet of you to say it, but in fact you don't. You have got an excellent maid, and an excellent companion—a much better one than I could ever possibly be—and, to cap it all, though you may, like the saint you are, offer to take me to some little village where nobody ever comes and nurse my broken heart in retirement, you know that you are really pining for Davos, and crowds of people, and all the things you can't possibly have with me at your elbow. It's no use denying it, Aunt Anne. I know, because, you see, those are just the things I have always wanted myself."

They argued it, a little half-heartedly, for when one knows her own mind discussion between women is a futile thing. Then Jan rose to go, stooping to the withered cheek with impulsive tenderness.

"How many kinds of a fool am I, Aunt Anne?"

"Most sorts, I should think." The sharp eyes

twinkled mistily. "My dear, why must you run upon the swords?"

"So that I shan't run away from them, I think. I have to take to my heels either way. Good-bye, you sweet, wise philanthropist."

"Rubbish! A lot of good you have let me do!"

"'Man shall not live by bread alone.' Only this morning I thought I had been born into a world of snakes and crocodiles, because a few months ago I could have sworn that everybody liked me, and now——"

A moment later she threw off the self-commiseration with a quick toss of the head.

"Aunt Anne, isn't it funny how life seems all streaky sometimes, dark and light, like a day in April?"

"Not being a philosopher, I see no humour in the dark bits myself."

"Oh, well, if one keeps telling oneself that they are only patches——"

Jan settled her hat at an angle, and shrugged her shoulders defiantly, but her smile was tremulous.

"Good-bye, Aunt Anne."

Once in the street, she discovered, with a start of consternation, that she had forgotten her veil, hesitated a moment, half minded to return and borrow

one, and then pulled herself together, determined to face the thing out and conquer her morbid sensitiveness at a blow, but her flushed cheeks and panic-bright eyes attracted even more attention than she had bargained for. Hardly anyone passed her without a glance, a few turned their heads to look again, and the beautiful Mrs. Lovatt, who had always taken notice as a matter of course, winced under their interest like an escaping criminal. Resolutely she lowered her eyes to the pavement, and kept them there, with the immediate result that she ran into Anthony at the corner of Brook Street, and stood warding him off with tight-clenched hands, the instinctive words of apology frozen on her lips. Anthony was the first to find his tongue.

“Jan!”

“Oh, you are going to know me then?”

“I must speak to you somewhere. Oh, not in the street. Can’t you——”

“No,” flashed Jan. “You offered me money to keep away from you, and I’ll do it for nothing. I’ve finished with that.”

She eluded him, but her quick swerve brought her up against two girls who were walking arm in arm, in time to see the gleam of suddenly

awakened interest and to hear the whisper of her name.

Jan pulled up sharply, breathing very fast through parted lips, the clear colour in her cheeks a flag of defiance that came and went, her eyes, turned to her husband, sparkling like hoar-frost.

“Well, you saw that?”

“No. What was it?”

“Oh, nothing.” Jan turned on her heel and swung down the street, speaking over her shoulder in a fierce undertone. “If you want to walk with me you can. I see that I am—not in a position to attract attention by running away from you, and you see it too. Well?”

Anthony winced, but fell into step beside her, and for a couple of hundred yards they walked in silence, their eyes carefully avoiding each other.

“Won’t you tell me your plans, Jan? I think I have a right to know them.”

“Why?”

“I’m still responsible for you in a way. You refused to take an allowance from me. Does that mean that you are provided for in other ways?”

“It’s not your business,” flamed Jan.

“I think that it is. Are you—have you—”

Anthony stared fixedly in front of him. "Do you think of re-marrying soon?"

"I said that was not your affair. It isn't. I don't choose to tell you, and for the moment I hardly see how you can make me. Wait and see, as Mr. Asquith says."

"You are making things very difficult for me, Jan. I don't think you understand what I mean. It isn't that I want to know any details of your private arrangements, or that I suppose they would give me any pleasure if you told me; but I must know that you have a settled income of some sort. You may need it some day, and we don't want to have to rake all this up again. If you are going back to your people that's enough, of course. Are you?"

"No," said Jan shortly, and then, desperate that he should read in the avowal that she had been refused admittance, "Why won't you let me alone? Are you afraid that I shall be a drain on you in the future? I will sign an undertaking never to bother you for money if you like. Is that it?"

There was a silence, and then Anthony said slowly, "You only said that to hurt, Jan. You don't really believe it."

“Don’t I? Well, are you to have the monopoly of statements which you don’t believe in? I suppose that what you really want is to be declared free of all responsibility. You are, free as the air. I didn’t fight that divorce suit to keep my bread and butter. As far as that was concerned you could have got rid of me by simply inviting me to walk out of your house while there were still some rags of reputation adhering to me; but I suppose that would not have been enough.”

“No. That would not have been enough.”

For a time they walked in silence, then Jan started from her resentful brooding to follow a new train of thought.

“If we had had a child I suppose you would have taken it away from me?” Then, as he made no answer. “Would you?”

“Yes—no—I think so. What is the good of going into that now?”

“There is none,” said Jan through set teeth, “except to thank God that He didn’t give me one.”

The lack had been a grievance unacknowledged, but vaguely felt through the whole of their married life. About a week after their marriage Anthony had broached the subject with, for him, unusual

abruptness. "I suppose you don't want any children at once, Jan?" and then, at her stammered denials, born of unprepared nervousness: "Very well, we'll wait for a year or two. There's no hurry."

Jan had regretted her decision in the months that followed, but had never keyed herself up to the pitch of saying so until the growing breach had made it impossible. In a subtle way, her attempts to rouse Anthony to jealousy had been dictated by that regret, and at the memory of those veiled offerings of herself her cheeks tingled anew with burning self-disgust, and she pulled up short and faced him.

"Well, you have my word that I won't bother you. I suppose that is what you wanted. Will you go now?"

"I wanted your assurance that you will be looked after. I haven't had it yet."

A slow drizzle had begun to fall, thinning out the strolling crowd of shop-goers, and for a moment they were left on the strip of slippery pavement facing each other, unspied upon, Jan erect and defiant, Anthony rigid and obstinate.

"It isn't your business," reiterated Jan for

the third time. Thumbscrews would not have driven her into admitting her destitution to the cause of it, much less the charge of becoming monotonous.

“I undertook to provide for you,” Anthony insisted stubbornly. “That still holds good. It isn’t fair of you to handicap me like this. You may make your own terms for a settlement, but you must have one from somebody. I insist on that. You know perfectly well that I can afford it. Have I ever grudged you money? You must know that people who live, as I suppose you intend to live, may be left penniless to face—almost anything. And even if you are going to try——”

“That’s enough!” cried Jan, scarlet to the roots of her hair. She tore off her glove and wrestled furiously with the wedding-ring, which in three years of wear had made itself a groove in her finger, wrenched and pulled it off, heedless of the reddened, angry flesh.

“There! Take it and go! I’m finished with it, and every damned thing it represents. Take it, I say!”

She held it out with trembling fingers, pressing it upon him furiously, but Anthony, glancing at it obliquely, thrust his hands into his pockets.

“I don’t want the thing. Keep it, or throw it into the gutter. It isn’t mine.”

“The gutter!”

For a moment Jan stared at him, aghast, and then deliberately adopted the suggestion.

The drizzle had increased to a downpour, and the gutter was aflood with a muddy torrent, which carried the ring, glittering and clinking as it rolled in its course over and over along the edge of the streaming pavement; and Jan, heedless of her surroundings, stood with the rain soaking her shoulders, watching its path with a tumult of inarticulate despair; saw its danger and stooped to retrieve it, then straightened empty-handed in passionate pride to watch it carried through the bars of the grating, and heard Anthony laugh harshly as it vanished with a splash into the muddy ooze beneath.

“How appropriate, Jan! I should never have thought of that.”

“Damn you!” said Jan, with concentrated venom, and flung away from him.

CHAPTER IV

“YOU ought to be working, Felix,” said his aunt.

“So I am,” was the lazy response, “in my head. You’re a materialist, Aunt Anne. All you see is my gross, recumbent body, and you assume, because there is so much of it, that that is all there is of me, whereas— Why aren’t you in Cannes, by the way?”

“I shall be next week.” Mrs. Dennison, who was prowling about the room in search of cigarettes, turned and eyed her prostrate nephew with disfavour. “You fat lump of a boy or man, whichever you call yourself, why don’t you get up and help me find——”

“Because I needn’t, of course. I have them here at my elbow, as you would see if only you cared to look. And as for your insulting reflection, one ceases to be a boy at thirty.”

“Thirty? Are you really that?” Mrs. Dennison paused beside him, staring down, her fine grey brows contracted. “It’s high time you married, my dear.”

“Don’t beat about the bush, Aunt Anne. It

isn't like you, and I so admire all that is like you."

"Why didn't you marry Jan Lovatt?" his aunt questioned straightly, and plumped herself down in a chair, prepared to argue the point. For a moment Felix merely stared at her without reply, then he slowly removed his hands from under his head and sat up, straightened his coat.

"My dear aunt, you don't seriously imagine that I didn't ask her?"

"I hoped you had," said Mrs. Dennison grimly. "I wanted to be sure. Why wouldn't she have you?"

"For an entirely mid-Victorian reason. She loves me not."

"Um!" said Mrs. Dennison, and bit a lean forefinger. "That is a reason for some people. Do you know where she is now?"

"Do you?"

"Naturally. I went to the trouble of finding out. She is working in a beauty parlour off Jermyn Street—one of those places where vain old women go to be made young and beautiful. Even the management haven't the brazenness to inform their clients that Jan was ever old, but they maintain that she came to them ugly."

"Does anyone swallow that?"

“My dear, a plain woman who hopes to be beautiful will swallow anything.”

“I see. And how did you come by this information?”

“It is nice of you not to assume that I came by it in the quest of a new chin.”

“Did you?”

“Not at all. I decided that Jan was not to be left to her own devices in London, so I took steps to discover what had become of her. It was quite easy. I guessed that she was too fond of that scapegrace family of hers to lose touch with them altogether.”

“Mollie told you, of course.”

“Of course. I understand that they still correspond regularly; though, with a wonderful sense of justice, they have shut their poor little erring sheep out of the fold, while they continue to enjoy the fleece. There’s not one of them who doesn’t simply bristle with Jan’s presents, and who wouldn’t bristle again if ever she marries another millionaire. Oh, perhaps I should except that Scotch mother, with her kirk-bound imagination and whalebone morals—a lot of good they will ever do to anybody if she couldn’t teach her own daughter to keep out of hot water!”

Mrs. Dennison paused to wrench viciously at her

gloves, her eyes snapping vindictively, and Felix regarded her thoughtfully.

“Is that what you said to Jan, I wonder?”

“I said nothing whatever to your Jan,” said Mrs. Dennison crisply. “I couldn’t. She looked too much like a child who had been beaten for making mud pies in a clean pinafore. If the Lord had seen fit to give me children—well, I suppose they would have resembled George, so it is perhaps as well that He didn’t. If girls would only consider what fathers they were about to inflict upon their unborn children—I didn’t, but no matter.”

She closed her lips with a snap, and stared at her crossed knees with a portentous frown, then dropped her half-finished cigarette into the ash-tray and rose to her feet.

“Well, there you have it,” she announced drearily. Something of her usual vitality was lacking from the sharp brown face. “I have done what I could to help—which was nothing. I am old. That is the trouble. Old and out of it. What has crabbed age to do with youth? Between them is a great gulf fixed. What are old people for except to laugh at their own pointless jokes, and nod their venerable heads over such sins as

they have not had time to commit? I am going to Cannes. I shall sit in the sun and pretend that I am necessary to somebody's happiness, and probably, after a time, I shall believe it."

"Believe it now," Felix suggested, and put an arm round her. He would have proceeded further in comfort, but she stiffened suddenly and leaned towards the window.

"My eyes are not what they were," said Mrs. Dennison. "There is a poster out there for the *Evening* something or other. Can you read it?"

"Oh, damn!" said Felix hotly. "Why can't they leave the poor child alone?"

The poster ran briefly: "Jan Lovatt in Jermyn Street."

CHAPTER V

FELIX was occasionally despised by the temperamental as stupid. This was an error. He was merely a contented man. His profession of consulting engineer brought him in as much money as he had any very pressing need of, and he had few ties and practically no cares, the latter freedom being more a question of temperament than of anything else. His recipe for complete well-being—"A good cook and an easy chair"—had met with some support. In any case, Felix had them both, and was likely to keep them. Baily, the good cook, had been in his service for a trifle over four years, and had acquired, presumably by absorption, a large share of his master's placidity. He was as comfortable as the flat, and as solidly respectable as the Bank of England.

When, towards the close of a chill October day, Jan came running up the steps and rang the bell with the quick jerk of barely mustered courage, he greeted her with a smile which was serenely benign, in spite of the fact that the Lovatt trial had been a shock to his sensibilities.

“Mr. Royd is out for the moment, Mrs. Lovatt,” he told her regretfully. “I am expecting him back to dinner, if you will come in.”

“I’ll wait,” Jan told him briefly, and followed him into the sitting-room, where the fire burned with a cosy redness oddly reminiscent of Felix himself. Felix impressed himself upon his surroundings. One sighed in relapsing into his deep chairs, held out one’s hands to his fires, smiled up into his face.

“No. I’ve had tea, thank you,” said Jan, in answer to a murmured enquiry from the window, where Baily was drawing the soft, thick curtains.

The lights above her head were hooded with large orange shades appliquéd with black velvet owls. There was abundance of light, but all of it warm-tinted radiance that inclined the soul to bask. The back of all the chairs sloped inwards on reaching the seat, and it was impossible to do anything but recline in them. Jan reclined accordingly, and her mind wandered until suddenly caught and held by her own portrait, challenging observation in the place of honour over the fireplace, “With love, Jan” scrawled across the corner in her bold, upright handwriting. For a moment she stared at it.

How utterly mad to have written that! How utterly reckless to keep it here, exposed to the public eye! Then, with a hot flush, she remembered that everyone knew of its existence. It had been produced in court, reproduced in the newspapers, characterised by the prosecution as "a piece of unblushing effrontery." Jan wondered drearily how they had got hold of it at all, and why, once they had got hold of it, Felix had gone to the trouble of retrieving it; then realised with a little tremulous smile that he wore it as a gage; with a twinkle of humour maybe, but, since she had given it, and others had challenged his right to its possession, flaunted it on his mantelpiece in much the same spirit as a knightly favour. "And I would fain see the man who shall find himself aggrieved at this glove!"

"I will be a good wife to him!" Jan whispered desperately to the flickers in the fire. "I will! I will!"

"You can't!" the flames spat back at her. "Two months ago you said it was impossible. What has happened since to make you change your mind?"

"Be quiet!" said Jan.

She curled herself up on the hearthrug and pelted the fire with little chips of coal, choosing for pref-

erence hard, bright fragments which looked as if they would hurt.

The hearth was very wide, tiled in a shade of warm red-brown and chestnut, the fender raised at the sides and cushioned in untanned leather. When they were married they would sit here, one on either side of the hearth, and play at Darby and Joan. Jan, her frivolity beaten out of her, felt a sudden longing for domesticity. Oh, comfortable, comfortable Felix! Why had she fought against him for these months? Why had she objected to his only loving her in "a reasonable sort of way?" That was ideal. Safety, comfort, rest; that was enough to ask of any man in all conscience. Why was he so long? She was anxious to get over the first execrable moments of avowal, and be taken back into the quiet haven of rest and companionship. She had stayed away too long for the sake of an idiotic scruple. What was the use of it when, with the exception of Felix, there was not a man or woman living who believed that she had any longer a claim to their respect? As his wife she would, at least, be freed from any outward manifestations of contempt. Felix was not the man to be content with merely passive protection; nor was he the man to ignore the more obvious,

material part of their bargain. Jan winced a little, picturing that, then drew herself together with a jerk. Felix would be giving much—everything. It was something to have a commodity with which to square the bargain.

“After all,” said Jan in self-defence, “I *am* a lovely little devil.”

She rose as if to satisfy herself on the point, propped her elbows on the mantelpiece, and studied her small, pale face in the glass. A sleepless night had ringed her eyes with purple, and even the smooth cheeks showed white and pinched. There was less colour in the challenging mouth, a desperate compression instead of the usual soft curves, hinting at an agony of fear behind the set defiance.

“What is the matter with you, little idiot?” said Jan fiercely. “There is nothing whatever to be afraid of, and I never in my life saw you look so plain. Oh, why doesn’t Felix come!”

She turned away, and then whirled back again for another few words with the mirror:

“Where is your brazen effrontery? What is the use of it if it isn’t going to help you over times like this? Don’t you belong to yourself, to sell, trade, or barter, or to do any damn thing you please with? What if you are going to do a little disgraceful

bargaining? Haven't you been driven to it by the very respectable people who draw their clothes away from you? Haven't you been assured that this is the only way left for you to live? Wouldn't the same respectable people have you in the police-court if you attempted to solve the problem by not living? Well, then! And Felix can look after himself. No, he can't. Felix has been imposed on and taken advantage of all his life. If anyone has a lame horse, or a car that won't go, or a house with no drains, or a picture by a cubist whom nobody has heard of, or furniture which isn't really antique, or silver which isn't genuine, don't they at once seek out Felix and sell it to him? Isn't he bound to be victimised by the first adventuress who tries to make him pity her? Oh, what are you doing, you white-faced little parasite, you hopeless little rotter? And he called you a valiant little gentleman."

Ten minutes later Felix entered the room, to find her still standing there, her face hidden in her hands; but at the sound of his step she raised it, and turned to meet him, her eyes dilated and almost black in the white-rose face lifted to his.

"I came—" she whispered, and faltered over it. "I came to ask you to—to marry me, Felix, if

you will—that is, if you still want to. Oh, please tell me if you don't!"

"I do," said Felix briefly, and swept her off her feet. "Why, what's the matter, dear?"

She was trembling violently, her lips pressed tight to keep them steady, her whole body rigid with the effort to yield. The answer came between set teeth, the grey eyes desperately searching his face.

"This—this is the most beastly thing I ever did. Are you sure you understand, Felix? I'm rotten and a cheat from head to foot. I've no reputation. I'll be a disgrace to you all your life. I—I don't love you. I'm horribly afraid that I'm in love with another man. I've simply come to you to save my beastly self, and that is the vilest thing of all."

"I know what I'm getting all right. Don't worry about me. I can look after myself."

"You can't," wailed Jan. "Look at all those pictures!"

"Well, perhaps they are a bit fierce," Felix admitted cheerfully. "I'll take 'em down if you like."

"It isn't that. It's that they are bad, worthless, and you bought them from someone who said they were good because you knew he wanted the money;

or perhaps he pretended to be honest, as I do, and told you straight away that they were bad, and you bought them just the same, as he knew you would, and as I know you will, and we both of us counted on it. Perhaps if we hadn't we wouldn't have had the courage to tell you at all. God knows! Ugh, how I hate myself!"

"You needn't," said Felix calmly. "I told you that I knew what I was getting—a young wife, a lovely wife, a true wife. Behold, it is enough! No Oliver Twists allowed on the premises. There, that's all. Subject's finished with. Not another word."

He lifted her into the air, deposited her in an arm-chair, tidied her skirts, and settled himself at her feet, tilting his red-brown head back against her knee.

"There, Jan. Comfy?"

"Very. Felix, you are a *rest!*"

"That's all right, then. Now, what have you been doing with yourself these last three months? Oh, by the way, I saw that article in the paper."

"I guessed that you would." Jan leaned back in her chair, staring before her with a heavy despair in her eyes. "Oh, why can't they leave me alone? Haven't I been punished enough already?"

I thought I would get away from everybody and forget my own name, make a new life for myself. And I did—I did. It wasn't specially useful, and it wasn't very amusing, but it was *something*."

"And now it's impossible, I suppose?"

"Yes, impossible. All yesterday and the day before people were coming continually—to look at me, as if I were a show. It isn't much to ask of life, is it, just to be let alone? But I'm fair game for anybody who happens to recognise me and thinks he can make a guinea out of it. Felix, do you think you'll ever be able to make me feel sane and normal again?"

"Yes; and you're sane now. So am I; so is everybody; only there are nasty little snags in people when they get together in crowds. You always were rather in the limelight, Jan."

"I suppose so. I rather liked it before, but now——"

"Well, they've all got your photo, you see, and naturally they like to use it twice."

"So it will be the same trouble everywhere. Last night I was trying to think of a way out. My mind went round and round like a mouse in a cage, and there wasn't any way, so this morning I tried to drown myself."

“Jan!”

She had spoken so calmly that it was a moment before he comprehended the meaning of the words.

“Oh, I wasn’t afraid of the actual dying, but—the Thames is so muddy—and so public. Whenever I got as far as the parapet I thought of the police-court, and the staring crowds, and the hoardings, if anybody recognised me—all that over again—and I couldn’t find the nerve. Then I noticed that a policeman was watching me, and presently he came up and asked if I wasn’t Mrs. Anthony Lovatt. He had been on duty outside the court when I was tried, and he remembered me. I said I wasn’t, but I don’t think he believed me. He knew what I was going to do, because he said that it was his duty to take me in charge, but he didn’t want to be hard on anybody who was down and out, and so if I would give him my word not to do anything foolish he would let it drop. I gave it to him and ran away.”

“To me?”

“Yes. Not straight. I walked about the streets for a little first.”

“Strictly speaking,” said Felix meditatively, “I should have preferred it if you had come to me before the Thames, but never mind. Now look

here, Jan. Let me have your hands to hold for a few minutes, and give me a promise.”

“What?”

“Well, mainly the same one as you gave the policeman—seriously this time—that, whatever happens, you’ll never run off the tracks. Promise me, Jan. It’s frightfully important.”

“But I don’t want to. I like to think that if things are—very bad I can always wriggle out.”

He pinned her at once.

“There it is, you see. ‘Wriggle out.’ You’re too fine for that. You rage, but you don’t wriggle and you don’t give up. Your courage is phenomenal, Jan, and you have got to live up to it. But perhaps I am thinking of myself after all. I can stretch my imagination to the point of seeing times when the Thames would be the best way out, but I can’t see myself regarding it with any equanimity. There you have the root of the matter. I’m a selfish brute, you see, and I happen to be fond of you. If anything of that sort happened I should never get it out of my mind. That might be said of other people, but it’s myself I’m thinking of, you know.”

“Very well,” said Jan slowly.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Felix heaved a sigh of relief and pushed his head back against her knee, so that he was smiling his thanks straight up into her grey eyes, and stretched up a big brown hand to pat her arm in a friendly fashion.

“It’s good to feel that you trust me, Jan. Yes, you do, quite a lot, and that’s a good basis to start working on. We are going to make a success of our times together, see if we don’t. Do you want to know our immediate plans, by the way?”

“I suppose I might as well. What are they?”

“Well, I’m afraid that, as things are, we can’t be married to-day. It’s past six for one thing, and, for another, I’m not in the least sure how to set about it, beyond the fact that one gets a special licence from someone. I’m afraid that it will have to be a registrar’s office, but that’s a detail. Then for to-night I suggest that we have dinner together here, and then I’ll loan you the flat—after all, it will be your flat after to-morrow—and take myself off to the club. To-morrow morning we might do a little shopping. Where do you want to spend your honeymoon, Jan?”

“Honeymoon!” Jan started violently, and

stared at him with dilated eyes. "Oh, I—hadn't thought. Need we——"

"Have a honeymoon? Not unless you like. Had you thought of anything beyond the actual moment, grey eyes?"

"Yes." Jan set her lips resolutely. "I'm not making any reservations at all. I—I'm glad you think me pretty. That's all I've got to pay with, the only part of me that isn't a cheat. I don't paint, nor even use a lip-stick. There are no horrible little discoveries for you to make, like hair dye, or false teeth, or spoiled feet. All the surface part of me is all right, and I—I'll do my best about the rest. Do you really want a honeymoon, Felix?"

"Not specially. What do you think of it yourself?"

"I'd rather stay here, I think—that is, if you don't mind. I want to hide somewhere for a little while. Not for long. I'll soon get over it. Do you think it very cowardly, Felix?"

"Well, hardly." He met her pleading eyes with a smile. "At the same time, it's better to face things out if you can. You haven't done anything to be ashamed of. Don't let the scurrilous little

people keep you from leading a normal life. That's paying them too much of an honour. Yes, I daresay it's easy enough to say that, and extremely difficult to do it, but I love preaching. It makes me feel so comfortably superior while it lasts, and you can always preach back, you know."

"I don't feel like it," said Jan slowly.

She was silent for a few minutes, interlacing her fingers tightly over her knee, then sprang to her feet, her head held high, a bright spot of colour flaming in either cheek.

"Very well, we won't hide—not a day—not an hour! I don't want to any longer. Take me somewhere, Felix—to one of the old places where there are sure to be hundreds of people we know. I don't suppose they will consent to know us, but never mind. Will you send Baily to get my things, please? Now, at once, and we'll go."

"Not to-night, Jan."

"Yes, to-night. I want you to realise it all before it's too late for you to draw back and tell me to go to the devil, where I belong; as I should do of my own accord if I had the courage of a water-rat. Let me have my own way just this once."

"I'm not denying you anything to-night," said Felix gently.

He rose, slipping a protective arm around the frail shoulders, and ruffled her hair affectionately.

“Jan, do you know the conclusion people may jump to if they see us about together just now?”

“I do,” said Jan steadily. “Well, I suppose they think something of the sort already, don’t they? If we are to live a normal life let’s begin at once.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” Felix admitted reluctantly. “Well, after to-morrow everyone will know that it’s all right, so it can’t make so very much difference.”

He was inclined to wish that he had maintained his objection when, an hour later, he ushered Jan into one of their favourite haunts, and saw a ripple of curiosity run over the tables like the wind over a cornfield; a sudden vista of twisting shoulders as their owners turned their heads towards the door; widened eyes, journalistic in their sharpness; here and there a solitary diner, restrained by some remaining precept of good manners, staring fixedly at the plate before him, but, from the majority, an intent and shameless stare. It was early yet, and half the tables were empty, but the more secluded had been pounced upon even earlier.

“I don’t care,” said Jan, instantly interpreting his thought. “I came here to be seen. Let them stare at me. After all, I suppose they will have to stop some time, if only to eat.”

She dropped the cloak from her shoulders, the battle signals flaunting hotly in her smooth cheeks, and deliberately eyed the surrounding faces, giving back stare for stare. Here and there someone endeavoured to catch her eye, but Jan acknowledged none. She sat erect, her chin at an angle, crumbling her bread with unsteady fingers, then looked at Felix quickly with a little half-laugh.

“How much of this can you stand, my dear?”

“As much as you can.”

“Sure? Not for just to-day and to-morrow, but for ever and ever, world without end, amen? There’s still time for you to turn me down, you know, and it’s kinder to do it really, unless you are sure, dead sure, that you can—endure to the end.”

“If it was going to be as bad as you think, I could,” said Felix firmly, “but it won’t be. Give them a year to get hold of another scandal, and we shall be able to go about as if we were nobodies. That’s a generous estimate, too. It won’t be a year. Memories are short, thank the Lord!”

“I don’t think mine is.”

“Don’t be morbid, my dear. Wait till you’ve really done something that it is gall and wormwood to remember.”

“Well, what am I doing now, though I swore two months ago that I’d never do it? That’s the pressure of public opinion, I suppose—a sort of faith-healing, only worked the other way round. Everybody thinks I’m a rotter, so I straightway embark upon a rotten thing like this. Oh, I’m sorry, Felix. I know you hate me to talk like that, but, in a funny sort of way, it eases my conscience to call myself a beast. A conscience is a selfish, useless possession when one comes to think of it. To hell with it—no, to heaven. We need not journey in company.”

She lifted her wine-glass and sipped, her eyes glowing like jewels above the rim.

“What are you thinking about, Felix?”

“That you are one of the loveliest things I’ve ever seen. Oh, I know that’s crude,” he added composedly, as Jan made a grimace at him. “My dear, you asked me to tell you what I thought, not to wrap you up a compliment and throw it across the table like a bonbon. Honestly, Jan, half the people here are staring at you because they know who you are, and the other half because they don’t

and wish they did. You can't help being noticeable, you see. It isn't entirely the little Press paragraphs that have done the mischief. It's Nature who made you what you are."

"And married me to Tony."

"Well, perhaps his money may have had something to do with it. It covered you with cloth of gold, and turned you from a pixie into a queen regnant. You have an air of walking on red carpets and bowing at suitable intervals. Confess, Jan, you were rather fed up with adulation when we first met, and you looked upon me as a change. Oh, I admire you, of course, but not——"

"Not on your bended knees?"

"No, more like this."

He slid out his hand across the table cloth, and after a moment she gripped it, wringing it furiously with small hot fingers.

"There. That's better, isn't it?"

"Lots better, Felix. There's no one on earth I like and trust as I do you. That's such a comfort to think about. You—you will beat me, won't you, if I disappoint you badly?"

"Rather not. If I hit you, you'd break. I shall probably pull your hair, though, and perhaps stick my fingers in your eyes. I say, Jan, do you mind

looking at your plate for a couple of minutes.”

“Why?” said Jan, and, with the immediate contrariness of human nature, raised her eyes, and looked across to the entrance, crowded now with the main body of supper-hunters. There was no need to repeat her question.

“But I thought he was abroad,” said Jan, with stiff lips.

“So he was. He is now, presumably, back; but of course that needn’t affect us to any great extent. There is plenty of room in London for the three of us. I didn’t want you to see him if it could be helped, but that doesn’t matter, of course. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not much,” said Jan uncertainly. “Felix, can we go soon! I don’t want any more to eat, and——”

“And our table is in request,” said Felix good-naturedly, and beckoned a waiter. “Don’t stand up yet, Jan. Wait till they get settled at their table if you want to avoid observation.”

“Very well,” said Jan tonelessly.

She might have told him that any precautions were a waste of time, for across the sea of tables which separated her from Anthony their eyes had already met. His passed on to find her companion,

then returned to her filled with a dreadful comprehension, and suddenly and overwhelmingly she was sick of the room, with its glaring, revealing lights, and its chattering, staring people. She pushed back her chair and rose, feeling blindly for her cloak, and as Felix moved to drop it over her satin-smooth shoulders she winced away from him. Above everything rose the necessity to get away and hide like a hunted animal. They passed between the crowded tables like ghosts, and were out in the night air again, picking their way delicately over the wet pavements by the hard pools of artificial light. They found a taxi at the foot of Shaftesbury Avenue, and relapsed into it with a sigh of relief.

“Tired, Jan?”

“A little. That was a mistake. And yet I don’t know. It taught me something.”

She turned her head restlessly on the cushion, and stared out at the moving shadows of the streets.

“After all, we agreed that everyone might think *that* if they chose.”

“Only Lovatt isn’t ‘everyone’?” Felix suggested gently.

“No. Not that I care a damn what he thinks. Oh, it isn’t fair to lie to you to-night. I do care.

I care horribly. But I suppose there will come a time when I don't."

"Of course there will," said Felix consolingly. The darkness hid his expression, but there was a new intonation in his voice which made Jan turn to him quickly, her wide eyes striving to pierce the shadows.

"Felix, you're hating this?"

"I'm not. Here we are. I won't come in to-night, Jan."

"Why not?" said Jan dully. "It's your flat."

Then with a jerk she shrugged off her turgid mood and got to her feet.

"Good-night, Felix. I'm sorry I've been such a beast."

"My dear," said Felix gravely, "I like and admire you, and I firmly believe you to be the straightest of living women. What beastliness there is in proving that you trust me I cannot imagine."

He kissed her lightly, and turned away to the taxi as Jan ran up the steps of the flat. Twelve was striking as she dropped her cloak on the carpet and pushed open the door of the bedroom. The shaded lights blinked softly on the brass knobs of the bedstead and the ordered array of handleless

brushes. "How uncomfortable he will be tomorrow!" thought Jan's subconscious mind. As she walked across to the dressing-table she came face to face with her own reflection for the second time that day, and stared at it with the deepest disgust.

"You would have let him do it," she whispered fiercely. "You would actually have let him marry you, you damned cheat!"

She struck the reflection across the face with her open palm.

CHAPTER VI

OTWAY is a little village on the south coast, and half a dozen people make a habit of going there yearly to fish. Beyond that it has few visitors. There is a tiny inn, which calls itself an hotel, and a cluster of cottages for the permanent population, who are poor, but not very poor. Practically everybody keeps chickens, and nobody buys eggs. It is an ideal place to go to if one desires to live the simple life.

The farthest house of the village has lost itself altogether, and wandered up a footpath almost into the next cove. It is a larger cottage than the majority, and the landlord, aware of this, and finding a difficulty in letting it, has divided it into two. The larger half is, or was, let to a "writing lady," regarded with awe, not untinged with scorn, by the more practical population, and left severely alone as a modern practiser of the black arts and a worker of mysteries.

Monica Stuart was a tall, long-limbed girl of five and twenty, her face very broad at the fine

forehead, dwindling abruptly to a small, sharp chin, her nose, rather too long, was inclined to be sharp also, except at the tip, which was blunted into a knob in the unexpected manner so common in Saxon noses. Her eyes, very wide apart and straight-looking, were calm as the evening star and cool as wet violets, and her cold, crisp voice was a delight to the ear.

You see her first in a faded overall cut square to the neck and falling straight, unbelted, to just above her ankles, which are shapely. It is marked about the cuffs and yoke by dabs and splashes of ink, where she has used it to clean the tip of her pen, and her patch pockets are stained also, and torn a little, hanging outwards.

Monica had first come to Otway in the ordinary manner, as a summer visitor, breaking fresh ground in the way of seaside retreats, had cocked an ironic eye at the village and an adoring one at the splendour of sea and cloud, and announced that the air which did such wonders to other people's chickens must be the very thing for the development of her Soul. Incidentally, she spoke of her soul with a capital "S," made fun of it in public, and worshipped it in private. She stayed.

Thus Jan, knocking at the door of the cliff cot-

tage, found it opened to her by a lanky, grave-faced girl, who eyed her with frank curiosity, and then with franker concern.

“Good Lord, how wet you are! Come in and dry!”

“I don’t mind rain,” said Jan, and shook the drops from her hat, where they were collecting in preparation to descend in a minature waterspout. “I really came for the key of the next cottage. I understood that you had it. You are——”

“Oh, yes, I’m Monica Stuart. Are we going to be neighbours? How nice! But you can’t look over the place in that state. Do take off that hat and dump it in front of the fire. I was just going to have tea, anyway. There’s nothing to eat—there never is—but there’s heaps to drink. Do stay.”

“Shan’t I be disturbing you?”

“You’ll be disturbing my heroine,” said Monica grimly. “I don’t care. She’s such a stick of a girl, and she talks and talks. If she would only shut up for a moment and give the hero a chance I might get somewhere, but at present there isn’t an earthly chance of it!”

Jan laughed sympathetically, and drew the only other chair close to the fire. November was well advanced, and the biting sea wind had chilled her

to the bone. As she drew off her wet gloves and held a small blue hand to the fire she shivered slightly, and hunched her shoulders about her ears.

“They told me in the village that you wrote. You seem to be regarded as rather a curiosity, you know.”

“I write books that nobody ever reads,” Monica admitted. “Of course, I have never had one published. That may be the reason. I don’t know that I blame the publishers, either. It is not their fault that they are born without a sense of discrimination. I say, you do look frozen. I hope you haven’t caught your death of cold.”

“I hope so, too. Does it always rain here?”

“Well, it rained yesterday and the day before. As a general rule I should say it did, except when it snows. Please don’t let that put you off. It’s quite a nice place really.”

“Put me off?”

“Well, you’re going to stay here, aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure,” said Jan, her eyes on the fire. “I may not be able to. It depends on—circumstances.”

“I hope you can,” said Monica warmly. “You’ve no idea how lonely it is.”

She had cleared the ruck of papers from the

table, and was cutting brown bread and butter, her head, fuzzy as that of a Fiji islander, bent above the loaf, and presently Jan turned her eyes from the coals to watch her with a kind of hungry wistfulness which had grown on her during the past months. Jan was naturally gregarious, and the complete isolation from companionship had told on her more than even she was aware.

“Why, I haven’t spoken to a friend for weeks,” she said impulsively, and instantly regretted her indiscretion; but Monica was not observant, or, apparently, suspicious. She merely raised eyes of honest astonishment and paused for a moment in her work of cutting.

“Good heavens! Where have you been living?”

“In London.”

“Oh, that explains it,” said Monica, with a worldly-wise nod. “London is the most God-forsaken spot on this earth, unless you happen to live in the suburbs, which God forbid. There, tea’s ready.”

As she moved to the table Jan eyed the kitchen with interest and some admiration. The walls were hand distempered, and decorated with a frieze of dancing skeletons. Monica explained in the interval of munching bread and butter that she

had done them herself, and that most of the unframed sketches tacked to the wall, haphazard, were her own also. She leaned to pen-and-ink work, and found her subjects in scrawny damsels writhing in the toils of scaly but otherwise inoffensive dragons, or riding tempestuous waves in every conceivable attitude of vigorous abandon. There were one or two seascapes, done entirely with the brush, and decorated on either the near or far horizon with a red and flaming sun and a flock of seagulls. Short curtains in a large check decorated the small-paned windows. The floorboards were stained rather unevenly, and covered at intervals with Japanese grass mats in varying stages of repair.

“I started to make a carpet once,” Monica explained, “but it took so long that I gave it up. Besides, it was so dull and easy. I hate doing things that anybody can do. It is such a waste of time. It’s like owning that one is no better than anybody else. That may be true, but why own it? I instinctively distrust people who assure me that they are no better than their neighbours. It invariably means that they are worse. No one is as good as they think they are, so it is as well to

think strenuously, and catch up when you can.”

“Is the other half of the cottage anything like this?” said Jan curiously, seizing the first opportunity to slip in a question.

“Well, it isn’t quite so nice,” Monica admitted frankly. “You see, I have what used to be the sitting-room and the best bedroom. I put in this stove and a bathroom. It’s the only private bathroom in Otway. I’ll lend it to you if you like. We have to share the garden, too. There was a honeysuckle and a columbine in it last year. I’ll have the honeysuckle, and you can have the columbine if it comes up. We drink rainwater mainly. It’s in a tank under the garden, and you have to pump up what you want every morning. It’s a beastly job. We’ll do it on alternate days. Now, will you come and see your half?”

She led the way, and Jan followed, lamblike, dazed by the quick, continuous flood of directions. Monica was guide, philosopher, and friend in voluble triumvirate as she opened the second door of the cottage with a flourish, thrust Jan in out of the rain, and followed herself, neatly avoiding the drips from the leaky rainwater pipe above the door.

The room they entered was small and dark

in the wintry twilight, cheerless as uninhabited, uncared-for rooms are bound to be. Monica introduced it with a gesture.

“There is no passage, you see. There was, but they did away with it when they divided the place. That makes it the very devil for draughts, but otherwise I don’t know that you miss it. It was probably too narrow for a Christian, and the very haven of rest for earwigs. You would have to do up this room a little. I’ll distemper it for you. Painting woodwork is easy, if you know how much oil to use with the paint. I do. It won’t be so dark when the window is cleaned. That stove is made to light, little as it looks like it. I tried one day to see. Whether it cooks or not I couldn’t say. Do you mind cockroaches? I think that there are some about. If you give them Keatings in small doses they usually die. Some don’t, but that’s fate. Are you wondering how one gets to the next floor? The stairs are in the cupboard. I think that is to deceive burglars, but it may be to deceive the tenant. Again I couldn’t say. The chief advantage is that you can’t fall down them. There isn’t room. *Allons!* We mount the stairs.”

The room above was tiny, sloping of roof, and diminutive of window, with the additional dis-

advantage that a square had been cut out of the floor to admit the passage of the stairs, but the window, set in the slope of the roof, gave a matchless vista of sea and rock, and tumbled, thunderous clouds seen through a thin grey veil of drifting rain.

Monica threw open the window and the cold, salt wind swept in to replace the stagnant mustiness, with the clean, sweet smell of the rain. Drops, blown inwards, frosted her golliwog hair as she turned, her face oddly reverent, and quoted softly:

Charmed magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Their eyes met in quick understanding and spoke to each other a moment. Then she laughed and nodded cheerfully.

“So you know that, too. Who doesn’t? But we are going to be friends, aren’t we?”

“No,” said Jan, suddenly grave.

“Why not? Don’t you—like me?”

“I could like you a lot too much. That is just the trouble. That is why I can’t stay here at all. I thought I could till you opened that window, but——”

She paused a moment, fingering the sash, her eyes cast down; then raised them, resolutely courageous.

“Doesn’t my face remind you of anything?”

Monica shook a puzzled head, her face demanding enlightenment, and Jan went on ruthlessly.

“My name is Desmond now. It used to be Jan Lovatt. *Now* do you remember?”

“No. Ought I to?” Monica was aghast. “Good heavens, you don’t write too?”

Jan laughed a little uncontrolled laugh, shook her head, and turned away, staring out of the window at the tumultuous waves.

“No, I don’t write. I’ve been written about—quite a lot. I’m very famous. My trial was the most sensational of the year. My husband divorced me a few months ago—for the usual sordid reasons. Now you know.”

She eyed Monica’s open, unfeigned horror with calm detachment, and added dispassionately:

“Of course, I should have told you that before I accepted your food. You wouldn’t have offered it if you had known. Thank you, anyway. I think I had better go now.”

“Don’t,” said Monica, with a gasp and a gulp, “Come and look at my bathroom.”

CHAPTER VII

MONICA was a product peculiar to her age, cynical, blasée, aloof, and, beneath her crab-like armour of sophistication, as utterly and innocently ignorant as the most Victorian grandmother could have desired. She had gone out of her way to acquire a technical knowledge of the nastiness of life, and took some pride in shocking her parents with the exhibition of it, but, though of this she was blissfully unaware, she remained as complete a stranger to it as a schoolgirl to the French tongue, and her attitude towards divorce was a striking example of this curious state of mind. In writing, in debating societies, and in conversation, she was vehement in its defence as a necessary adjunct of modern life. Privately, though without acknowledging it even to herself, she accepted the teachings of the Bible on this point *in toto*, and would have held it a point of honour to fight her way through any matrimonial tangle to the bitter end; but her judgments were always impulsive. She had taken Jan to her heart at sight, recognising a fellow spirit, or perhaps

merely caught by the fresh, vivid beauty of face and voice. Her instinctive efforts to pin down the new-found acquaintance with offers of service had sprung from admiration as spontaneous as it was fervent, and to be told that she had, to use a current phrase, taken a viper to her bosom caused the same amazed recoil as if she had really been guilty of that short-sighted action. So much for the first moment. Then reaction. Squalid romance and draggled-tailed morality had, she was sure of it, no further connection with those eyes. Sin? It was a word with no meaning. She held out her hand impulsively.

“Come and look at my bathroom.”

It was typical of Monica that she made no further reference to the matter, dismissing it, even in thought, to that world of shadowy unrealities in which she had no active curiosity. As to herself, she made no reserves. She was the daughter of a schoolmaster, had herself carried off honours at school, and started life with the handicapping belief that she was clever. It was advisable, though not absolutely necessary, that she should do something for her living, and she had tried a number of things with varying success, always hampered by the knowledge that she could do something else better.

She had left writing to the last because her people disapproved of it, though she herself believed that her whimsical aptitude for the pen would prove her salvation. Her father allowed her a hundred a year, living was cheap, and she supplemented her income by knitting jumpers at fifteen shillings a garment. This source of income she revealed to Jan, rather suspecting the stringency of the latter's finances.

"You knit a sample jumper," she explained, "and after that they send you down the silk, and pay you for the work as you do it. It isn't very well paid, of course, but it ekes things out. When I first came down here I spent my first quarter's allowance in putting in the bathroom, and I couldn't very well write home for more. Daddy is a dear, and I know he gives me absolutely all he can afford; so I stuffed my unprofitable novels into the cupboard and knitted furiously. I was as lean as a slum cat before the next quarter-day, but I made ends meet somehow. Why don't you try it?"

"I can knit," Jan admitted, frowning. "I don't see why I shouldn't try, at any rate."

Monica foraged for a moment in one of her frequent heaps of litter, dragged forth a bulging work-bag, and from thence extracted a limp gar-

ment of vivid sea green, and held it out at arm's length with much the gesture of one handling a dead rat.

"There's your sample. Isn't it fierce?"

"Do you mean I'm to copy that?"

"No. Send it in as your work and save time. I know it's all right, because I've been working for those people for a year. Then, when they send you down the silk, you can start straight away."

"Is that quite honest?"

"Why not? They can always say that they don't like your work if they don't. Anyway, being businesslike is doing as many people as you can without being found out. I was in the city once for a whole year, but I wasn't much of a success. I was always being found out. By the way, how are you getting on with my novel?"

Jan, who had accepted the thankless task of reading and criticism, and who had been vainly trying to divide her attention between the Monica of the clear, incisive voice and the Monica of the scribbled foolscap, puckered her brows a moment before replying, aware of the delicacy of the task.

"Your people talk too much," she decided at last. "All the chapters are really a series of dialogues. If your heroine is on the stage they're

monologues. You are using yourself for your heroine, aren't you?"

"Oh, Jan! That hopeless, pedantic prig!" Monica broke off, aware of the familiarity. "I'm sorry. You never said that I might call you that."

"Do. I like it."

"Well, anyway, here have I been cursing that girl from the first page, and wondering where on earth I got her from and you dare to ask me if she's *me*."

"Sorry, but she is like you, you know, and a long way the most vivid study you've done. All the women are good, I think, but the men so far are rather sticks."

"I don't know any," Monica confessed, with an anxious frown. "I had to make them up out of my own head. Isn't it terrible the way some girls are brought up? Except for daddy, and one or two others, all old and much married, I've hardly spoken to a man in my life, and I'm twenty-five. I wonder where men go to when they're young? One hardly ever sees them between eighteen—when, so far as character goes, they don't exist—and forty-five, when they are simply branded with middle age. I believe they hibernate in between times, and marry in their sleep. In fact, that ex-

plains the type of girls who marry and the type who don't. I have always wondered whether the average married woman is fatuous because she is married, or was married because she was fatuous, or whether it is only fatuous women who allow themselves to be married."

"The last, I think," said Jan, with a flickering glance at her ringless left hand lying across her knee.

The look did not escape Monica, but she refrained from commenting upon it.

"I loathe the ordinary English married woman!" she said vigorously. "As far as I can see, there is nothing she does well. She can't or won't dress. She can't cook. She knows less than nothing about hygiene, and what she does know won't apply. If her house is mismanaged, as it always is, she blames the modern servant. Actually she knows about as much about housekeeping as the average cart-horse. She will regard it as a chance affair and not as a science. I don't blame her so much as the system. She's proud of knowing nothing. Read any war novel, and you'll find that the chief reproach we hurl against the German woman is that she knows her job. Not that I think a woman should be a slave to her house, but our

women *are*, and querulous slaves at that. They are slaves to their children, too, and the children bully and despise them for it. No one was ever the better for any silly self-sacrifice. The atmosphere of unselfishness is as enervating as damp heat, and more exasperating. The domestic tyrant is a finer animal than the domestic martyr. Oh, I tell you the incompetent housewives of England are responsible for a lot! Here endeth the first lesson. If you'll clear the table I'll cook the lunch."

The two had drifted into the habit of lunching together on alternate days. It was, said Monica, a dispiriting business to cook for oneself, and she thought highly of her cooking, not altogether without reason. Jan, whose ignorance in matters domestic was almost complete, had become her pupil, and accepted advice and instruction with eager gratitude. Her first week at the cliff cottage had been an epic struggle with the accumulation of dirt on a diet of hard-boiled eggs and bought rolls, but Monica, discovering the state of affairs, had attacked her with bracing scorn, and initiated her into the delights of bread-making. Privately Jan thought the trouble involved disproportionate to the saving of farthings, but she admitted the charm of kneading the dough, dividing and twisting it into

shapes, and setting it before a hot fire to heave and swell its way into being. She learned, too, the mystery of crisp, golden omelettes, which is briefly to beat the yolks and whites separately and long, and the way to make coffee that was really coffee and not pale, coloured fluid, and how to use sand for cleaning and scouring.

As the winter shut down on Otway it was as if invisible gates had been set up between the inhabitants and the outer world. Even the motorists who occasionally whizzed through the village were held up by the state of the roads. A thin, grey film of sleet settled over everything, and alternately froze hard or melted and dripped muddily. Jan, who had never spent a winter on the coast, discovered in the grey, storm-racked sea an endless source of delight, and neglected her knitting to curl up against the grey, frost-starred pane and watch, or on warmer days ventured down to the rocks to get a nearer vision of the racing white horses. Monica, who, as has been said, was graciously pleased to approve of the sea, usually accompanied her.

It was returning from one of these expeditions that they came upon a party of motorists, who had strayed from the beaten track in search of a new

sensation, and found it in a breakdown miles from anywhere.

Jan had frozen into recognition, and would have passed them without speaking, but was detained, and when she rejoined Monica five minutes later her sparkling eyes and elevated chin excited the latter's frank curiosity.

"Friends of yours?"

"I haven't any!" said Jan viciously, and her mouth set uncompromisingly. Then, aware of having been ungracious, she laughed uncertainly.

"Monica, if God stamped on you, which would you prefer, the people who ran away from the mess or the ones who crowded closer to look?"

"The runners," said Monica, with prompt decision. "I never thought of that before. I wonder if that is what usually makes charity so insufferable."

"Probably. If I invented a new commandment it would be: 'Thou shalt not finger thy neighbour's soul.' No one would keep it."

"Oh, yes, they would," said Monica firmly. "You're not so transparent as you think you are. At the very worst there will always be a glass case between you and the public. By the way, this is December, Jan."

“Do you think I don’t know it?” said Jan, with a protracted shiver. “Why, it’s written in the very marrow of my bones. Why do you think it necessary to remind me?”

“Christmas is coming,” Monica announced briskly. “I always go home to my people for a week or two. What are you thinking of doing?”

“Nothing. Stay here, I suppose.”

She stared fixedly at the water as she spoke, finding it dreary. The Desmonds had never been accustomed to make much of Christmas, but as a rule they had spent it together. Jan, the outcast, felt a sudden spasm of home-sickness, and bit her lip sharply to drive away the desolate ache.

“Look here!” said Monica, pursuing her own train of thought with her customary oblivion to cross-currents. “Why can’t you come home with me. My people would love to have you. Daddy is a dear, so is Frances, and it would be jolly for me. Do come!”

“I’d love to, but of course I can’t.” Jan stared at her. “Have you forgotten?”

“There isn’t anything to forget,” said Monica stoutly, “and if there was, I have.”

“That’s frightfully nice of you.” Jan slipped a hand through her arm with an affectionate laugh.

“But, my dear, do you seriously imagine I would accept hospitality from people who don’t know that I’m a divorced woman? They don’t, I suppose?”

“Of course they don’t,” said Monica indignantly. “It isn’t their business.”

“If I went to their house it would be.”

“Oh, very well then. I’ll write and tell them if you like,” Monica conceded reluctantly. “It won’t make any difference, and it’s frightful rot, anyway, but I suppose if you say so——”

“I don’t and you shan’t. I don’t think you realise what divorce means, you know, and I’m sure I don’t want you to; but your mother will, and then I—shall lose a friend, I suppose. I haven’t too many.”

“I wouldn’t drop you for a wilderness of relations!” said Monica hotly. “Besides, you seem to think my people are utter beasts, Jan. They’re not!”

“I daresay, but I don’t suppose they are any more tolerant than my own. I’m not allowed home, you see.”

“The unconscionable brutes!” snapped Monica vindictively, and Jan regarded her with amusement.

“I wonder if I say thank you for that,” she said

meditatively. "Well, it's nice of you, only they aren't, you know. I believe they would have me back if they could, but I have sisters—three of them—and it wouldn't be fair to them."

"I suppose you think that the existing arrangement is fair to you! Don't be a hypocrite, Jan! Besides, it's no use telling me that you ever did anything which would shock a baby. I should call you a liar."

"Babies aren't easily shocked," said Jan.

CHAPTER VIII

A WEEK later Monica departed for her home. The suggestion that Jan should accompany her had been allowed to lapse, Monica accepting the finality of the other's reasoning; and she made no further reference to it until the last moment when she was safely packed into the aged trap which was to carry her the five miles to the nearest station. Then she leaned out for a moment and put her hands on Jan's shoulders.

“Sure you won't come with me, dear?”

“Of course. But I shall be all right down here. Don't worry. Happy Christmas to you!”

Acting on impulse she raised her lips for Monica's brief, pecking kiss of farewell, and stood watching the departure of the creaking trap with wistful eyes until the dip in the road hid it from sight. Then, feeling that a return to her lonely knitting was more than likely to lead to a fit of nostalgia she turned towards the cove.

The tide was far out, leaving an expanse of smooth sand bare to the afternoon sun. Towards

the mouth of the cove, where a bar of sabre-toothed rocks jutted out, nearly closing it, the water lay still in broad lakes and channels gleaming faintly blue in the reflection of the pallid sky. The sand itself was smooth enough, and pleasantly resilient to the foot. Jan crossed the half mile or so of the beach, picking her way among the network of shallow pools and found a seat of tawny seaweed partly sheltered from the wind where she could curl up for a moment and observe the breakers tumbling in across the limestone breastwork. She watched them, however, with an absent mind engaged in other problems, for the immediate business of living claimed urgent attention. She had discovered that by spending every spare moment left over from housework in rapid knitting it was just possible to make thirty shillings a week. One could live on that, especially now that she had learned not to waste half her food in cooking it, and could leave a small margin over for safety, but only a minute one; and piecework has the alarming disability of being paid for at irregular intervals. Jan, whose ignorance of business methods was profound, had been aghast at the discovery, and had flown to prompt and stringent economies.

“But when *do* they pay you?” she queried indig-

nantly, when driven to speak of her difficulty to Monica.

“When they think they will. You have to send in your bill regularly of course. You may have to send it in two or three times.”

“But I hate seeming to dun people.”

“You have to. Nobody pays bills before they must. Most concerns are run on the money they owe. Why, free lance journalists and artists don’t get paid for months. I know some who are nearly always at their wits’ end for money for just that reason.”

“It isn’t very fair.”

“It isn’t at all fair, but there you are. It’s the custom. The piece-worker scores over some things; but mostly he has a dog’s life. That explains the existence of the wage slave. If it weren’t safer to be pinned down no one would bare their bosoms to the pin.”

Jan considered this point frowning, reluctantly acknowledged it, and altered her budget accordingly. She was shy of discussing money matters, and preferred to struggle through alone than apply for help as to what could or could not be most easily dispensed with; but it was here that Monica’s directing hand would have been of most use to her,

for she had only the vaguest ideas as to what were luxuries and what grim essentials. She cut herself down to bread and cheese, and was recklessly extravagant with her laundry, spent a week's income on her shoes and wasted a morning trying to mend a leaky tap, which a plumber could have settled in five minutes. In the past few weeks she had lost something of her smooth roundness of cheek, and violet shadows had settled themselves beneath her eyes. The glowing scarlet of her mouth was less pronounced.

Her small stock of money was dwindling perilously, and her nights were haunted by petty, but terrifying arithmetic, bread at 5d., butter 1s. 2d., cocoa—Jan detested cocoa, but had been told that it was nourishing—8d., and, above all, the lunches which she shared with Monica, and which could not be economised.

“It seems such a waste of food to eat it,” said Jan, with passionate seriousness.

In Monica's absence she decided to eliminate the item of a mid-day meal, remembering that she had read somewhere that two meals a day were both healthful and economical.

“And Monica will be back in a fortnight,” said Jan. “So it can't kill me anyway.”

She rose, stamping her feet, and folded her hands closely against the base of her warm throat, gazing out over the grey restlessness of the sea. She had ceased to be resentful against life, mainly because the fire had burnt itself out. Of Anthony she resolutely refused to think. Whether he had meant much or little in her life, whether he had treated her well or ill, he was shut away in the back cupboards of her mind, and padlocked in; but the life they had lived together was a neutral zone where she allowed herself to range at will. The Mediterranean and Pluffles. The big Japanese umbrella, casting a parti-coloured shadow on the sand, where the beautiful Mrs. Lovatt held levée, flushed from a reckless exhibition of diving, sleek and workmanlike as an otter in her one-piece swimming suit, that clothed and revealed her at once like a black skin. Jan was a strong swimmer, and a quite fearless one. She could never be otherwise than conspicuous, but the sea was her supreme theatre. Where was Anthony in the picture? She pondered the question with drawn brows, and laughed vexedly. The man had a positive genius for self-effacement. Was it natural to him, or a carefully cultivated art? She reined her thoughts to a standstill, conscious whither they

were tending. For the first time in her swift, careless life she had leisure for self-analysis and restless questioning, and both were equally useless.

“We take things as they come because they come,” said Jan, “and afterwards, when we try to sort them out, we don’t know how.”

A wave larger than the rest came tearing landward, and dashed itself with a bubbling roar against the very rock on which she was standing, and Jan turned towards the shore, clambering over the rocks in preference to the smoother going of the sand, where the shallow pools were already uniting into formidable lakes. Jan was learning a respect for shoe leather, but it was slow work picking her way among the boulders in the waning light, and her skirts and ankles were wet enough before she reached the dry land, and ran up the path to the cottage.

For the first time in weeks the windows were dark and unlighted, mutely reminding her of Monica’s absence. The fire, left too long untended, had seized the opportunity to go out. It was a cheerless homecoming.

Jan made a face at herself in the window pane, and broke into the “Marseillaise.”

CHAPTER IX

“YOU aren’t looking well,” said Monica severely.

She had, though she did not say so, cut her holiday short, in spite of protestations, for the sake of a speedy return to her disconsolate companion. Her friendships were few and Jan’s small fingers were twisted in her heartstrings more tightly than she realised. Something of admiration, something of girl and girl freemasonry, but more than all a warm protective motherliness went to make up the strength and sweetness of their relationship; and it was the mother now who surveyed Jan with anxious solicitude, and noted the pinched face where the bright, unnatural flush came and went with suspicious frequency, dyeing even the smooth forehead under the square-cut hair. Her eyes appeared to have grown abnormally large and luminous, and yet to wear a blinded expression as if she had looked too long at a bright light. Monica, listening to the quick, uneasy breath, guessed shrewdly that she should be in bed, but judged it impolitic to say so. At her comment, Jan had put

up an unsteady hand to push the damp hair off her forehead, and regarded her with a puzzled distress which was infinitely alarming.

“I get little black spots before my eyes,” she complained listlessly. “It makes it awfully difficult to knit. I wonder if I ought to see an oculist.”

“Rot!” said Monica with scornful vigour. “You’ve been underfeeding, that’s what’s the matter with you. I guessed it at once. What have you been having to eat while I have been away?”

“Oh, the usual sort of things.”

“Cooked food?”

“Well, it didn’t seem worth while to mess about with pots and pans just for myself. I don’t care what I eat and it’s too much bother. Don’t scold, Monica!”

She broke off to cough, and Monica, already sufficiently warned by the faint hoarse voice with its dragging undercurrent of weariness, grew solemn as a lead coffin.

“I won’t bully,” she promised kindly, her eyes observant. “But you might try to be a sensible little beast. There’s no earthly good in starving yourself. Look here, when I first came down here I had a mad idea that genius flourished best on

bread and cheese. Heaven knows where I'd got it from. Not from anyone who had tried it unless from a homicidal lunatic. There you are! The black spots are bad enough; but wait until you come to the white ovals that are always appearing under your eyelids when you least expect them! There's no sort of sense in it. You get run down, and then you can't do your work. That's enough for the time being. I'm going to make some cocoa."

"I don't want any," said Jan listlessly. "Oh, I didn't mean to be rude. Of course I'll drink some if you like, only I don't feel like it somehow."

Monica, who had risen to get the cocoa tin, looked over her shoulder with a worried frown, and spilled a little on the table.

"You've been getting wet lately," she accused.

"No, I haven't—yes, I did though, about ten days ago, directly after you went. By the way, aren't you back rather early?"

"M'm, yes, perhaps. It was dull at home. I wanted to get back. One can't work with people about. Did you miss me?"

"Of course," said Jan without any particular feeling. "It was horribly lonely without you, but—well I suppose we have to get it over some

time. I've been thinking—you know, that thing we talked about before you left. It's got to be faced."

"What thing?"

"Oh, you know! Saying that your people wouldn't care to know that we were living together—practically living together as we are. It isn't—isn't exactly good for a girl to have much to do with a divorced woman. It doesn't matter so much down here, because no one knows who I am, but they may get to know, and then—it will be absolutely horrid, you know."

"I don't know," said Monica fiercely. "And I'm sure I shouldn't care if I did. Shut up, Jan! You are talking the most utter rot I ever heard in all my life."

"It isn't rot," said Jan wearily. "That's just the trouble. I owe you so much, and I don't want to pay you that way if I can possibly help it. I don't mean that I should soil you morally, because I don't believe—even now I don't believe, that *morally* I'm any worse than other people, but *conventionally* I may, and convention is—is a lot more important than one thinks to begin with. And so I think it would be better if we didn't see so much of each other as we have done, and

perhaps, presently, I had better go away altogether, only I don't think I can afford it just yet."

Monica would have interrupted her, but Jan ignored her, and pursued her way, her eyes fixed on the toe of her shoe in apparent absorption.

"I thought when I came here that if I told you I had been divorced, and you chose to have me here in spite of it, it was enough. I suppose I thought so because I wanted to think so. Anyway, there seemed no chance of the secret getting any further. But how can one be sure? Any day I may go to the village and see in everyone's faces that they *know*. Any day! Did you ever read "The Scarlet Letter," Monica? I've got it tacked on to my dress for anyone to see, if they only know where to look. When I meet anyone, my first thought is always: 'Do you know?' and after that 'Have you remembered? Do you know that I am Jan Lovatt, that plague spot, that disease, that corruption?' Very soon now everyone will be told. Everyone will begin to—stare. Why they stare I don't know. I shall look as I looked the day before, but they'll stare—only not at you. I won't let them stare at you. The first time I managed badly. I let my best friend be daubed with my mud. Not again, oh, not again! It isn't

worth it. I ought to have known that I wasn't fit to associate with anyone unless they were old enough, and irreproachable enough to touch pitch without soiling, and so——”

“And so you will please leave off talking nonsense,” said Monica hotly. “I should never have left you, I see that. You have been brooding alone by yourself until you don't know whether you're Man Friday or Alexander Selkirk. A week ago you didn't think you were a tar baby. This sack-cloth and ashes phase is a combination of under-feeding, and—I should say—a touch of influenza. It's as much a hallucination as the red spiders a man thinks he sees after reading Omar. Feed up a little, and you'll be a normal, self-respecting citizen again. You talk as if you were the only divorced woman in England, and on a par with a murderess. Why, there are thousands, and most of them carry on afterwards as if nothing had happened.”

“Yes. When they've married the man they were divorced for. I didn't. I couldn't. There were three of them. Don't you see yourself, what a difference that makes. It wasn't a grand passion—people will forgive that—it was just senseless depravity; and mine was *the* sensational trial of the year. Why, I don't know. It is like that.

Hundreds of cases are hurried through, and nobody thinks anything about them, but mine—mine seemed to catch on. It was on the hoardings—everywhere. I—I heard they gagged about it in the music halls.”

“How utterly disgusting!”

“It doesn’t seem very funny to me. I don’t know how anybody turned it into a joke. But you see what I mean. It’s not as if I was merely a *divorcée*. I’m Jan Lovatt. When the people here know——”

She broke off, shuddering violently, and rested her head on her hands, staring through interlaced fingers at the table.

“You aren’t depraved,” said Monica with stubborn conviction. “Nobody but a fool would ever say you were. I simply refuse to discuss it. Oh, that cough of yours! I suppose you haven’t been taking anything for it either. Does it hurt?”

“A little,” Jan confessed, her handkerchief pressed against her mouth to still the paroxysms. “I’ll take—ah—anything you like. I may have caught a chill.”

“A chill!” sniffed Monica scornfully, and would have spoken further, but a hammering on the door overwhelmed speech.

"I'm fearfully sorry," apologised the knocker. "I couldn't make anyone hear. Why, Jan, I thought the other cottage was yours. I've been pounding on the door for at least twenty minutes."

"So it is," said Jan. "This is Felix Royd, Monica; Miss Stuart, Felix." She rose uncertainly. "If my fire has not gone out, I will make you some tea."

It had not, though the coals had grown dull. She found the bellows, and knelt before the feeble glow, puffing at it, the ruddy light warm on chin and throat and breast. Seen so, her patent ill-health was less noticeable, and, when she finally raised her face to Felix, he saw nothing beyond the general pinched look.

"The Veraslyths told me that they had seen you here," he explained in answer to her question. "I had a sort of idea that you wouldn't send for me whatever happened—you're such a stiff-necked little spalpeen—so I ran down for a week-end to see for myself. Why didn't you write, Jan?"

"I had nothing to say after that last note. Did you understand why I—ran away? I had to."

"Of course, I understood. You weren't ready

for me. I guessed that even before the supper episode. How are things now?"

"I'm earning my living," said Jan, with stubborn pride.

She sat back on her heels watching him, her hands locked together between her knees, and he found himself wondering why he had never noticed before how large her eyes were—glinting pools of darkness in the pallor of her face.

"You always were a brave little gentleman," he commented softly. "D'you find it easy, Jan?"

"Not particularly. Is anything?"

"Nothing that's worth doing. There, let's be comfortable, Jan. One of the nicest things you ever said to me was that I had all the component parts of an easy-chair. I have. Rest yourself in me. It's what I was made for. Lean your head against me metaphorically—physically, too, if you like. There is a place for all things, even for your straight little back. I'm not a man, you know. I'm a leaning-post. There, comfy?"

He had adjusted himself with his usual large placidity, one arm flung round her shoulders, supporting them in a manner half brotherly, wholly comforting. Jan, who had made a faint momen-

tary resistance, allowed her body to relax, and lay back more at ease than she had been for weeks; presently, suffered her hand to lie on his knee, their fingers meeting.

“You are *restful*, Felix,” she told him in a faint, hoarse whisper, broken by an uncertain laugh. “You are the most comfortable thing in men I ever came across. Will you mind very much if I go to sleep that way?”

“Not at all. Tired?”

“A little. How long since I saw you last? A hundred years, isn’t it? I’ve missed you, Felix!”

“That’s why I let you go perhaps. I had a feeling that one never prized the modest violet until the spring was flown, never turned to arnica until one fell downstairs. When you’re ready for me I’m here you know, Jan. I shan’t lose my relaxing qualities when I become a husband.”

“What I like about you,” said Jan with weary unpleasantness, “is that it never seems to occur to you to omit the offer of marriage. Other people do, you know. With me it isn’t really necessary.”

“You nasty little devil!” said Felix composedly.

It was typical of their relation that neither had thought it worth while to move while they exchanged hostilities. If anything, Jan’s head sank

back a little further in making her thrust, and in the midst of his denunciation Felix's eyes were tender.

"What I like about you," he mimicked pleasantly, "is that you say the most abominable things to me with a serene confidence in the non-turning qualities of the worm. Somebody has presumably been worrying you, but you do not immediately fly to the conclusion that all mankind is a thing of naught. Who was it, Jan? Give me his name and address and I'll bring you his head on a charger."

"Would you?"

"Rather! Love to do it. It is the plain duty of a gentleman to knock the head of everybody who isn't one. That is the idea underlying all knight errantry. Try me!"

"I may some day." Jan paused, wriggling her fingers thoughtfully, her eyes on the fire. "Felix, have you seen Tony lately, since—you know?"

"He's still in town, I believe, but naturally I don't see much of him. Why, Jan?"

"Oh, I don't know. I wondered." She faltered, and presently raised gleaming eyes, unnaturally bright, between the thick fringe of lashes. "Felix, you told me once that—that all that hap-

pened, I mean, was mainly my own fault. I think I should like you to tell me that again. I was—very silly, wasn't I? Anyone might have thought—what Tony thought."

"Good Lord! Do you mean to say that you want me to whitewash Lovatt for your edification?"

"Well, you did say he wasn't to blame," Jan defended.

"I said nothing of the kind. I said there were excuses. There were. There always are. For one thing, Waring *was* a pretty average rotter, and how you escaped finding it out I don't know."

"I did—find it out."

"When?"

"After the divorce he—oh, you know."

"Right!" said Felix cheerfully, "I'll bash his face in for you. I've been aching to do it for months. I believe that he was out for mischief from the start; only your monumental innocence refuses to grasp that sort of thing until it simply stares you in the face. Anyway, you can see what I mean when I say there were excuses."

"I do. It might so easily have been. Only it wasn't. Why do you believe in me, Felix? Are you quite sure that you do? I—I'll forgive you if

you don't. I'll forgive anybody anything to-night, only——”

“What's the matter?” said Felix sharply, alarmed at last by the succession of violent shudders which were sweeping over the little body resting against his arm, and clicking her teeth like castanets. He rose hastily to his feet and held her at arm's length to inspect her anxiously, and she drooped with the disjointed limpness of a rag doll, her eyes wide and faintly puzzled at herself.

“What's wrong, Jan? Your colour is all right, but you look odd somehow. Have you got a touch of 'flu or anything?”

“I don't know,” said Jan vaguely. “Things don't seem to keep their right sizes or shapes. Wasn't I going to make you some tea or something, and I haven't even put the kettle on. I must—— only my feet are funny. I wonder——”

“You ought to be in bed,” said Felix, with anxious decision. “You ought to have a doctor, too. How hot your hands are.”

“I wonder!” said Jan dreamily, and collapsed. Felix stood holding her in his arms and staring round the room in search of a second door which might lead to the staircase. Her weight was neg-

ligible to a man of his strength, and he swung her off her feet against his shoulder, where she lay without protest as he carried her tenderly up the narrow stairs; but as he was laying her down on her bed she stirred slightly, put a languid arm about his neck, and drew his head down against her cheek.

“Thank you, Tony,” whispered Jan huskily, and turned her head on the pillow like a sleepy child.

“Oh damnation,” muttered Felix bitterly, and stood staring down at her in a passion of helpless wrath and pity.

It seemed to him that she had never looked so pathetically small and defenceless. She reminded him vividly of a small grey squirrel which he had shot by accident in a not too distant boyhood. With painful distinctness he remembered the feel of the tiny creature as he had taken it into his hands, all moist and limp, still quivering in its last agony, and the pitiful, twitching jerk which had heralded the end. There was a terrifying similarity in the still body under his hands. What if Jan should be seriously ill! What if she should die on his hands before he had time to fetch help! Felix was supremely ignorant of degrees of illness. His troubled eyes swept the room as if he expected a

helper to spring up from the naked floor; then, with a start of relief, he remembered the fuzzy-haired girl next door and fled.

Monica was working over sheets of blotted foolscap, and looked up irritably at his entrance, her hands still straying through the disorder of her brown mop.

“I’m busy,” she said curtly. “Want anything?”

“Jan’s ill.”

“Of course she is.” Monica was scornful. “She hasn’t been properly fed for weeks, and for days she has been starving herself outright. What do you expect? I’ll come over. Have you put her to bed?”

“Well, more or less.”

“Do it properly then. I’ll make some beef tea and bring it over. I’ve got the cubes somewhere, and it’s hunger more than anything else that’s the matter. I ought never to have left her here alone. I might have expected something of the kind. Be as quick as you can. I won’t be long.”

“But I can’t put her to bed,” Felix protested, aghast.

“Rot! I won’t be ten minutes.”

Monica swept him forth.

Felix retraced his steps in some confusion, and

found Jan still as he had left her, one arm trailing helplessly over the bed, her head thrown back a little, her eyes closed, lips slightly parted above the clenched teeth. Felix discovered that he was blushing furiously, but the terror of Monica was upon him, and he sat down on the edge of the bed and settled to his task of unlacing Jan's shoes. Somehow the sight of her little bare feet, smooth and unspoiled as those of a child of ten, brought home a stab of consciousness of her pathetic immaturity, her utter helplessness, and Felix cursed softly as he fumbled over his work, keeping his eyes studiously averted. The chance sight of Jan's small white breast finally defeated him, and he hurriedly pulled a nightgown over her remaining clothes and tucked her into bed, praying fervently that the deceit would pass undiscovered.

Monica, entering with burdens, was displeased, and took no trouble to hide it.

"You have turned the bedclothes into a sort of strait-jacket," she said severely. "That's the very thing to give a patient nightmares. Anyone could have told you that. There, that's my hot-water bottle. I don't for one moment suppose that Jan has anything so sensible. The brandy in the beef tea will probably make it taste vile, but that

doesn't matter. The main thing is to get her to drink it while it's hot. Lift up her head a little; I can get her teeth open with a spoon."

"Oughtn't I to get a doctor?" said Felix nervously, his eyes fixed on Monica's rapid depositions in a sort of awed trance.

He had lifted Jan's head obediently, but the business of feeding was entirely out of his hands. His suggestion was treated with scorn.

"There is no doctor," said Monica. "None for ten miles anyway, and he's a fool. And any good that Jan might possibly get by having him around would be balanced by the worry of having his bill to pay. Jan is too painstakingly honest to suffer debt gladly. I know what's the matter all right. Starvation mainly, and a touch of pleurisy. She'll get over it. Time enough to send for a doctor if she gets worse. I'll throw over my other work to nurse her. It'll be all right."

"It's awfully good of you!"

"Rot! I'd do a lot more than that for Jan. By the way, who are you? That sounds awfully rude, doesn't it, but I should like to know how you come into this. Acquaintance, friend, or relative—which are you?"

"Oh, a friend, I suppose."

“Aren’t you sure?”

“I was wondering whether I should describe myself as a suitor,” Felix explained with simple directness. “You see, Jan consistently turns me down, but I suggest the idea to her at intervals.”

“How frightfully weak of you!”

“Think so?”

“Of course it is. If I were a man I should marry anyone I pleased. It’s perfectly easy. Any girl will marry any man who knows his own mind—that is, if she isn’t otherwise engaged. There, that’s the last of the beef tea. I’ll make some more in a couple of hours. This room is like an ice-house, and of course there’s no fireplace. There wouldn’t be. All the architects in England should be hanged, drawn and quartered. I have an oil lamp which doesn’t smoke much, but I think I won’t use it unless I have to resort to a steam kettle, which God forbid. There seems to be plenty on this bed for a wonder. I shall sit up to-night, of course. I’m not sleepy anyway. I suppose you haven’t had anything to eat for hours. Come downstairs and I’ll get you something. No trouble at all. I must get supper for myself, anyway. Come along!”

“I think someone ought to stay with Jan,” Felix objected.

Monica considered this and was pleased to agree with it, at least in so far as that they should not leave Jan’s kitchen. She returned to her own for a quarter of an hour to manufacture coffee and a dish of scrambled eggs with her usual swift dexterity, and was imperative that Felix should share them.

“Food,” she informed him, “is one of the basic facts of life. One could do without love, friendship, and marriage, but not without food. It is the one household divinity that one cannot afford to take liberties with. I was going to add that that was nonsense. It is of course, but it’s sound common sense as well. I was wondering if I like you.”

“You have known me for over an hour,” Felix protested. “You ought to know by now.”

“I do. I think I like you.” Monica propped her sharp chin in her hands and studied him with north-cold eyes. “Are you one of the brutes who got Jan divorced?”

“Well, I was one of the co-respondents,” Felix admitted, “I don’t know whether that earns me

the title of brute. Perhaps it does, but my intentions were and are most excellent. Why?"

"I was wondering if you knew Jan's husband?" said Monica thoughtfully. "What's he like? What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing in particular. He's just a thin dark fellow, rich as Cræsus. I found him rather monosyllabic, but that may have been my fault. In fact, if he thought I was making love to his wife I suppose it was only natural."

"Were you?"

"Well, I don't know." Felix eyed her with some mischief. "You see, honoured lady, there are degrees in love-making, from the gentle flirtation which are as the flowers on the dinner-table of life, to the grand passion which is very uncomfortable for all concerned and rarely respectable. I do not say that I have made respectability my first aim in life, but there it is. I am not violent in my emotions. I have, incidentally, provided the reading public with some tit-bits of scandal, but it was almost accidental and quite unexpected. Like Byron, I awoke one morning to find myself famous. One felt rather taken aback, as if Destiny had just performed a conjuring trick, but there it was."

"Oh!" said Monica, and took some time to digest

this, then went back to her original train of thought.

“You’re sure there’s nothing radically wrong with him? He doesn’t drink or drug or do anything which makes it absolutely impossible for Jan to go back to him?”

“Oh, well, you know, that isn’t exactly the situation. He simply wouldn’t have her at any price. It isn’t a question of going back to him.”

“Yes, it is,” said Monica firmly. “Jan can’t look after herself. She thinks she can, but she can’t. She hasn’t been trained for it. Someone must do it for her, and who better than her husband? I don’t know much about divorce, but I do know that Jan never did anything which mightn’t have been published in a convocation of angels, and nobody but an idiot would think she had. Even supposing that he *is* an idiot, he has a right to know that she’s almost penniless. Do you think he does know it?”

“I don’t,” Felix admitted. “But even if he did it wouldn’t be any use from Jan’s point of view. She won’t take his money if he offers it, let alone ask for it.”

“Why should she when you can do it for her? You know him. Go up to London. Tell him that

she needs help. If he doesn't come for that he isn't a man, and Jan had better starve without him, only I'll see that she doesn't."

"But you don't understand." Felix protested. "We aren't on speaking terms. We never were intimate, and now——"

"Oh, well, of course, if you are going to think of yourself."

"It's a habit of mine," said Felix meekly.

"Then I've no more use for you. Selfishness is a disease, and I've one patient on my hands already. Don't let me keep you."

CHAPTER X

JAN'S was too healthy a little body to make a long business of recovery, and a few days showed her well out of the shadow of danger. Monica contested that there had never been any, but was none the less zealous in affectionate service.

"You may think you are strong enough to get up," she said severely, after a heated struggle over the point. "I say you're not, and I know best. Never contradict your elders. Do you think I want the trouble of nursing you all over again? Well, I don't. Lie still!"

"Oh, but I can't," Jan protested. "I've my work to do if you haven't, and we neither of us belong to the leisured classes."

"Oh, rot!" said Monica. "If you get up now you go to bed again next week, and you can't work unless your hands are steady. You'll only drop stitches and generally make an ass of yourself. As for my own writing——"

"There it is," said Jan eagerly. "It's frightfully good of you to nurse me like this and keep

my house in order as well as your own, but you mustn't think I don't realise——”

“What a burden you are to me? Rubbish! You're copy. I'm so sick of my ghastly heroine that she's going to be sick of herself for a change, and without you I should never have known how to do it. You're a godsend to me. If you would only see your way to developing tuberculosis I wouldn't have a thing left to wish for.”

“Oh, that!” Jan laughed softly. “The cavernous eye, the hectic flush, the racking cough tearing the thin chest? My dear, you ought to be able to do it with your eyes shut.”

“Of course I could, but your description lacks the realistic touch. For instance the racking cough would not only tear the gaunt chest, but bring fragments to the light of day in an utterly disgusting manner, and probably there wouldn't even be a hectic flush, just blotches like a middle-aged spinster with indigestion. I don't for instance know whether you cherish the illusion that you were particularly decorative last Thursday. You were not. You were a horrid whitey-green colour like a decomposed corpse, with purple patches over your eyes where they usually put pennies, and your breathing was horrid, like a snore falling

downstairs, and as for the few delirious whispers——”

“Yes, I’ve been wondering about that.” Jan’s eyes were intent upon the ceiling. “Did I—talk?”

“Well, if you call it talking,” said Monica grudgingly, “you muttered things, and kept on gritting your teeth like a cat with a nightmare, and you were about as intelligible. When I think of all the innumerable plots which hang on sick bed confessions—fakes, all of them fakes. I never caught a word. Were you afraid that you had been letting slip the murky secrets of your past?”

“M’m, something of the sort. Monica, there’s another thing. While I have been in bed here you have been buying things for me. You must let me know what I owe you.” Seeing Monica hesitate she turned her head to face her with the candid sweetness which was her chief charm. “I know what’s worrying you, dear. It needn’t. At the risk of your offering me a loan I don’t mind saying that I *am* rather hard up, but I have enough money left to tide me over this, and, ridiculous as it seems, I don’t want to owe you for material things, though I’m oceans deep in debt for the things that money can’t buy.”

“Pay me by taking what it can,” said Monica

gruffly. "Look here, Jan, I'm not much good at talking sentimentally, but what I have is yours and what's yours is mine—at least it would be if I were poor and wanted anything. It's more generous to take than to give. If I ever have the chance I'll show you that by taking from you to your last mouthful. Oh, now I believe I'm making an ass of myself, but I don't care so long as you know what I mean."

"I do know," Jan confessed. "But, all the same, I'd be happier if you'd let me pay for this while I can. I can't afford to be generous, you see, I'm so much poorer—oh, utterly poorer than you could ever possibly be, and if I give you my pride, my independence, I'm quite—naked. Don't despise me, Monica! My self-respect is such a patched and threadbare garment at its best, just that I've never tried to melt down love and friendship into things to eat and drink. Sometimes I've come rather near it. I want to tell you about that—about everything. I want to tell you now."

"You needn't," said Monica abruptly. "I know all I want to know, that you're the straightest thing that ever was. I don't have to hear any more."

"Oh, yes, dear, you must." Jan laughed rather mirthlessly, "You see things don't work out so

simply as all that. I remember I said once that I'd been punished for nothing, and Felix said that I hadn't. That one was always responsible *really* for what happened to one. I think I see now what he meant by that. I didn't at first, but I suppose that, in a way, I was to blame for what happened—only not in the way they said I was—and I can't go on taking things from you, not even the custards and beef-teas, much less things that matter, until you are in a position to judge whether you want to give it. So listen, please!"

"Very well, if you like. But it won't make any difference."

"I hope not. Yes, that is what my altruism amounts to. I know that it's best for you to drop me, but I hope you won't."

She was silent for a moment, staring in front of her with unseeing eyes, her fingers picking nervously at the sheet. When her voice came at last it was faint and irresolute, but gathered strength with speaking.

"I don't know; even now I can't tell what was the start of the trouble, so I will begin right at the beginning. Not when I was born, of course; but with meeting Tony, my husband.

"I had always been the pretty one at home.

We weren't any of us ugly; but—I was the eldest, and they always thought I should marry well. I—I think my people planned for it, and gave me specially nice frocks and petted me, and introduced me to rich people and all that sort of thing.

“I was only nineteen when I married, so you see I hadn't had time to fall in love with anybody else. There was just Tony. But he was very—eligible. Directly he even looked at me my people began to throw me at his head with both hands. I hated that, and so I rather ran away from him to balance things. It was a wonder we ever got married at all, we were so very much helped. I have sometimes thought since that perhaps Tony didn't really want me at all; but if he didn't it was frightfully weak of him to take me. Wasn't it?”

She broke off for a moment to send a fleeting, wistful glance in Monica's direction, as if to see exactly how much the halting words conveyed; then went on slowly, pausing to choose her phrases.

“Almost from the start we didn't get along together very well. It wasn't that we quarrelled. We never did. No one could quarrel with Tony; but, considering we were living in the same house

it was wonderful how seldom we seemed to meet, and how little we had to say to each other when we did. It wasn't that it was a large house even. It was just like being in separate compartments in a railway carriage. Both going the same way in the same train, but as for being together, we simply weren't. If Tony had been living in Yokohama we might have been nearer—easily. I don't mean that I was unhappy. I wasn't. I was too busy enjoying myself. That isn't exactly the same thing, but to start with I didn't know the difference. We hadn't been poor at home, you see; in fact, judging from now, I should say that we had been quite well off; but I had never had money to play with before just to throw away in handfuls. Tony seemed to want me to do it, only— There was always an 'only' somewhere about, you see, and I never quite knew what came after that. He wanted me to have friends too, and I did, any number. I had nothing to do except frivol. I didn't even look after the house. We had a house-keeper right from the start. Tony seemed to assume that I wouldn't want the bother of it. We didn't have any children either. These aren't grievances, you know; they were just the way things were. I could have had them altered any

time if I'd asked; only it wasn't exactly easy to ask. I thought of doing it sometimes, but somehow I never did.

“I wanted you to know the way we were living, because that makes it easier to understand what happened afterwards; but the lawyers began with Nice, so I suppose that that was really the start of the serious trouble. They said that I went there with a man. I did. His name was Pluffles, not his real name, of course, just a nickname; but I went with my sister, too. Tony was to follow us when he could get away. I knew that Pluffles would be on the same train. I didn't mention it to Tony simply because it didn't occur to me. I might have done it. Oh, easily, *easily*. It was one of the damnable little things that just happened. We were at Nice for a week before Tony came. For the last two days Mollie had neuralgia and was in her room most of the time. Pluffles was staying in the same hotel. Naturally—I don't see even now why it wasn't natural—he used to come to our rooms when we didn't go to the Casino together. He was there the night that Tony arrived, and Mollie had gone to bed though it was only about ten o'clock. I wasn't expecting Tony just

then, but if I had been expecting him it wouldn't have made any difference. It never occurred to me that he might not like it. I didn't know even at the time that he didn't. Of course the prosecution said that I went to Nice to—to live with Pluffles, and took Mollie as a sort of stalking horse. I hope Tony didn't think of that part for himself. Of course he may have done. He seems to have thought about as badly of me as it's possible for a man to think of the woman he's married; but he never said anything. Right up to the last he simply stood aside and gave me all the rope I needed to hang myself. I did it. Oh, I did it thoroughly. I didn't realise until they began to pull at the end what loops and loops of hemp I had wound round my own throat.

“I wish you had read the papers, Monica, then there would be no need to tell you all the horrible sordid details. They were all like that really. Just one damned thing after another. I had more men friends than women, and I wasn't careful. I didn't know I had to be. One of the men was what they said he was, a waster and a libertine, but he was never so with me until after I was divorced; then he wrote and asked me to go abroad

with him—not as his wife. I think Felix is the only man living who will ever think of me in that way again. Felix is very nice. He doesn't love me at all, but he thinks it is his duty to make up for getting me divorced. It isn't, of course. I would have been divorced anyway. There was plenty of circumstantial evidence even without him, much more than there would have been if I had been what they said I was, because then I would have known enough to be careful. As it was I hadn't any defence except my word, and no one wanted to take that. You see the evidence was all true. It was only the inferences they drew from it which were so cruelly unjust. I'd been silly, and frivolous, and quite madly imprudent, but nothing else, before God nothing else!"

"You don't have to tell me that," said Monica. "I knew, right from the first moment."

"It's very nice of you." Jan slid her hand over the sheet to meet Monica's firm clasp, with a grateful squeeze. "It's funny, though, that you should believe when my own people didn't."

"Fools!" said Monica between her teeth. "Fools, dolts, idiots. Oh, I know I'm speaking of your relations, Jan, but I don't care. They are all—all quite mad, and your husband was a mind-

less brute, and the jury corrupted dunces. I don't have to be told. I know."

"But I don't think the British juries are corrupted, and anyway there was no one for them to be corrupted by. Tony wouldn't have done it even if he had wanted to. I did think at the time that he might have brought the case simply to be rid of me, but now I don't think even that. It was just a mistake from beginning to end. If we had ever been anything but strangers to each other it couldn't have happened. If Tony had ever thought of me as a wife instead of a pampered baby he would have told me when he was jealous. If I had ever stopped to think what he was getting out of the marriage business, I must have seen. But I didn't, and he didn't, and we have no one but ourselves to thank."

"But if it was only a mistake it can be cleared up. It isn't as if there was anything past mending."

"I suppose," said Jan thoughtfully, "that you wouldn't say that life was past mending because one hadn't a shred of reputation left. I can live without reputation. In fact I do, and I shall have to go on doing it, but as for being cleared, how can I be? I have said I was innocent once and no one

believed me. I can't go on protesting. My sentence is for life; I think I faced that almost at once. If I had done what they said I did I suppose that I should be sodden with misery instead of smarting with it, but that's all the difference it makes for practical purposes. Oh, Monica, isn't it bitterly, bitterly unfair. Why did everyone have to know? Wasn't the shame and the heart-break of it bad enough without all that ghastly, blistering publicity. Even if they mean it as a punishment for a sin that isn't criminal, the people who deserve it don't feel it, and those who do— Even if I had been acquitted I should have to go through that *first!*”

She pulled herself together with a quick, convulsive shrug and turned gleaming eyes on Monica.

“There, I think that's all, unless there are any questions you want to ask. I'd rather not talk of this again. Are there?”

“There aren't,” Monica decided, “but, Jan, I want to say that I love you. And now I'll go and get supper.”

CHAPTER XI

“THE woman will disapprove of me!” Felix complained, his eyes full of mischief.

He had spent the morning in wordy warfare over nothing, and at his protest Jan broke into care-free laughter for the first time in weeks.

“Do you? Oh, Monica, why?”

“He is a frivol,” Monica accused hotly, “a fripon, a thing-about-the-house. He lives to be comfortable.”

“It is an ideal,” Felix admitted. “Happiness is an ephemeral thing. Comfort is not. One may say without fear of contradiction that one is or has been comfortable, whereas to be truly happy it is necessary to be less so, both before and after. One never knows that one is happy at the time, only afterwards. What a waste! I get no more good out of knowing that I have been happy than my creditor gets out of being informed that I *had* a bank balance. He is just as vociferous over his dishonoured cheque, and rightly so. The past is not negotiable for practical purposes. That is the

great test for value. Is a thing negotiable? Can it be turned into something else? If not, it isn't worth the room it takes up. Now my comfort is negotiable. For instance, I know three separate people who would move heaven and earth to get me out of my flat. The fact of knowing it gives me a warm sensation about the heartstrings whenever I put my latchkey in the door. I can say: 'This is mine. It does not belong to Smith, or Jones, or Robinson.' They wish it did. This chair is modelled to fit me. When I sink into it my excrescences answer its depressions each to each. The cushion matches my wig to a hair. I have two simultaneous satisfactions: one that I am comfortable; two, that it is impossible for Smith or Jones or Robinson to be similarly comfortable. There is nothing of deferred payment about that. I do not have to wait until someone opens the door and lets a current of cold air down my back before I know that I am at ease."

"Poor fish!" said Monica with energy. "Do you mean to say that you expect nothing better of life than to eat, and sleep——"

"And be merry," Felix acquiesced. "But so far as I know I shall not die to-morrow. My health is very flourishing."

“You will,” said Monica viciously; “you will die of fatty degeneration of the heart and liver. I shall not come to your funeral, but I will send a wreath of sage and onions. Have you no soul, man?”

“None,” said Felix, with proud simplicity, and Monica abandoned him.

“Birds of a feather,” Felix quoted at her retreating back. “I always said you were a termagant, Jan, but you have been unusually gentle this morning, I notice.”

“My ruffling was done by proxy,” Jan suggested with a twinkle. “You seem to find each other interesting.”

“There is a felicity in disagreement,” Felix admitted.

He crossed the room to seat himself on the arm of Jan’s chair, and regarded her with eyes of agreeable speculation. Her dark blue jersey and short hair turned her into a schoolgirl again, and if the childish curve of her cheek was a little diminished, the fresh colour of it was beginning to show again like almond blossom on ivory. He put a hand on the slim shoulder and shook it gently.

“Jan!”

“Yes.”

“Have you any idea how lovely you are?”

“Of course. It isn't long since your last proposal, my dear. Is this another opening?”

“If you call it an opening. The question was never closed, and I am liable to go on asking you until you say you will. What is your objection to me, Jan? Does my outside give you the shivers?”

“You know it doesn't. Oh, vain! That is what you were angling for; and now that I have pandered to your conceit to the extent of saying that I like you enormously, I will be a sister to you and love you as a Christian. Will that satisfy you?”

“Skim milk!” Felix made a face at her. “Of course I know your reasons, my dear. They're nothing. If you can point to a stain on you, real or imaginary, that isn't on me as well——”

“But with a man it doesn't matter. You have an oilcloth reputation, dickeys, celluloid collars, and cuffs. A wet sponge whenever you like, and there you are. Respectability itself, a churchwarden if you like, and I shall be—‘an odious woman married.’”

“Don't!” Felix reddened with sudden anger. “It's abominable, and it's untrue, and it makes me feel that I want to smash the world. Jan, Jan, don't you see how I want to take care of you, and

have the right to fight every damned liar who dares to say that!"

"It's like you, dear." Jan reached for his hand and pulled it against her cheek, her eyes starry.

"Who was it who defined love as an unaccountable desire to pay for a strange woman's board and lodging? If I believed that I think I'd marry you, Felix. I nearly did, you know, that time I came to your flat when I thought it was you or the Thames, but my courage was at a low ebb just then. I'll never victimise you, dear. You're too fine for second best. You've got to have someone who doesn't reek of rotten eggs. You've got to have a woman who can teach you how to love her properly."

"I love you. I've said it."

"But you don't even know what it means. If you did you wouldn't be put off with substitutes. The real thing isn't to be mixed up with everything else. It's something that doesn't stop short anywhere; that goes on living even after it's been weeded up and thrown away. Something that doesn't count the cost of itself or reason why it is; that can't be outraged beyond forgiveness simply because it doesn't understand forgiveness. Everything that comes into conjunction with it is lost at

once, is—is almost unimportant. Felix, you shall not dare to ask me if I mean any special person by this!”

“I don’t have to,” said Felix shortly.

He rose and walked over to the window, where the pane, blurred by drifting rain, showed a landscape dimly grey and desolate. A stray branch of creeper had been blown across it, and still oscillated faintly, as if tapping for admission. Suddenly he swung round and looked at Jan, lying curled up before the fire, its soft glow tinting her absorbed face, and finding a new, warm radiance in the jewel-bright eyes.

“Would you take the fellow back, Jan?”

She raised her eyes to him, considered the point with dreamy detachment, and nodded gravely.

“If he wanted me, yes. I’m not particularly proud any more, but he would have to want me, and now he never will. What’s the use of thinking of impossibilities? I’ve had my chance and wasted it. A second doesn’t come in this life. But I can bear it, Felix. You needn’t look so worried. And you don’t have to tell me that I should have the moon if you could get it for me, only it happens to be out of reach.”

When Felix left her half an hour later he had

come to a decision. If Jan wanted a thing, very well, it must be done, however unpalatable the doing might prove to himself; nor was there much doubt as to the best and shortest way of doing it. Felix still belonged to one of Anthony's clubs. There had been no unpleasantness about his continued membership, for his popularity there was immense, and such as had yet found no opportunity of selling him a car that would not go or a picture with no name to it were presumably buoyed up by the hope of some time performing that benevolent action. Hitherto Felix had felt that tact demanded his self-effacement, but he had no particular objection to emerging from his obscurity if the public weal demanded it. Luck was with him, and almost at once he had the pleasure of sighting his quarry. There were two other men in the smoking-room, which struck him for the moment as unfortunate, but they appeared to be engaged in their own affairs. Anthony was sitting apart, apparently unconscious of Felix's entrance, and a moment afterwards he rose, flinging down the paper he had been reading, and stood looking out at the hurrying traffic of Piccadilly. Felix, seizing his opportunity, made a rapid swoop and touched his arm.

“May I have a few minutes with you, Lovatt?”

There was a startled jerk, and then Anthony turned without hurry and surveyed him from head to foot, his dark eyes enigmatic.

“Why?”

“I wanted to speak to you about Jan.”

“Have you a message for me?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t see why it should be necessary. Jan has my address if she likes to send to me, but if not I’m not specially interested. We agreed to go our own ways, and I don’t think I want to talk to you.”

“If you think I get any pleasure out of it—” Felix began hotly, and then abandoned the point.

“If you know anything whatever of Jan you must know that she’d starve before she’d ask for help, but she needs it pretty badly. She’s been ill, and she is almost alone, and she hasn’t enough money to live on.”

“Isn’t that your affair?”

“Mine!” Felix stared at him. “Oh, I see what you mean. Well, if you want to know, I haven’t seen Jan more than half a dozen times since she was divorced. She won’t be my wife, and I can’t very well get her to take my money without that, though

heaven knows she's welcome to it. She is living in a God-forsaken little village on the coast, and when I went down there a few weeks ago she was light-headed, mainly through not having enough to eat. Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Starving!" Anthony repeated uncomprehendingly. "I don't understand. How can she be? Why, it isn't a year yet, and——"

"How much money had she to start with?"

"I don't know. I offered to provide for her, of course. She refused quite definitely. I understood that she had made her own arrangements."

"You would!" said Felix scornfully. "As it happens, if you knew what she had when you left her, you would have a very good idea of what she has to-day, less what it has cost to keep her alive for the time between. Up to the present she has not accepted a penny from the people to whose protection you kindly consigned her. It has been offered, of course. She prefers to live in two tiny rooms and struggle to make a living in the face of every conceivable obstacle. I suppose you'll tell me that's not your business."

"It *is* my business—that is, if it's true, and I don't see why you should lie about it. I don't see why you should speak to me at all, if it comes to

that. I'm quite helpless. Jan won't take my money if I send it. She wouldn't before. Have you any reason to suppose that she has changed her mind?"

"Six months ago she had no idea how damnable it was to shift for herself."

"I see that." Anthony turned his head away, staring across the room with unseeing eyes. "If I sent her down a blank cheque, do you think there's the remotest chance of its ever being used?"

"Not the slightest."

"There are her jewels, of course. She sent them back; but naturally I haven't any use for them. They are worth a great deal."

"That's better," Felix approved. "But you must give them to her yourself, or she will come to the conclusion that I asked for them, and then nothing on earth will persuade her to touch them. It will be a devil of a job anyway, but perhaps, with tact——"

"I never intend to see Jan again," said Anthony, with quiet energy. "You say that she is starving, and, of course, I admit that it is my business to attend to that. I'll settle anything she pleases on her, and the jewels have always been hers, but I will not see her!"

“If you don’t you’ll never get her to touch a farthing of your beastly money.” Felix restrained his inclination to shout with an effort. “Jan isn’t a servant, to be pensioned off when you have no further use for her. Man, can’t you understand that her pride is raw with the treatment she has had already? Oh, I didn’t come here to quarrel with you as to whether or not it was just. I always said that you believed in your own case, and as far as I am concerned I don’t care twopence whether you think me a rascal or not; but Jan is different. You had the power to ruin her for any sort of life except the one which she won’t live, and you seem to think that if she has any claim on you it can be met with a cheque. If that’s your attitude she’s well rid of you. There’s her address. Keep it or throw it away as you like. I’m damned if I care!”

He turned to go, but Anthony recalled him with a gesture.

“You said Jan had been ill. What was the matter?”

“We called it pleurisy.” Felix gave his head a quick, indignant toss. “It was mainly work she wasn’t accustomed to and worries she never ought to have had, and insufficient food—actual, physical want! She was wasted away to a little bundle of

bones and for most of the first night she mistook—didn't know me." Felix bit back the admission which had nearly escaped him.

"You nursed her?"

"Yes. Would you have preferred it if I had turned my virtuous back upon her and returned to London? As a matter of fact, I couldn't do much. A girl who lives in the other half of the cottage is taking care of her, and doing it very well. Curious as it may seem, she does it for love, not for charity; but she isn't rich herself, and I rather think that she has a hard struggle to find the means to do it at all."

"It's very good of her," said Anthony slowly. "I suppose that, in a way, it's very good of you, too. Has Jan shown any signs of wanting me?"

Felix considered that before answering, then decided that he had said enough without betraying a confidence.

"She never asked for you," he said, truthfully enough. "Did you expect her to, after what has happened?"

"No," Anthony admitted, and winced a little. "I don't know that I should have expected it, in any case. Well, thank you for telling me. I suppose there is nothing else you want to say?"

"Nothing!" said Felix sharply, and swung away.

Outside the door he remembered with a joyous thrill that he had promised to settle with Waring, but in the press of other matters had neglected to do so. The rare urge of righteous indignation was already surging and tingling through every muscle of his big body, and it was an opportunity not to be missed.

He hailed a taxi.

CHAPTER XII

“I ALWAYS understood,” said Jan, with borrowed severity, “that you worked for your living.”

“Well, so I do.”

Felix dropped a four-pound box of chocolates in her lap, offered another to Monica with unusual nervousness, and, obviously relieved by her frigid acceptance, turned to prowl about the kitchen in search of a comfortable chair.

“We love to have you,” Jan told him lazily, “—no, I am sitting on the only one with cushions, and I am not going to get up—but at the same time we cannot help remembering that you only left us on Tuesday, and that to-day is Friday. Monica feels very strongly about it. Don’t you, Monica?”

“Well, hang it all, can’t a fellow have a quiet week-end fishing?”

“I can’t speak for other places, but in Otway, at this time of the year, it isn’t done. If you’re going to stay, Felix, you must cut the bread and butter. I—must finish—this—abominable—sleeve—before I do anything else.”

“He has a bruised cheek,” Monica accused, looking up from the tray she was arranging. “It is very ugly. Ask him where he got it.”

“I noticed it,” Jan admitted, “but I thought maybe it would be more tactful to pretend that I didn’t. Felix’s colour-scheme is red and blue, and the bruise is red and blue, but somehow not the right shades. Where did you get it, dear? It doesn’t look very respectable.”

“Waring!” said Felix briefly. “It was the only one he got home, and both his eyes are closed up, and his mouth is cut about. When I left him he was sitting in a rose-bush and feeling very sorry for himself.”

“Oh!” said Jan, and flushed painfully. “I wish I hadn’t told you. It didn’t matter really.”

“But, my dear, I enjoyed it! You know how fond he is of his roses—grows them for exhibition or something? Well, I lured him out to them. Said I wanted to see how they were getting on. He seemed a bit surprised, because, as a matter of fact, they weren’t blooming, or apparently even thinking of doing it, but he swallowed the bait all right and took me round. I meant to wait until he had shown me his favourites, but my feelings were too much for me, so I threw him at the biggest ones,

and pulled up the rest. It was a glorious mill—at least it would have been if he hadn't been so flabby. I had dropped him on two rose-trees before he seemed to realise that I was trying to be offensive."

"Brawling is vulgar," said Monica, and thrust a breadknife upon him. "Shall I boil you an egg, Jan? You mayn't stay up to supper."

"Why mustn't I?" said Jan rebelliously. "I'm well again now, and I will not be mollycoddled. I will not be made to feel an infant, neither will I have high tea. That is a lot more vulgar than brawling. I wonder you don't suggest a kipper."

"I should if I thought it was likely to be good for you," said Monica firmly, and reached for a saucepan. Her eyes were kind. "Leave that jumper alone, Jan. I'll finish the sleeve for you."

"You will not," said Jan indignantly. "You have done enough for me as it is. I am well, and I am going to stand on my own feet again. Besides, how do you know that I don't *like* knitting?"

"Guessed it. Do you?"

"I loathe it," said Jan, with sudden passionate frankness. "There are times when I would give my immortal soul to destroy every ball of Sylko on the face of the globe. There is only one thing I dislike more, and that is cheese, with its odious

appearance of representing so many proteids or calories or whatever it is. Solid, uninteresting cheese, with its red rind, reminding you of long-toothed rats, and its smooth, self-satisfied face staring at you like a half-moon with all the mystery left out. Felix, you were a dear to bring me these chocolates, and I love you."

"I know you do," said Felix drily. "At the same time, I think it would be just as well if you took the advice of your elders and went to bed, leaving me with this acrid female who does not."

"Not at all!" said Jan, her grey eyes sparkling with mischief. "I am going to show you that I am quite well by dancing a *pas seul* directly I have had my tea. Prosit!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" said Monica hotly.

"Yes, I shall. Why, Monica, you don't know me if you have never seen me dance. I have stardust on my toes, haven't I, Felix? Slip, slop, gobble—there goes my tea. Who said I had been ill?"

She rolled up her knitting in a tight ball, and, transfixing it viciously with the needles, stood up, frowned, and sat down again, tugging at her shoes.

“Eat your food at once!” Monica commanded wrathfully, “What do you suppose I get it for, you ungrateful loon?”

“Not knowing, can’t say!”

Jan kicked loose her shoes, and rose, balancing on stockinged feet.

“Lord, this skirt is a weight. I might as well try to move in a leaden coffin. Wait a moment! An idea strikes me! The clean curtains! Find me some pins, Monica! I faithfully will go to bed directly.”

She fled, gurgling laughter, and reappeared five minutes later, the short check curtains pinned about her shoulders and falling toga fashion to the knee, pirouetted to the middle of the room, and stood there, bare arms spread.

“Do you remember when I last did this, Felix? At the Gunthers’, wasn’t it? Move the table a little, will you? Other couples get to the walls and stay there. The beautiful Mrs. Lovatt will now perform.”

She waved imaginary dancers to one side and slid into movement. Jan had spoken truly when she claimed to have star-dust on her toes, and Monica, whose experience of professional dancers was small, guessed vaguely at the quality of what

she saw, and gazed absorbed and ecstatic. Felix, who had seen the same before, but for whom the charm never faded, propped his chin on his hands and applauded mutely when Jan paused for appreciation, her hands fluttering down to her slim hips.

“I am rather tired,” she admitted breathlessly. “I don’t think I’ll do any more to-night. Like it, Monica?”

“It’s beautiful,” Monica breathed adoringly. “Why didn’t you go on the stage, Jan? With your looks and that——”

“Never thought of it.” Jan had drifted across the floor, weaving the words into her steps. “There’s the post! Open the door, will you, Monica? I might give the dear, good man a shock.”

She broke off, looking aghast into her husband’s face, then fluttered down into a magnificent curtsey, deep as a sigh and mocking as laughter.

“Good afternoon, Tony. My house is yours. Will it please you to come in?”

“I do not know who this man is,” said Monica austerely, “but I feel sure that we are *de trop*. If you will bring the tea things, Mr. Royd, I will wash them up in my own kitchen.”

“You are a sibyl, old in wisdom!” muttered Felix fervently, “and——”

“I do not see the slightest reason why either of you should go,” said Jan, rising from the floor, her cheeks flushed combatively. “This is the man who used to be my husband, Monica. We have nothing private to say to each other.”

Anthony held the door open, and waited in polite silence. His patience was rewarded.

When they were alone he turned and surveyed his wife with thoughtful eyes.

“What was that you were dancing, Jan?”

“Oh, the old spring thing. You’ve seen it heaps of times.”

“Done for the general public, yes. I hope Royd enjoyed it!”

“So do I!” Jan finished lacing her shoes and stood erect, her eyes defiant.

“Tony, there is one word which expresses my feelings for you, and it isn’t an English one. This isn’t your house, you know; and you have no licence to insult me in it.”

“Whose house is it?”

“Mine, as it happens. If you don’t want to believe it you needn’t. I don’t care. What did you come here for, anyway?”

“I fancied you might need me. A quaint idea, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, Felix!” Jan caught her lip in her teeth and her eyes boded ill for the absent go-between. “Well, I suppose it goes without saying that I cannot live without your magnificent self. And I always used to consider you unassuming! Did you find it easy to believe that—that I whisper your name of nights to a tear-wet pillow, my heart’s high lord?”

“It didn’t seem very likely,” Anthony admitted. His eyes appraised the white-rose pallor of her face, the thinness of her bare arms, the Spartan simplicity of the room behind her.

“No, I didn’t credit you with any sudden burst of affection for me, Jan; but it did occur to me that you might need money. It might have been better to have sent some without asking. I wish now that I had.”

“If you had!”

Jan drew a sharp breath, and held out her hand.

“Did you bring down an instalment, by any chance?”

“Yes.”

“Give it me, please!”

She took the proffered note-case, emptied it of

its wad of banknotes, and, without pausing to count them, carried it over to the stove, and thrust it in.

“Melodramatic,” said Jan briskly, as the flare gilded her neck and chin, “but highly necessary. That may serve to convince you, Tony. I resent being hired as an Aunt Sally for any rotten eggs you may have to dispose of, nor will I be paid after the event. Henceforth any income I can’t account for goes into that stove without any pause for consideration. Satisfied?”

“Well, hardly!” Anthony, who had watched the bonfire without great emotion, crossed the room to stand beside her.

“What have you to live on, Jan?”

“What I can earn by knitting—about twenty to thirty shillings a week. It’s enough. Your standard of living is extravagant.”

“It’s what yours was a few months ago.”

“Circumstances alter cases,” said Jan maliciously. “One needs a large income to support the honour and glory of being Mrs. Anthony Lovatt—and to keep up one’s spirits under it. You have your drawbacks as a companion, Tony, though you may not have noticed it. Not to put too fine a point upon it, you would drive better women to drink.”

“Jan, is that true?” Anthony gripped her wrist with sudden force and swung her round to meet his eyes. “Was life so intolerable to you that you had to do—what you did? Tell me the truth for once. I’ve starved to know!”

“I never told you anything else.”

Jan disengaged herself coldly, and surveyed her bruised wrists with ostentatious surprise.

“I wish I knew what you were trying to find out, Tony. You have a horror of direct questions, I know, but I don’t see why you need carry it into your relations with me when the witness-box is a home to me. Any false delicacy seems out of place after the rest.”

“Do you suppose for one moment that I enjoyed that—that sordid hell?”

“Well, I suppose so. You ordered it, and paid for it. Oh, *pax!* I don’t want to squabble over who was to blame. If you won’t take my word, you won’t, and there’s an end of it.”

“You never gave me your word.”

“Would you have believed me if I had?” Jan raised shining eyes, a ghost of hope struggling in their clear depths. “Tony, I’ll swear I didn’t do it if you like. Would you accept that?”

“I—can’t.”

“Oh, very well,” said Jan listlessly. “I suppose if you really can’t, it’s no use trying to. Anyway, I don’t seem to have wasted much time by not denying it before.”

She sat down beside the fire and regarded him wistfully, her chin cupped in her hands. Her voice was dreamy, almost toneless.

“I wonder what I have ever done that you should think me a liar, Tony. The other thing I can understand more or less, but that— Perhaps you believe that it’s natural to a woman to lie in defence of her reputation. It may be. I wouldn’t have said that to save myself from a mediæval thrashing, bare back, cart-tail, and thongs, but I suppose you won’t believe that either. You know you should really have married a meek, weak, loving sort of woman, who would have wept and protested when you tried to turn her out of the house. You couldn’t strike at anything that clung and cried, could you? Well, better luck next time; and that, I think, closes the interview.”

“There never will be a next time!” said Anthony passionately. “Jan, can’t you realise that I love you—oh, not a little? Enough to want to be told that it was my fault from beginning to end; that you weren’t morally rotten—just tempted and not

protected. Jan, *were* there things I could have done which would have made any difference?"

"No, I've nothing to complain of."

"Then why? Why?"

"Oh, what's the use?" said Jan wearily, and allowed her head to sink forward a little upon her screening fingers.

"What's the use of asking me questions if you won't believe the answers? Won't you go, please, Tony? I'm very tired."

"I'm sorry, Jan!"

"Of course. It's all right."

Anthony went towards the door, hesitated, and then came back and stood beside his wife's chair, staring down at the bowed head, his long, nervous fingers clenching and unclenching themselves against the cushioned back. After a moment he dropped upon his knees and put his arms round the small, crouching body.

"Jan, my Jan, is it all no use? I want to forgive you. I want to take you back and be sure that you're properly looked after—safe. I don't care what you've done—not very much. You're mine, to take care of always, to comfort if you need it and I want you so. Come back to me, Jan."

"Why, dear?"

“I can’t bear to know that you’re starving. Oh, you needn’t live with me—only in the same house. I shan’t worry you. I never did, did I? You don’t even have to know that I love you unless you need me. I’ll help you to keep straight. If you just can’t I’ll—try to stand it somehow.”

“Can’t you believe, not possibly, that I have been—good?”

“I’ll say I believe, if you like.”

“No, don’t. I don’t want a lie from you. And so it’s just the same old story over again. From you to me, a roof for my head, and food, and things to wear, and from me to you, what? I was happy enough with that sort of life when I didn’t understand what it meant, but to go back to it with my eyes open—I can’t, and I wouldn’t if I could. Go away, Tony. I don’t need you, and, thinking as you do, you aren’t much of a help to my self-respect. Try to believe that I’m living clean now, whatever I did before, and good-bye, my dear.”

Anthony did not move, tightened his arms if anything, his face hidden in her lap, and Jan, blinded by unshed tears, made no effort to push him away. She was utterly spent by the emotions of the past hour, hopeless for the future, content to rest in the

beloved hold, knowing that it must presently be withdrawn, but hardly caring, all feeling dulled by the stupor of physical fatigue. She drooped, listless, her hands straying through the dark hair. After all, what was the use of struggling? Oh, what was the use?

Anthony spoke again, his voice muffled by the folds against his mouth.

“How thin you are, my darling. How cruelly thin!”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think of it. I wouldn’t let myself think. It seemed so certain that you were with one of those others. Why aren’t you, Jan? No, don’t answer. I don’t want to think of them just now, just when I am persuading myself that they don’t matter. I know it was my fault. A man isn’t a man if he can’t guard his own wife. There must have been some way to put a stop to it—something definite, something masculine. And I could only stand by and watch. That is all I am good for—to watch. I couldn’t expect any woman to stick to me, let alone you, you splendid, radiant thing. Such miracles don’t happen. I was mad to hope that one would. No, don’t push me away. I won’t try to kiss your face, not even your hands

if you had rather I didn't. It doesn't hurt you to let me hold you like this for a few minutes before I go!"

.
"I wonder what those two are talking about," said Monica.

She had finished her washing up, even to the dish-cloths, and leaned against the window, watching the steady square of light thrown on the late-fallen snow.

"Let us hope that they are not talking at all," said Felix pleasantly. "There is an intimacy in silence which leads to understandings more often than not."

Monica cast him an anxious glance, her forehead puckered in affectionate concern.

"You're sure it's best for them to come together after all? Marriage isn't much of a life for a woman."

"No?"

"Not if she has brains enough to think for herself. Most haven't. We're poor trash. Oh, well, I don't run the world! Sure that you won't mind yourself?"

"Mind what?" Felix regarded her with placid

devilry. "Your running of the world or the prospective loss of *ma belle amie*? The first would probably overcome me. Under the latter I think I can bear up, thanking you all the same. Well, I suppose that it's getting time for me to push off."

CHAPTER XIII

FELIX did not stay out his week-end. It was given him to perceive that his presence in Otway was superfluous, and he determined to try a little self-effacement as an antidote to past officiousness. For a time, therefore, he gave the little village a wide berth, and devoted himself to his own affairs. From time to time he wrote Jan brief, chatty letters to break the effect of desertion, but when the weeks trickled into months without bringing any reply he justly assumed that he was under a shadow which it must be trusted to time and Monica to remove. Philosophically he informed himself that he had the reward which a clear-sighted altruist should have expected, and possessed his soul in patience. From this state of placid resignation he was aroused by a brilliant meteor in the shape of little Mollie Desmond, who hurled herself upon him from the blue of a *thé dansant*, and demanded to be taken aside for quiet talk.

“Just anywhere, Felix, where we can talk and not be interrupted. I want you.”

“That is flattering,” Felix admitted. “What do you want me for?”

“But what should I?” She stared at him with round eyes of innocence. “About Jan, of course.”

Felix laughed and surrendered. As he had prophesied, he rather enjoyed his new reputation as a *roué*, but Mollie was too fine to practise his hand on. Instead, he became brotherly with the best grace in the world.

“Well, I can’t give you any very recent news, I’m afraid. I haven’t been down to Otway for over a month.”

“But you have been down there?”

“Several times.”

“Is it a nice place?”

“A windy one. I should say it was rather beautiful in the summer-time. There is a cove which would give topping bathing, and the view is magnificent. Thinking of going down there?”

“Jan won’t let me,” said Mollie regretfully. “I wrote and asked her to have me with her, but she said it wouldn’t do. Daddy would make such a frightful row. He doesn’t even like me writing to her. He seems to consider that Jan is divorced from the family as well as from Tony. Isn’t it beastly of him?”

“It’s one point of view,” Felix admitted. “But, you see, Jan agrees with him.”

“She does,” said Mollie frankly, “and that’s beastly of *her*. I should be company for her if I couldn’t be anything else, and we could share my dress-allowance until it was gone, and then keep a shop. I know some girls who do that because their father is dead, and they earn quite a lot. But she only writes such short letters—not as if she wanted to tell one anything, but just the other way round. Do tell me everything, Fe! I’m not a child, whatever people say, and I won’t be treated as one. Do, do!”

“Oh, very well,” Felix conceded gracefully, and proceeded to paint a picture of Jan’s existence which, if it erred slightly upon the rosy side, at least succeeded in rounding Mollie’s eyes to delft saucers, and parting her lips with quick, fluttering breaths.

“No servants!”

“It’s such a small house, you know,” Felix defended. “Only two rooms. There wouldn’t be room for one.”

“But Jan can’t cook or wash, or do anything that servants do. She doesn’t know how to. Oh, how perfectly horrible!” Mollie wrung her hands

in open despair. "I thought it might be bad, but never so bad as all that."

"It isn't. Miss Stuart helps her a lot."

"Oh, I know, but what difference does that make?"

Mollie broke off for a moment to detach the string of pearls from her soft throat and held them out.

"They aren't very large," she acknowledged ruefully, "but I've been meaning to send them down to Jan for ever so long. Will you take them, please? I didn't dare to put them in the post, because it would be so dreadful if they got lost, and I haven't any others. But I want her to have them, and with all my love. Don't forget that. It makes such a difference in giving presents—if one really means it."

"I don't think Jan will take them." Felix looked from the glowing face to the necklet with some embarrassment.

"Oh, yes, she will," Mollie nodded wisely. "Jan hates taking things, but it's different with sisters. They belong together, and that makes it all right. Now do be a dear, Fe. I was counting on you."

And she kissed him to clinch the matter.

Felix blinked a little under the warm impulsiveness of the caress, blushed furiously, and returned it with some enthusiasm. This was slightly more than Mollie had bargained for.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that!” said she.

“Of course not. Nice kid, aren’t you? Well, I’ll put this through for you as well as I can. I say, aren’t they rather particular with you at home—more than with the others, I mean?”

“Course they are, because they say I’m like Jan. I’m damn glad if I am!” Up went the valiant little head to mark the words.

“So I see. Well, good luck, little girl!”

“Good luck!”

“For life. I never saw anyone so tiptoe for it; everything beginning, and the world so new and all. Well, I think so too, and I’m thirty. Shake hands, you bonny child!”

“I’m not, and I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Mollie, naïvely puzzled. She was going, but swirled back, all the sweet immaturity of her tense.

“I say, ain’t it *piggish* of daddy to go on taking money?”

“Whose?”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Jan was paying

for Derek at Sandhurst, and Tony said he wanted that to go on just the same. Daddy lets it. Isn't it hateful of him? And when we meet Tony we are supposed to speak as if nothing had happened. I won't. Oh, I hate him!"

"Money doesn't cost anything to Lovatt," said Felix drily, and Mollie coloured furiously.

"Does that make it any better for us? It isn't even as if we needed it really. It's just greediness, and not having any pride, and—oh, everything hateful!"

"One is not supposed to criticise one's parents," said Felix dispassionately. "Everybody does it, of course. Don't let me stop you. I shouldn't pass on your information to Jan, though."

"As if I would! I'm not a fool. But I do hate things!"

She was gone in a flurry of righteous indignation, and Felix watched her retreating figure with eyes of thoughtful approval.

For the following week he was kept in town by business, and, oddly enough, it was a chance meeting with Anthony which clinched his decision. Rather to his surprise, Anthony made no effort to avoid him; indeed, spoke to him on his own initiative; and for the first time Felix sensed the deep,

almost overpowering nervousness beneath his armour of reserve. His voice was steady enough, but there was an indefinite impression of shrinking behind it. Felix guessed at the sensitiveness which bred it, and banished every trace of hostility from his own face.

“You have not been seeing Jan lately, have you?” Anthony broke the ice with simple directness. “Would you mind telling me why? You need not, of course, if you would rather not.”

“Didn’t want to make trouble,” Felix explained amicably. “I’m rather good at doing that, aren’t I? It seemed simpler to stay away.”

“I fancied that might be the reason.” Anthony found occasion to look away, and then added with something of an effort, “It would be very good of you to go down to her occasionally. I think she needs friends.”

“I will!” Felix promised readily, and waited for more, certain that it was coming.

“There’s another thing. I believe I ought to offer you an apology, if you care to accept it. I am nearly sure now that I had no reason to name you as a co-respondent. I suppose it is rather futile to ask you to forgive me for it, but I do.”

“Oh, that’s all right!” said Felix easily. “But I say, why——”

“You tried to give Jan back to me. The two things didn’t fit.”

Anthony paused as if for comment, and, receiving none, turned away.

“The world can’t help being mad,” said Felix philosophically.

That afternoon he packed a handbag and took a train for Otway, wiring Monica to meet him at the station and turn him back if he was not wanted. It was impossible to reach Otway direct, and on the long train journey he found ample leisure to reflect upon Anthony’s sudden change of attitude.

“First he has no utter use for me,” he complained bitterly. “Well, I don’t blame him for that. It was natural. Then he charges me with playing games with his wife. Well, that’s natural, too. I’m no saint, and Jan was made to be loved. Well, but if the fellow thought that why did he leave her alone, like a passion-flower blooming in the wilderness? If Uriah the Hittite was as slack in looking after Bathsheba— No! Either he wasn’t interested in her at all, or else he knew he could trust her through thick and thin. So he

could; but, then, why the divorce? Suddenly he won't have anything more to do with her; willing to do anything to get free; tries to bribe her to keep away from him. Suppose I loved a woman, and she turned out to be a bad 'un, should I feel that way? Never having lost my head over one to any extent, can't say, but suppose it's on the cards. Well, why am I St. Anthony of Padua now? If they are reconciled that explains it, but, then, why hasn't he brought Jan up to town? No, they can't be reconciled. I'm cleared because of my open and manly bearing, but Jan isn't. Why not? If he's found anything more open and manly than Jan I should like to see it. This loving people is the very devil for messing up one's powers of observation to the point where they are worth about threepence-halfpenny, or rather less. Damn it all, I won't be St. Anthony if Jan is to go on posing as the Scarlet Woman. I never heard of such rot. What I'm to do to prevent it I don't for the moment see, but that will come."

The deserted country station brought Monica clad in a faded blue raincoat that had seen better days and a tam-o'-shanter pulled low over her hair. She greeted him without enthusiasm and eyed his bag with scorn.

“So you are coming down for a few days! We thought you were gone for good.”

“When I am wanted,” Felix assured her with becoming gravity, “I can be depended on to appear like a conjurer’s white rabbit. Why didn’t you send for me?”

Monica sniffed.

Outside the station they took the narrow flinty road across the open country, Monica swinging along at his side with a long-limbed, easy step which it needed no shortening of stride to keep pace with. The afternoon was wearing into the clear amethyst of evening, fresh with the breath of rain. On every hand green buds were breaking out on the green country-side. Felix, snuffing up the air, found that it was good.

“Well,” said Monica impatiently, “don’t you want to hear the news?”

“No. Is there any?” Felix held her off for the pleasure of seeing her toss her head, but she countered with a question.

“Why did you run away like that before? Not that we wanted you.”

“I guessed that I was *de trop*,” said Felix equably. “It appears that I’ve been whitewashed since, but— Well, what happened, anyway?”

“Nothing much. I watched to see Jan’s light go out, but it was on practically all night. He left soon after you did, but I didn’t like to go in without being called. In the morning Jan’s eyes had big rings round them, but she didn’t seem to want to talk. She’s been different ever since; quieter and less ready to fly out about things. I think she cries at night. Then this man wrote to ask her if he might come down here to live, and she told him to go to hell and do what he damned well pleased, but except for that she hasn’t shown any spirit for weeks. It’s abominable. I wish he had stayed where he belonged and let us forget that he existed. Oh, I know that I told you to fetch him, but how was I to know what he was like? You told me that there was nothing radically wrong with him.”

“So he’s down here?”

“We don’t see much of him,” Monica admitted. “I think he only comes down for a few days a week, and then he keeps out of the way; but it’s bad enough to know he’s about. Why can’t he stay in London if he can’t do anything but make Jan miserable?”

“I’ll propose to her again to-night,” Felix promised cheerfully. “She has to get up her spirits to

turn me down. It's quite an exhilarating proceeding, and does her heaps of good. This will be the fourth time, which is not a lucky number, but no matter."

"Don't you ever take anything seriously?" said Monica furiously. "You bring everything down to the level of an amusement. I hate you!"

"Well, would you turn courtship into a tragedy?" Felix regarded her stern profile with dancing mischief. "One heart, one love, is overdoing it. Think of all the surplus women in Great Britain! Think of the correspondingly increased demand for romance! Why, your unitarian ideas would upset the whole laws of supply and demand. Think of all the tender maiden hearts which but for me had never known the thrill of unrequited passion. Are they the worse for it? Not they. I have loved them, and they have a hair of my scalp to dangle through eternity. When I am bald I will abstain, but not till then."

"And in that case I suppose some poor woman is to put up with your exceedingly second-hand devotion, and say nothing. 'My wife, poor wretch.' I should rather think so!"

"Not at all. I shall come to her with all the benefits of experience. It is no compliment to a

goddess to tumble upon her notice, and woo her like an undergraduate.”

“And it was by acting upon that code that you got Jan divorced, I suppose?”

“I did,” Felix was suddenly grave. “That is going to be the lasting regret of my life. I was going to say that I had never broken a heart, but I believe I have—Lovatt’s. And yet God knows I wouldn’t have hurt either of them if I’d seen what was happening, instead of blundering straight ahead like a silly fool.”

“Or if you had only hurt him I shouldn’t care.” Monica sniffed. “Men are devils!”

“Yes?” Felix regained his twinkle on the instant. “How many do you know?”

“What’s that got to do with it? If you only knew one guinea-pig, and it was a devil of a guinea-pig——”

“I see. May I ask if I——”

“Oh, you don’t count!”

“Thanks. So Lovatt is the fiend in porcine form. Any others?”

“I don’t know. That’s enough, isn’t it? Anyway, they are. I don’t see why I should bother to be logical about a thing I know perfectly well.”

Abruptly she relaxed to laughter.

Jan was sitting on the cottage gate when they reached it. Her glossy head was bare, and her woolly jacket made much of her lithe boyishness.

She dropped her work at their approach, swung herself down, and came to meet them, candid friendliness in her eyes.

“What an age you have been away!” said she frankly. “I thought I was never going to see you again, Felix.”

She gave him her hands.

“Oh, yes, you are forgiven,” she added, in answer to the unspoken question. “That is to say, I forgive you what you said for the sake of what you didn’t. Come into the house, my dears.”

CHAPTER XIV

RATHER to Felix's surprise, Jan accepted Mollie's gift without demur. She took it in her hands laughing a little, hesitated, fingering the pearls, and then put them down very gently and raised her head.

"I think this is too sweet to refuse," she said seriously. "Yes, I am sure it is. There—there are some very nice people in the world, Felix."

"And some very nasty ones."

"Yes." Jan admitted that instantly. "And the nasty ones are always with us, like the poor."

She did not elaborate the statement, although he waited for her to do so. Presently she referred to the pearls again.

"I shall keep them for the next emergency," she said thoughtfully. "I suppose I have been frightfully extravagant, but I've only got a little over three pounds left as a reserve fund, and it isn't enough to be safe. Illness is so frightfully extravagant, and—and badly regulated. I was

never ill before, when I could afford to be, and now, when I simply can't——”

“Oh, Lord!” said Felix aghast.

“But, of course, lots of people are like that,” said Jan, in a matter-of-fact voice, “only one doesn't know. In the old days one didn't think of illness as frightening, just as unpleasant; and then there is growing old, too, only it is rather early to start bothering about that.”

“I should rather think so. What is your age, by the way? Twenty-two?”

“Twenty-three; but I've no one but myself to depend on for ever and ever, and things must get worse with me instead of better, so if I don't save now I never shall. When I look at the end of the road it's bleak. Am I being morbid, Felix?”

“No. Tell me all of it,” said Felix gently. “Nightmares die when you drag them into the daylight, little girl. I'm here to listen.”

Jan crossed the room and stood in front of him, her hands clasped behind her back, her chin at an angle, the wide, clear eyes oddly childlike in spite of the shadows beneath them.

“Oh, you arm-chair, Felix! Well, if you like I really believe it would help. You see, when I was in London, before I came down here, I spent

my time trying to find out what happened to divorced women in the long run. It wasn't a very cheerful occupation, was it, but it fascinated me, and—well, I did. There was a woman I met by accident. She didn't mind talking to me, and I was very hard up for people to talk to. She seemed to know a lot about it. They marry mostly, of course, and then there are the ones who—just live in flats; and the others who live in bed-sitting-rooms on pensions from the relatives who won't see them. At first, of course, a few people are interested and sympathetic, but that dulls after a time, when one is only the scandal of the year before last. Ten years hence, you see, you will be married, and your wife isn't very likely to approve of me, is she? And Mollie will be married, and her husband is certain not to; and Tony will be married—not that that will make any difference; and Monica—I don't know about Monica. But you will all be going forward, and I can't very well, can I? It isn't even as if there were something to look forward to, or something else to live for and fight for, as I suppose there would have been if—if—” Jan coloured vividly and stammered over the sentence. “You see, I've got to be a divorced woman without any of the di-

forced woman's equipment. I can't be brazen, and I won't be humble, and the only love possible is behind me. One has to go on, of course, but it's damnably difficult sometimes. Felix, you are an angel to listen to me like this. I'm finished! I've whined enough for one morning, and I must do some work, anyway."

"Half a minute! I want to know about Lovatt. Jan, how are things between you?"

"They aren't." Jan stared away with set lips. "He wants to be generous. He loves me well enough to take me back—as a wanton—forgiven—I can't talk about it."

"Are you on speaking terms?"

"Oh, yes, but we hardly ever meet. He has a house down here now. I wish he would go away. If you speak to him, Felix, you might persuade him that it's no good staying. It really isn't. I'd rather be left alone."

"Sure, Jan?"

"Quite sure. That side of my life is finished with. I want everything or nothing now, and I can't have everything. Don't let's talk about it any more."

"Oh, very well," said Felix reluctantly. "But I wish you could be happy, you know."

“I know you do,” said Jan softly.

She sat down on the arm of his chair, her arm flung lightly round his shoulders.

“Felix, it’s pleasant—pleasant to be a sister to you, and what a dog in the manger I am becoming! For, honestly, though I will not have you myself, I cannot endure the thought of parting with you to another woman, unless——”

She had been speaking lightly, and gently pulling his hair as she talked. Now, of a sudden, her eyes, resting on his, lit up with a quick sparkle of understanding.

“Oh, Felix, of course. How perfectly splendid! Why ever didn’t you tell me before?”

“She wouldn’t look at me,” said Felix stoutly. “Why do you suggest such ideas to my innocent head?”

“I didn’t. You thought of it first. I saw you do it. I am so glad! The one woman in the world who is nice enough to deserve you; and, if you can be improved, I am sure that it will improve you enormously to fall in love. Tell me honestly, when did you think of it first?”

“A moment ago—a fraction of a second before you did. This is a very amazing experience, and I shall have to get used to it. She is the very

antithesis of all that I admire in women, and yet—Well, I must think about it.”

“Do!” said Jan gleefully. “There is a great deal in thinking; but I have more than a suspicion that nature has settled this matter in advance. Think, Felix, think!”

“You look like conspirators, you two!” said Monica, entering a quarter of an hour later. “I wonder what you find so important to talk about? And, of course, neither of you would think to light the lamp.”

CHAPTER XV

FELIX was no ordinary man. He did not allow the new possibilities suddenly opened before him to obscure his interest in old issues. If anything was to suffer for his preoccupation his work was obviously the destined sacrifice, and, instead of living in town and visiting Otway at intervals, he reversed the procedure, and ran up to London two days a week, devoting the remainder of his time to whimsical courtship. For obvious reasons, this presented difficulties. Monica, at the very outset, gave him clearly to understand that she did not propose to allow her spinster existence to be gladdened by thrills of romantic ardour. At the very suggestion she grew glacial and vindictive.

“The woman is a positive north wind!” he complained bitterly to his ready confidante. “We are going to be fiendishly uncomfortable if ever we do manage to get married.”

“That will be so good for you, dear!” said Jan

heartlessly, and Felix flung away in what was, for him, a close approach to a huff.

In the intervals of his wooing he found time to improve his acquaintance with Anthony, and here he was met half-way, even finding shy advances in return. Anthony was an enigma, and Felix, lighted on his quest by that one flash of insight granted in London, settled to the problem with zest.

Jan commented on this with a twinkle which hid a deeper current of seriousness.

“Just how much are you growing to like that quondam husband of mine, Felix?”

“I hardly know myself,” Felix confessed. “I’m dining with him to-night, as it happens. Do you mind, child?”

“Of course not. Why should I?” Jan hesitated a moment, and wriggled her finger against the corner of her mouth, a pet mannerism of hers when at a loss to express a thought.

“Felix, you won’t—won’t tell him things, will you?”

“What things?”

“That I—oh, you know—not that I do; but, anyway, you won’t?”

“I don’t know,” said Felix dubiously. “Jan,

hasn't it ever struck you that it might make a lot of difference to a fellow to know that you cared for him? In fact, it might make all the difference."

"It might." Jan's bright face was grim. "It might, for instance, put him on his honour to take me back. Felix, can't you understand? That one wretched little bit of me is the only thing that hasn't been wrenched away and fingered by everybody who had an interest in it. I can bear to be despised for a lie—that's all in a day's work; but to be pitied, and for the truth—not that!"

"Well, of course I can do nothing without your permission," Felix admitted grudgingly.

He did not see his way to carrying the point, but in his own mind he felt certain that Jan was wrong, and that a little pride would be well expended in the cause of understanding. That, however, was a matter of character. Jan would not have been the clean, brave fighter she was if she had ever found it possible to bend her stiff little neck and confess to the wounds which were draining her strength. To her their very existence was less a sorrow than a corroding shame. Love should have died with faith; it had not; but let it seem to

die, and she could turn the same unflinching face to the enemy, confident in their blindness as in her own valiant hypocrisy.

Something of this Felix understood, and admired even in disagreement, though his own easier philosophy chafed under the restraint. Here were two people who had lived together and held by each other, who were still more to each other than is usual with most married couples, held apart by circumstance and the belief in a lie, or, to be exact, in a chain of lies. Felix was honest enough to admit to himself that wives had been divorced on less evidence than had been marshalled against Jan and yet had not been entirely innocent; but he denied that that seriously affected the issue. Belief, he stoutly maintained, was not a matter for evidence; if one knew and loved the soul in a woman's eyes she might be free to compromise herself how and when she would. So far Felix the sentimentalist; but beyond that he became practical. He acknowledged that he had allowed himself to become prejudiced by constant study of one side of the question. Remained Anthony's.

Anthony, with a consideration which Monica would have hotly denied him, had installed him-

self at the further end of the village, in a bungalow belonging to people who only used it occasionally for the summer half of the year, and who had been even more astonished than pleased at the prospect of letting it for the spring. It was a gimcrack, typically-seaside affair, of much white woodwork in crying need of a coat of paint, and a windswept garden, ragged and uncared-for; but a tumble-down boathouse giving on an inlet of calmer water promised possibilities; and indoors Anthony had imported enough of his own surroundings to strike a contrast of pleasant luxury.

Felix surveying the sitting-room, where chintz had given place to carpet and hangings of deep soft blue, and wicker was exchanged for dark oak, approved the effect, but doubted whether the trouble of transplantation was worth while.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Anthony vaguely. He was wandering about the room like an aimless ghost. “I buy so many things, you see, and I haven’t anywhere to put them really. I wish I could find a dealer who couldn’t talk. They all make one take things one doesn’t want, and sound so plausible about it. I don’t think I like this chair much.”

He was fingering a gorgeous Spanish seat, his

brows creased in an anxious frown, and as he spoke he raised troubled, dark eyes, as if expecting sympathy in its possession.

“All this inlaid work is rather showy, don’t you think? I wonder why I bought it.”

“Not to sit in, I should imagine,” Felix opined, with a gleam of humour. “One might possibly put a cushion over each end and lie upon it, but even then——”

“I know. It isn’t comfortable. That stamped leather one is Spanish, too. I suppose,” he added, with a sudden spurt of irritation, “that only fools allow themselves to be saddled with things they don’t want.”

“That’s rather sweeping,” Felix disagreed, his judgment hampered by the memory of certain unfortunate bargains of his own.

He was studying the man before him with quiet curiosity, and found him interesting.

Anthony was of about his own height, but of much slighter build; all long limbs and attenuated body, and he moved lightly, with a suspicion of jerkiness which hinted at overstrung nerves. His complexion was unusually dark for an Englishman, and the fine features too large for good looks, suggested an American somewhere in his family

tree. His speaking voice was soft and pleasant, rather inclined to drawl and blur over the end of a sentence, as if he himself had lost immediate interest in it, and he talked readily, with a sort of shy deference which coming to a man no older than himself was oddly attractive.

“I wanted to go into the Navy once,” he said, in answer to a casual question. “They wouldn’t have me, of course. I never got past the first interview. I remember they asked me what animals ate grass, and I was so nervous that I thought they said ‘Admirals.’ It seemed such a silly sort of question to ask that I simply blushed and stammered at them. And so they wouldn’t have me. It was almost the same thing during the war. I did manage to get sent to the front, but then all my regiment was cut to pieces while I was in the hospital with measles.”

The soft, unhumorous voice left Felix in doubt as to whether or no it would be tactful to laugh at the tragic Odyssey, and he refrained with an effort.

“It would not have mattered so much if it had been anything serious,” said Anthony wistfully. “I suppose you——”

“Oh, I had luck.”

Felix might also have added that he had earned distinctions, but he was unwilling to divert the trickle of reminiscences. Already he glimpsed the intense natural humility lying beneath the mask of quiet reserve, guessed that it was the keynote of the puzzle, and put out cautious feelers to probe its source.

Already the growing insight explained much which had been darkness. Groping for a fuller knowledge of the truth he was tempted to a bold attack. True, he knew little of Anthony, but it is often easier to give up one's secrets to a stranger than to a proved friend. Felix had a peculiarly soothing quality of mind which had frequently lured the barest acquaintances into unexpected confidences, and he knew that Anthony at least had already come under its influence and counted on it not a little in attempting to break down his armour of reticence.

It was not till they had finished dinner, and were sitting over their coffee before a small wood fire, that he broached the subject, leaning down as he did so to flick his cigarette-ash against the edge of the tray, and so find an excuse for averting his eyes.

“By the way, Lovatt, from what you said in

London I gather that I am no longer—well, under suspicion, as it were?”

“Good Lord, no!” Anthony flushed darkly, and his thin hand clenched itself in a sudden nervous jerk. “I hope you haven’t been thinking that I—I say, you make me feel several different sorts of cad!”

“Why?” said Felix. He straightened himself, and smiled up at his host with his natural frank charm. “Look here, you acquitted me on the flimsiest evidence, you know. Say I was the rotter you once thought. Why shouldn’t I have been living with Jan ever since the divorce, got tired of her and tried to work her off on you? That’s a theory that covers all the facts, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t cover the persons,” said Anthony, in a low voice. “Oh, need we talk about all this? I have apologised.”

“Yes, to me. What about Jan?”

“Jan?”

“Oh, you haven’t acquitted her?”

“No. Royd, I refuse to discuss my wife with you or anybody. I know you mean to help, but it can’t do any good.”

“Oh, yes, it can,” said Felix inexorably. “I know I’m taking unfair advantage of my position,

but that's a detail, and you'll listen because you owe it to me. Also, you owe it to her; but I'm appealing on the first count. Look here! Your contention is that Jan is an utter rotter, yet when she was on the rocks, directly after the divorce, I asked her to marry me, and she refused. Of course, my income looks rather paltry after yours, but still, I can afford to keep a wife in comfort. Remember what Jan was facing, and then tell me how many women would have had the courage to turn their backs upon a way of escape and walk out into the world with practically nothing behind them but a bad name."

"Oh, don't!" Anthony implored. "It isn't any use going over the old ground, indeed it isn't."

"I insist on going over it, and I have the right to if I like. You've got to admit that. Eight months ago you accused us two of certain things. Now you are prepared to withdraw that so far as I am concerned. Well, unless you withdraw it against Jan too, it isn't good enough, and I shall go on talking. To prevent mistakes I don't mind saying, to start with, that there was nothing wrong between us; but there might have been. For months I was on the edge of being in love with Jan. If she had asked me to run away with her

I think I would have done it. She didn't. Oh, I'm not trying to argue that I was any particular temptation, but your contention is that Jan was loose—anybody's for the picking up. How do you account for the way she's living now, in the most cramped poverty? You know perfectly well that she isn't used to it; nor is she ascetic enough to enjoy it; nor is it necessary. Beauty like Jan's is always marketable, so is the notoriety you have so kindly given her. Do you suppose for one moment that she has lived through these months untempted? And now she has nothing to lose by giving in, as she had when she was your wife. How do you explain that she is straight now if she was crooked then? Remorse? Does Jan act like a remorseful woman or like a defiant and injured one? Doesn't she carry her head up and look the whole world in the face like the valiant little gentleman nature meant her to be in the first place? Hasn't she got the cleanest, straightest eyes on God's earth?"

"She has," said Anthony drearily. "But you don't understand."

"What?"

"It was my fault." Anthony ignored the

question, and substituted one of his own. "What reason did Jan give for refusing you?"

"The idiotic one that it wouldn't be fair to me. As I pointed out to her then and since, she's no more tarred and feathered than I am, but she sticks to her point."

"She's right," said Anthony thoughtfully. "And it's like Jan."

"It is, but it's not like the woman you divorced."

"You don't understand," Anthony repeated patiently, "I never said that Jan was not the sweetest, bravest thing God ever made. She just lacks the moral sense. It's not her fault. It's mine. I shouldn't have let her marry me to please her people as she did. Oh, I don't mean that they beat her into it! I'm not such a fool as that. But they did persuade her, and flung us together on every possible occasion. She didn't want to marry me at all, but I knew that her people could be trusted to make her do it, and I wanted her so. If she had hated me it would have been different, but at the time she *was* willing to accept the things I could give her, and it seemed all right; but how could a child like that know what it meant? I don't think she had ever even kissed a

man before she met me, and I'm not the sort a girl could ever care for much. I knew what we were doing, and those greedy, fatuous people who pushed her into it knew, but Jan was simply the innocent little sacrifice led to the slaughter in lace and orange blossoms. Perhaps she thought that was all there *was* in a marriage! She was too young to know what she was doing, and she was afraid of me. Jan! My little Jan! She had no cause to be, after the first. I left her alone. But I ought to have known that Jan couldn't live without love. It wasn't natural. Why, she was simply made for it. And mine was no use, because I had married her. I couldn't ask without seeming to claim a right. I had to let her go free."

"If you thought that why divorce her at all?"

"I don't know. Something snapped in me. I couldn't go on putting up with it. It was such a ghastly form of hell, pretending to live with Jan when I was the only man who didn't. What was the use, anyway? I wasn't keeping her straight. I wasn't doing anything for her except pay her bills, and I thought she would let me do that after the divorce. Man, can't you realise what it is to look on, and know, when one loves a woman more

than one's own soul? I bore it for a year. I don't know how, except that I hoped that, when she was through with Holland, she might turn to me to be comforted. Oh, I'm proud! I *hoped* that. I lived on the thought for months, and instead, with hardly a break——”

He turned sharply away, leaving the sentence unfinished. The inquisitor reached for another instrument.

“There were three charges. You withdraw one. Six months ago were you any surer of the other two? Isn't your faith in your own judgment the least little bit shaken? Don't you feel the smallest doubt that where you were wrong once you may have been wrong twice? I should if I were you. Think of all you knew of Jan. You were with her for three years. Did you ever find her doing anything mean, or underhand, or sordid?”

“Oh, can't you be quiet! I've told you what I think.”

“You have, and it doesn't convince me in the least. Why do you think Jan consents to be poor now?”

“She might be—in love.”

“She might; but if you're running to supposi-

tions imagine something else. Isn't it conceivably possible that you were wrong from beginning to end?"

"I wasn't."

"It isn't possible?"

"No. I loved her. Do you think I *wanted* to believe it?"

"I think you are too erratic and nerve-ridden to judge plain facts. Look here, when you were a kid didn't you drive yourself into fits by imagining things in the dark, see things crawling in every patch of shadow? I believe that from the moment you married Jan you were in a panic at the idea of losing her, and got the jumps whenever she spoke to another man. Weren't you on the watch every minute of the day? And do you suppose there is a woman living who can go under the microscope like that for years on end without showing a single indiscretion, much less Jan, the lovely little fliberty-gibbet. I don't believe she cares twopence who steals her gloves or makes eyes at her, or lines up in a queue to dance with her, so long as they point their toes properly. She doesn't take it seriously. Have you never seen her eyes twinkle when she was being made love to? She likes it; but I don't believe she ever

did any harm, even in play. The only time I ever tried to be serious with her she pulled my hair and told me to try it on Anne Trensham. Of course, you saw what you looked to see, but you saw all there was. I'd pawn my soul to the devil on that."

"But if that's true—" Anthony stared straight before him with unseeing eyes. "If I divorced Jan for nothing there's no place in hell for me. And yet I was sure—sure. But if it's not true—But it was—it was!"

"Ah! Now you want to believe it."

"*Want to!*"

"You are," said Felix judicially, "rather good at believing what you like."

He rose to his feet, conscious that he had already done his utmost. The seed of doubt was sown, and bade fair to flourish. There was nothing to be done except to leave well alone and allow it to grow.

CHAPTER XVI

JAN was a born procrastinator, and, as Felix had said, there was no Spartan strain in her to challenge hardships. When Anthony discovered her scrubbing the floor of her kitchen she was humming the "Marseillaise" with vindictive energy, and frowning blackly at the soapsuds. She looked up at him, her lips still pursed, her face flushed with long stooping.

"Oh!" she said, and regarded him with contracted eyebrows. "Very well, you can come in if you like, and if your dignity will allow you to sit on the table, otherwise I haven't room for you."

And she made onslaught on the boards.

Anthony obediently seated himself as directed, and gathered up his long limbs under him to be out of the way, linking his arms round his knees and resting his chin upon them as he watched her with sombre eyes.

"Why do you have to scrub floors, Jan?"

"Because they would get dirty if I didn't, dear

man. Really, Tony, that question is hardly up to your usual elliptical style. I don't do it often."

"You know I didn't mean that."

"Didn't you? Well, what did you mean then? I'm too busy to study out the *double entente* this morning."

"You needn't. It's quite simple. I want to know why I am not allowed to provide for you. It's usual, you know."

"Is it? I abominate the usual! Besides"—Jan swept her soapsuds before her in a venomous onslaught—"I have so few expenses."

"I suppose you hate me too much to take anything from me. Is that it?"

"P'r'aps. Do you expect me to *love* you, Tony? I haven't much in common with Griselda, you know."

"And even Griselda wasn't set to wash floors," Anthony admitted gloomily.

"You are a materialist, you know." Jan sat back on her heels, her small, work-roughened hands clasped between her knees, her head at an angle, very much like a questioning sparrow. "It worries you that I should do my own housework and occasionally go short of things to eat; yet you bore the thought of my alternative career with

silent fortitude. So noble of you! Don't you like to know that I have repented, Tony?"

"Have you?"

"Of course." Jan's eyes made brilliant mock of him. "I am so sorry for my offences, Tony dear. To err is human, but to throw away a perfectly good husband and a handsome income was little less than wasteful. I think I feel like discussing a reconciliation—so much down, and the rest to be paid in instalments. Irreproachable behaviour guaranteed while the payment is going on, but immediate backsliding on the receipt of full purchase money. Tony, you hypocrite, get out of my demoralising kitchen before I begin to make love to you. The truth is that I can't be trusted with a man about the house, only, of course, you know that."

"I'm not a man," said Anthony bitterly, "I had once the honour to be your husband."

"But that only gives a spice to it," said Jan, maliciously conscious of her power to wound, and savouring a novel enjoyment in the exercise. "I'm afraid you don't find me pretty this morning, dear, but, then, I didn't know you were coming, did I? Will you wait while I run upstairs to brush my hair and take off my apron,

and generally repair the ravages of time and absence? I can't be properly depraved in sack-ing. The association of ideas is all wrong. Oh, Tony, it is a delight to me to see you writhe! I've writhed so often myself for your benefit, and to get a little of it back——”

“You have a beautiful nature, haven't you?”

“I like to pay my debts,” Jan owned, with quiet satisfaction. She leaned against the table and eyed him beneath drooping lashes, paying them with a lavish hand.

“To have and to hold,” she murmured reflectively. “What a nice, safe, permanent sound there is about the wedding service—almost as if it was intended to last for ever, instead of only for three years. How horrible if you had really been tied to me for ever, Tony—for ever and a day—or is it only till death? I forget. In any case it doesn't matter, as you're not. You've been biting your lip, Tony! So silly of you! It's always open to you to go if you don't care for my conversation. Well, I won't make love to you if you dislike the idea so much as all that, but we needn't talk of money either. I never imagined I had any special claim on your bank-balance, you know. That was a case of ‘The Lord

giveth and the Lord taketh away.' What I do grudge you are the things which were never yours in the first instance, such as my home, and the friends I once thought I had, and my reputation. You had a right to turn me out of the house, Tony—after all, it was your house—but you had no right to make me a bank holiday show."

"I know," said Anthony wretchedly.

He stared at her, seeing with aching vividness the new shadows beneath the fearless eyes, the harder, older lines of the sweet mouth. Where the neck joined the shoulder he saw for the first time a faint line advertising the collar-bone, an angle replacing the round curve of the shoulder. The cheap material of her dress revealed everywhere a growing sharpness of outline. The little, roughened hands were red from long immersion, and still glistening with the soapy water. As one trying to piece out a manuscript in a foreign language, he groped for realisation of what the divorce had cost her, and found himself stumbling into muttered excuses, all sense of injury completely swamped by the thought of her suffering, pleading that he had been unable to think at all, still less foresee consequences; that had it been other-

wise he would never have made any public charge against her; would rather have shifted the blame, and allowed her to divorce him.

Jan listened, her eyes dwelling thoughtfully on his, and then shook her head.

“No Tony, never that. I have my faults, heaven knows, but I don’t count hypocrisy among them—faked charges, and alimony, and white-wash; the odour of sanctity, and all the rest of it! No, thank you, not for me! I’d rather walk to hell on my own feet than squirm into the other place by those ignoble little compromises. You don’t know much of me, do you? Or I of you, if it comes to that. I once thought, you know, that you had manufactured a case to get rid of me because you wanted my place for someone else.”

“Jan!”

“Yes, it wasn’t a very high-minded suspicion, but it has been done, you know, and I didn’t think that you could really believe that I— Oh, I forgot! I’m pleading guilty this morning, so, to be logical, I suppose I ought to forgive you for believing it.”

“I’ll believe anything you like,” said Anthony suddenly.

“Oh!” Jan raised her eyebrows at him. “And for how long?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do. For just so long as you can see and touch, and not one second longer. I hypnotise you, don’t I, Tony? It must have cost you a lot to get free of me. Ten thousand? Something like that. Permanent blacking is expensive; and yet you are willing to waste all that, and throw your emancipation to the four winds while it is still comparatively fresh, for the sake of a pink and white skin and a scraggy body. You are like the farmer and the weather, never knowing what you want. Six months ago you offered me money not to pester you, and now, because a man can only value a thing when he hasn’t got it, and because you recollect that I have eyes like tea-cups and lips indifferently red, and all the rest of it, you are willing to promise anything to get back what you once threw away—yes, even to promise to believe in it. And so you will, perhaps, until the next time——”

“Jan, stop!”

Anthony uncurled himself from the table and caught her wrists with a grip for once ungentle.

“What do you think I’m made of, to stand that?”

“I shall say what I like,” panted Jan.

She stood erect and flushed, her eyes sparkling defiance of man and all his works. After a moment she turned away, wrenching at her apron-strings, rolled the coarse sacking into a hard ball and tossed it into the corner of the room; then paused, considering it as if it were some natural phenomenon, her head bent.

“Very well, Tony!” she said at last. “I’m going on talking, but not quite in the same way. For instance, I shall begin like that.”

She bent forward and kissed him swiftly, then sprang away, her hands held out to ward off any return.

“No, Tony, that was only to show you that I forgive you for divorcing me. At least I think I do. That’s the first point. I’m not going to deny that thing again. I never shall. You can think what you like. What will that be, by the way?”

“Can there be any doubt?” said Anthony indistinctly.

“Yes, there can. Lots. If you remember,

Othello wasn't in the least pleased to discover that he was wrong in the same circumstances. He couldn't bring his corpse to life again, and you can't make people believe that I'm a good woman. Divorce is one of the things that can't be put right afterwards. Yes, of course you can remarry me. That's easy enough. A new wedding-ring—even you aren't rich enough to dredge all the mud in London and get back our old one—and a very quiet wedding in a registrar's office, as I can't be married in a church, and what then? Everybody will say that I have been forgiven. *Forgiven!* As a matter of fact, I shall have been. You offered to forgive me, didn't you, Tony? I suppose, when I am a married woman again, decent people will be inclined to tolerate me. That'll be nice, won't it? So much for the outsiders. Then what about ourselves? I gather that you intend to do violence to your intelligence and grub out your old belief in me, and put it on like an old coat that will do just a time or two longer. It has seen its best days, hasn't it? And even at its best I have seen better garments. Do you think it will stand the wear and tear of our life together any better than it did? I haven't altered, you know. I shall not be more circum-

spect than I was, and I have lost my self-respect; and suspicion is like cancer for being always ready to break out in a new place. What are we going to do the next time you doubt me, Tony? I can't go on protesting for ever! More than that, I feel now that I couldn't do with the ordinary amount of trust. I need it too much. Do you realise even dimly what these months have been to me? No, I see you don't, or you wouldn't harp so much on the food question. Why, I'd live on bread and water for a year if it would get me back the trust of the people I care for. One or two have stuck to me in spite of everything, and I feel that I could kiss their feet. Felix is one, Monica is another—but you're not made like that. You are out of funds in the one currency I care to accept. You can only say that you believe in a half-hearted voice, and take me back. My dear, that isn't good enough."

Anthony dropped his eyes to the floor, and stood eyeing his boot with preternatural interest.

"There would be—other things," he said in a low voice.

"Other things? Yes, I suppose there would be, but they don't impress me, you know. Have you the moon, dear sir? No, but I have a Dutch

cheese, which is twice as nourishing and not so hard to come by. Tony, I have called you a materialist already, but why is it the aim of your existence to get me to regard you as an animated cheque-book?"

"It's all I'm good for," said Anthony bitterly.

"Ah!"

Jan rolled down her sleeves over her bare fore-arms, and sat down, considering him gravely with her chin in her hand.

"I promised not to make love to you, didn't I?" she said suddenly, with seeming irrelevance. "If I did you wouldn't believe me, I suppose. Well, is there anything else you want to say before you go?"

"There are one or two questions I should like to ask you."

Jan laughed.

"Oh, Tony, I might have known it! You are a question-mark as well as a cheque-book after all. Well, what is it?"

"I wish you would trust me, Jan," said Anthony wistfully.

He moved over to her chair and stood beside her, clenching and unclenching his nervous hands.

"Why can't you, dear? In—in the old days I

used to pray that you would come to trust me some time and let me do things for you, but you never did. Doesn't it—doesn't it mean anything to you that I would sell my soul to buy you shoes?"

"It means something," Jan admitted slowly. "What do you want me to tell you?"

"Is there nothing I could do for you—nothing you are keeping from me?"

"That I don't intend to let you know? Yes."

For a moment Anthony was silent, fingering the back of her chair as if the grain of the wood held absorbing interest, stealing from time to time swift, tentative glances at his wife's bowed head, as if unable either to meet her eyes or to keep his own from her.

"Have you ever loved anyone, Jan?"

A low, bitter laugh answered him.

"Once upon a time, yes. Aren't you being rather a dog in the manger, Tony?"

"I don't think so. I want you to be happy—at least, part of me does. I must be able to help you some way. It doesn't seem possible that love like mine should be quite impotent. Why didn't you marry him, Jan?"

"What a question! You might as well ask a

man you had run over whether he was getting plenty of exercise. Don't you know that I'm not marriageable—and why? So why bother about it? I shall never marry again, my dear, if it gives you any pleasure to know it. I may later on drift—I don't know. Not very far, I believe, but that is on the knees of the gods. Don't look so worried, Tony! Do you want my sacred word of honour that I will not again stray from the paths of virtue? I think that I can't give it to you. There are distinctly more temptations in life than there used to be, and no one has a right to say me nay, in any case. Certainly not you. You paid ten thousand to repudiate ownership. And not the family. They are doing their best to persuade people that there never were more than three Desmond girls. But I will do my best. As for love, it will not pass this way again, as the quack advertisements say, and I shall never marry without it. If I sell myself, it shall be an honest affair—cash down for goods supplied, and no one but myself will be any the worse for it.”

“You seem to have thought it out.”

“Oh, yes,” said Jan frankly. “I've had to, you see. If I were ill again for a long time, or any-

thing like that—well, it's natural to take a marketable asset out of the cupboard, and look at it now and then, especially if one has nothing to lose by selling it; but—I'll do my best."

"But if it comes to that, you'll let me have the first offer, Jan? I think you owe me that."

Jan shook her head.

"No, Tony dear. I've forgiven you, but I owe you nothing, and least of all that. I know your bargains of old. They are funny because they're so one-sided, and what you get out of them I don't see. Added to that, do you think I'd marry you for money, Tony?"

"I don't know. You did before."

"I did what?"

"Well, you didn't care very much about me, did you?" said Anthony, with a nervous laugh.

He looked away as he spoke, and missed the slow whitening of her face and the stiffening of the small body. For a few minutes Jan sat silent, staring up at him with dilated eyes. Then she moved abruptly.

"What do you mean, Tony? Do you think I never cared for you at all? Not when we were engaged, even? Never from the first?"

"I'm not the sort one could get really fond of,"

Anthony explained hastily. "I never expected you to. It was all right—I mean, it was all right from my point of view, but——"

"Tony," said Jan, with sudden fierceness, "I want you to go out of this room straight to your bungalow, and pack your things, and never come within fifty miles of this God-forgotten place again!"

"Why?"

"One of us has got to go, and you can afford it. I can't. I'm sorry that I can't offer you an allowance to keep away from me!"

"It isn't necessary," said Anthony sharply. He turned to go, but hesitated with his hand on the door.

"Jan, you don't mean that I am never to see you again?"

"Yes, I do."

"I—must."

"Six months ago it wasn't necessary," said Jan, and then added mercilessly: "There are plenty of other bought women to amuse you. I do not know whether it is more expensive to buy one outright or hire one by the month, but no doubt you do. In any case it is not my affair."

Without waiting for a retort she left him,

stumbling blindly up the narrow stairs to fling herself down beside her beloved "magic case-ments," pressing her face against the cool glass, her eyes burning, her throat convulsed with tearless sobs.

"Oh, God!" moaned Jan, in a dry whisper. "What have I done, what have I done that men should think that of me?"

The sea gave her no answer.

CHAPTER XVII

MONICA'S birthday fell on the second of April. The fact neither unduly depressed nor unduly elated her.

"I am twenty-six," she said aggressively. "Anyone may know it."

"Am I anyone?" said Felix meekly.

He had developed a new and peculiarly Puck-like gleam of the eye in dealing with Monica which seldom failed to draw her fire. It did not fail now.

"Do you think I mind it?" she demanded hotly.

"Well, it's past your first youth, isn't it?" said Felix, with gentle commiseration. "I'm not saying that you look it, but, as they say in Scotland——"

"I don't care what they say."

"As they say in Scotland," Felix persevered, "if a lassie *caan't* get a man before she's sax an' twenty——"

"Well?" queried Monica dangerously.

Felix made mock of her above the crust of a ham sandwich.

The day was pleasantly warm, and they were celebrating the anniversary by a picnic lunch in the cove. Felix, who had been invited as an extreme mark of condescension, had stretched himself full length along the sand, his red-brown head cradled in his arm, his blue eyes dancing in tune to the gentle slap-slap of the ripples breaking on the wet shingle. Monica, seated on a rock above his head, was at pains to let him know in detail what she thought of his person, his manners, and, indeed, his entire sex. Jan, nursing her knees and skimming an occasional flint at the surface of the cove, took no active part in their bickerings. She had little doubt of the ultimate issue, knowing that the acrid Beatrice was fonder of her Benedict than she cared to admit, and that her surrender was merely a question of days. Help was as likely as not to hinder, and her attention was inclined to wander to her own affairs.

“If I wanted a man,” said Monica hotly, “I should get one. It’s quite easy. All that one has to do is to make eyes, and say ‘How wonderful!’ every five minutes, and the silly rabbit will sit up and wave its ears to music. Bah!”

“Do you ever say ‘Pshaw’ at all?” Felix enquired innocently. “I have always wanted to know how that was pronounced.”

“Idiot!” said Monica, and stood up with a jerk, her lithe body poised buoyant and tense against the land breeze, which puffed out her skirts on either side of her, her eyes shaded by her hand in the approved nautical gesture.

“There’ll be the devil and all to pay to-morrow,” she remarked irrelevantly, with a quick jerk of her head towards the misted horizon. “If I hadn’t been born to-day we wouldn’t have got our picnic. Well, I suppose I must get back to work. You bore me, you two.”

And she betook herself towards the cottage with the light, assured step of a goddess. Jan watched her departure with shining eyes and twitching lips.

“What does a man love a woman for, Felix?”

“Oh, for having fuzzy hair and a sharp tongue, I suppose.” Felix hurled a pebble after the retreating figure. “There may be other reasons, but if there are I don’t know them.”

“Yes, there are. Tell me, Felix. I seriously want to know.”

“Why?”

“It would be interesting.” Jan settled her chin

on her knees and sat regarding him with grave, steady eyes. "I have wondered. I can tell you a number of things for which they do *not* love them. Not for being faithful, or honest, or even normally honourable. A man can love a woman, it seems, if he believes her to be morally and physically depraved, utterly selfish and mercenary, a liar and a cheat. He will overlook all that if she is pretty and soft to touch. What is the use of that sort of love if the woman is ill or grows old, or loses her looks in an accident? Oh, it may be all right while it lasts—for a summer, or, perhaps, if she is *very* pretty, for a year or two; but is there nothing else?"

"In the majority of cases I should say no."

"Then a woman is better without it!" said Jan energetically. "It is not a favour to be forgiven everything for the sake of one's smooth flesh. It is an insult. It implies that the other things don't matter, because our souls are too trivial, too naturally squalid, to be important. It is as if one built a palace for the king, and beggared oneself to do it, and then all he cared for when he came was the knocker of the door to use as a horse-collar. If that is all a man can love a woman for he had better turn Sultan at once, and have her strangled

before she discovers what a mess of pottage it is for which she has sold her birthright.”

“When did you think of all this, Jan?”

“Does it matter? It’s true.”

Felix did not respond immediately. He rolled over on his face, and cupped his hands into an hour-glass, watching meditatively the slow trickle of sand from palm to palm. His blue eyes were grave when he finally raised them to meet the passionate bitterness in hers.

“You can’t do without bodies, Jan, not in this world; and they aren’t any the worse for being pretty ones. What would a flower be without the petals and scent and all the rest of it? That’s nature trying to get her couples married, and she doesn’t care a damn about the afterwards. That’s up to them. Don’t fall on a fellow for loving the body of you, Jan. That’s the natural beginning of it all. If it stops there I grant you there’s something wrong; but does it? I don’t think so. There’s no limit to the thing once you get it started; and it must have grown to some extent to condone things as it does. You’re inclined to underrate that forgiveness because you don’t need it, but think how comfortable it would be if you did. Think what that year must have meant, watching and

standing aside, and tearing his heart out so that you shouldn't be troubled by it. I tell you the fellow was hardly sane when he applied for that divorce. He was all broken to bits, willing to do anything if only he could get away somewhere and hide himself. You don't appreciate that part of it, because what you want above everything is trust; but don't you see that trust implies a measure of self-confidence, and that is just what Lovatt hasn't got? He simply can't imagine it as possible that he has any claim on your consideration. He seems to have expected to be kicked aside from the first, and there's nothing like expecting a thing to pave the way to assuming that it's being done. If you'd been an unscrupulous minx you could have used him as an upper footman, and kept him happy with an occasional pat on the head. Don't you see the bigness of that, Jan? One has to be damn big to efface oneself like that! If you had the smallest use for that fellow's head you could have it any time. He'd cut it off himself, and only apologise that he hadn't a second head ready when you wanted that."

Jan moved slightly, shading her eyes with her hands.

"All that is no use to me, Felix."

“No?”

“No. I want to be believed in. I can't be grateful for being forgiven for what I haven't done. It isn't in me. Yes, I see what you mean—that if I had been vicious I should be on my knees for the gift of what exasperates me now—but how does that help? I'm not humble. I can't be. I haven't done anything to be humble for, except that time when I asked you to marry me, and Tony wasn't hurt by that. Forgiveness isn't any use to me. Nothing is any use that doesn't mean trust and respect, and the sort of honour men give to women who have never been smirched. I don't want to be worshipped as a sort of Louise de la Vallière. I'm not good in that way, or bad in that way. I hate lies and shams. The only pretence I want to play at is that I've never been called—all the things I have been called. Tony puts me on a pedestal. How he does it I don't know. He thinks that I sold myself to him in the first place, and cheated him afterwards—not once, but consistently—and all that makes no difference to the pedestal. I can't understand that. I'm quite ready to admit that Tony probably lives on a higher plane than I shall ever reach, but even that doesn't help. His love for me is a lie—all given for things that don't

exist. He will say that the queen can do no wrong, but I'm not a queen, and I can do wrong, only I haven't. He won't take my word; I suppose he thinks it the divine prerogative of queens to lie. Apparently there is nothing I can do which will smash his adoration or give him back his faith in me, and I don't want to be adored. It's a hopeless situation."

"You could always tell him that you cared, you know."

"Of course I could. Queens can do that sort of thing; and he would look away and pretend it didn't hurt him to listen, or perhaps he would think I was saying it to get back all the perquisites that go with being his wife. I wish Tony could be ruined or crippled in some way; but he won't be. Such things don't happen in this life. He will go on being magnificently well and wealthy, and having everything to offer right up to the very end, and I shall go on being poor and disreputable, and having nothing to give in exchange except my wretched body, which can always be assessed and paid for in frocks to cover it; and, of course, I like all that sort of thing—silks, and furs, and tortoise-shell—and Tony knows that I like it. Oh! I wish I could die!"

“Don’t say that sort of thing, Jan. It hurts.”

“It’s all right. I shan’t do it. I never have any luck, and I promised you that I wouldn’t help myself. I don’t think, anyway, that I’d do it, because sooner or later Tony would be sure to get to hear of it, and it would hurt him rather a lot. I don’t want to do that; but there’s no harm in wishing, especially as wishes never come true—at least, mine don’t. Do yours?”

“That remains to be seen.”

“I don’t see why they should,” said Jan, with unexpected viciousness. “You’re every bit as depraved as I am. I don’t see why you should be comforted when I am tormented. It isn’t fair.”

“It isn’t,” Felix agreed equably, “but as yet we cannot tell whether I shall be taken to Abraham’s—or, rather, Monica’s—bosom, so your charitable desires for my downfall may——”

“Felix, you know I didn’t mean that!” Jan scrambled hastily to her knees and caught at the lapels of his coat with eager hands.

“Listen. I wish you all the happiness in this world. Monica, and a home, and—and babies if you want them, and success and love, and all the money you want; and I will look on and *not* make faces. And you are the dearest, nicest man that

ever lived, and I am an ungrateful beast, but only sometimes. Felix, you know that I didn't mean to be a pig?"

"Of course I know it. That's all right."

"When are you going to ask her, dear? Soon?"

"This afternoon, I think. As we have quarrelled all the morning she will be feeling exhausted, and the occasion is propitious."

Felix gathered his big limbs up from the sand and stretched himself luxuriously.

"Frankly, this terrifies me," he confessed with naïve gravity. "Come with me to the door and hold my hand."

"You idiot!" scoffed Jan. "Do you think anyone can look at your beautiful self and——"

"Well, you have looked at it pretty often; but let that pass. Certain facts are best buried in oblivion. I think I shall write her a masterly note and slip it under the door. I am, in fact, overcome with nervousness, but 'It's of no consequence,' as Mr. Toots says. Do you think you could do this job for me, Jan? Just interview her to prepare the way, and tell her that I am overcome by emotion, and that I would esteem it an honour if she would consider me as a possible husband, but if she has a previous engagement it is of no

consequence. Something simple and touching like that, to draw her attention to the subject, to which she can reply——”

“You needn’t tell me what she would reply,” said Jan, looking up from packing the lunch-basket. “I know. She would tell me to go to Jericho and leave you to recover from your emotions by yourself, and rightly so. Pull yourself together, dear! She can’t bite you, you know.”

“Bet you anything you like that she both can and does,” said Felix gloomily, and pulled himself to his feet.

Monica had not gone all the way to the cottage. He found her sitting on a shelf of wind-dried grass, shredding a ribbon of purple seaweed. She frowned at him.

“You spoil the colour-scheme,” said she. And then, without warning, her eyes grew dark as wet violets, and her mouth smiled.

“Well, get on with it!” said Monica breathlessly.

“I have discovered that I love you. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Very. What next?”

“Next, I possess a flat which is quite the last word in flats, and sufficient income to allow us to keep house together. Shall we? Let’s!”

"I don't know," said Monica, troubled. She looked away over his head, twisting her fingers.

"Don't you like me?"

"Oh, that!" She gave him a fugitive glance, and pursed her lips to whistle.

"Look here, how many women have a right to you?"

"On my honour, none."

"Sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"I don't poach," said Monica. She leaned forward on her hands, her sharp face flushed and dubious. "Women get a beast of a time dealing with men, so it's up to us to play fair by each other. I like you all right, but if it's going to make some poor wretch miserable I don't even want you. Do you see what I mean? Oh, well, I suppose it's all right if you say so."

"It is."

Felix leaned his elbows on the rock and looked up at her, his blue eyes entirely serious.

"My dear, I don't set up one standard for you and another for myself, and when we're married I shan't either. We two are going to like each other and trust each other, and play fair by each other, just as we did before we met, without know-

ing that there was anyone special to do it for, and that's as it should be."

"Oh, very well," said Monica, with recovered briskness. "I will marry you some time, if you like. Now go away. I have things to think about."

"Not at all," said Felix. "I am no longer a suitor. I am your fiancé, and I shall do as I like."

Thereupon he did as he liked.

"Ah!" said Monica.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANTHONY was troubled with ghosts, or, to be exact, a ghost, but as she flitted about the room her disguise varied. For the moment she was sitting in the shade of the heavy curtains contemplating the toes of her crossed feet beneath the sweep of jewel-hued taffeta. The line of her neck glowed against the dark background with the sheen of pale honey; her small, strong hands, linked one over another, were ringed, and no longer toil-worn. She was harmoniously expensive.

Anthony had been living with the ghost for months, but it took very little notice of him and seldom spoke to him. Sometimes he spoke to it.

Presently she rose and drifted over to the hearth, in the action becoming suddenly thinner and graver, exchanging her rustling skirts for a cheap black frock and coarse apron, and stood looking down at him with wide, frank eyes, and Anthony, sitting with his knees gathered up under his chin, met them with wistful pleading.

“Why do you never speak to me, Jan?”

The ghost obviously did not consider that worth answering. It turned its back on him, and looked round the room in the quick, birdlike way it had, ignoring him.

Anthony was used to its habits. He never tried to explain away its significance as an optical illusion or a projected thought-picture. Something of the sort it must obviously be, but the precise nature of the mystery did not interest him. It was sufficient that it existed. The twilight was its favourite time for appearing, drifting through the open window like a moth and taking possession of some chair or corner to sit brooding, or occasionally passing through the room from door to door, and so leaving him alone for the rest of the evening. To-night, apparently, it was disposed to stay, and Anthony watched it, fascinated. Incredible to think that he had once owned that vivid, dragon-fly creature. Bought wives were common enough, but this!

“If you had only told me that you loved him, Jan, I would have made it all right,” said Anthony wistfully. “It would have been so easy if you had only trusted me a little.”

The ghost was not interested in the hypothesis.

Beyond the window the sky showed, troubled

and cloud-tossed. The pale and intermittent moonlight seemed to fill the garden with hurrying shadows. Anthony, with much of the shadow in himself, was drawn towards the world of half-light, winds, and unreality. He pushed wide the windows, letting the sea wind enter with a cold, bracing rush, sending the curtains eddying against his face, bringing with it freedom, a chilling, breathless courage, a sort of peace.

That day Anthony had paid a deferred and much-dreaded visit to his solicitors, carrying the rough draft of a will to be turned into legal phraseology, and facing the task with the intense, quivering reserve which was misread by ninety-nine people out of a hundred. The draft itself was surprising, as the lawyer, somewhat in dread of giving offence, had made an attempt to point out to him.

“Surely it’s quite simple,” said Anthony sharply. “I want everything to go to my wife.” At the expression on the other’s face he coloured darkly. “To my late wife, then. I don’t care how you phrase it. To Jan Desmond, and afterwards to her children, if she has any, if not, to be disposed of as she thinks fit. I want that to be made perfectly clear and unconditional, if you can have a will without conditions.”

“With no reservations as to any second marriage?” the lawyer suggested discreetly, and was rewarded by a flash of the dark eyes.

“With none, unless you can think of a way of giving my consent which would not be an impertinence after what has happened.”

“Not many people would take the gift of half a million as an impertinence.”

“I know. Is the rest of it perfectly clear? Jan is to be sole executrix. The legacies in my other will can remain, but only as recommendations, to be carried out or not as she thinks fit.”

“Is that quite——”

“She will think fit. It makes no real difference, except that everything will have to be received from her hands, or not at all. I don’t think there’s anything else to be explained. Please draw that up at once—so that I can sign it today.”

Things, it was explained to him, could not, strangely, be made as simple as all that, and for an hour Anthony submitted to legal technicalities with exemplary patience, in spite of his inward conviction that his affairs were being managed by a firm of imbeciles, whose only object was to hinder their progress. Somehow he got away

from them at last, and wandered about London, objectless, but restless as an earthbound spirit. He lunched alone. Anthony had few intimate friends, his sensitive shyness keeping him aloof, an invisible barrier between him and his own kind. Even in the days when Jan had filled his house with guests he had been tossed like a negligible bit of flotsam to the edge of the whirlpool, and had played the part of host burdened by the uneasy consciousness that he counted for almost as little to the people who occupied his rooms as to the wife who gathered them together. Not that this had ever assumed the proportions of a grievance; to Anthony's inborn humility it seemed as natural that he should be ignored as that Jan should be adored; but it had stabbed him to see her careless tolerance reflected in the attitude of her courtiers as in a hall of mirrors. That made it impossible to pretend that her occasional touches of kindness meant anything beyond a rather conscience-smitten memory of his existence—the sort of perfunctory pat one might bestow on a neglected dog. And in the end, because of a month of madness, those years of self-effacement were robbed of their fruit. She had been starving, and she had found it easier to turn for help to comparative strangers. It had

needed that to bring home the full appreciation of failure.

The next day he met Jan in the village street, slim and boyish in her blue jersey and sou'wester. There was rain in the air. She frowned at him.

"Why haven't you gone yet, Tony?"

"I am going this afternoon. You needn't grudge me a few hours, Jan!"

"I don't think I grudge you anything," said Jan.

She pulled her sou'wester over her eyes and surveyed him meditatively.

"So this is really the very last and ultimate time of seeing you? Want to say good-bye, Tony?"

"I hadn't—thought about it."

"Think of it now. Do you?"

"Yes, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I don't," said Jan, her face suddenly brilliant with mischief. "A chance to flirt with you, you know, Tony. I love that. Come away from the houses. They cramp my style."

She turned, and he followed her, miserably conscious that they were back in their old and seemingly inevitable positions of whimsical lady and attendant footman. She led him to a rocky headland separating the village from the cove, curled herself up with her back to a friendly

boulder, tucked her hands behind her head, and sat regarding him, aloof and mocking.

“Well, Tony?”

“I haven’t anything to say. I never have. Jan, *don’t* laugh at me.”

“I shall,” said Jan, and broke into liting, malicious laughter, her eyes gleaming, darkly provocative behind the silk lashes. “Oh, Tony, Tony, it goes without saying that you’ve broken my heart. Why don’t you try to comfort me?”

“Is there any way you could suggest?”

“Of course. Two. You might make me out a large cheque in your usual manner of righting wrongs by a stroke of the pen, or you might——”

“Well?”

“Throw your arms about me and embr—r—r—ace me passionately. That’s the way it’s usually done, but in this case I don’t know that I should advise it.”

“Jan, you have no right to say that!” Anthony flamed out of his submission into sudden rebellion. “I haven’t tried to hide that I love you, that I’d give all I have to do that! I tread on all that’s natural and human to give you what you want, and you—you dare to taunt me with it!”

“Certainly I dare,” said Jan composedly. “It’s

quite safe for one thing, and for another, I rather like to see you lose your temper. It's good for you. You're too fond of saving up fireworks for years, and then having a grand *auto da fé*. It may be more dignified but it's very destructive. If you spared the rod and then decapitated the child the census would go down with a run. Similarly with wives, but I needn't labour the point. And so you are leaving us, Tony? I don't know, of course, but I rather fancy that you are not the sort of man to remain unattached for long, so let me know when my successor is fixed upon. There are things I could tell her about the job which might be of profit, and I should so like your second venture to turn out a success."

"Good-bye," said Anthony simply.

Jan paused for a moment, looking up at him with wide, half-startled eyes, then held out her hands in the frank fellowship which was second nature to her.

"I'm sorry, Tony!" she owned quickly. "Yes, that was all meant to hurt, and most of it was rather unworthy. It is best that you should go, my dear, but there needn't be any bitterness between us to poison our memories of each other. Forgive me for being a bad wife to you, Tony.

I was and am careless and selfish, and a rotten little termagant into the bargain. For that and for all my sins which I cannot now remember—all right, is it? Very well. Do you want to kiss me?"

"May I?"

"Of course."

She jumped to her feet and raised her lips, her eyes shining and unnaturally dark in the white-rose face; surrendered her straight little body to lie quiet in his arms, and made no haste to free herself.

"You kiss me as the peasants in Italy kiss the feet of their Madonnas," she whispered dreamily. "That isn't the way, you know, but never mind. Do you think very badly of me, Tony?"

"You know what I think."

"Do I? Do you?"

"I think you're the sweetest woman God ever made, and I don't care what you've done. That is what it amounts to. I simply don't know and don't care. It doesn't matter."

"Oh, yes, it does. Well, good-bye, Tony, and good luck to you!"

She slipped from his arms and fled, stifling sobs as she went. The wind blew her on her way like a withered leaf.

CHAPTER XIX

FELIX, entering the bungalow an hour after lunch, found Anthony tumbling his clothes into a suit-case, and stood aghast.

“I say, you aren’t going!”

“I’m afraid I must.” Anthony snapped the lock and stood up, moving towards a tray where the decanter stood beside some glasses. “May I—” His hand lingered over the stopper.

“But look here, you can’t,” Felix protested, ignoring the question. “There isn’t a train, anyway, from this little old end of a place.”

“I know. I’m taking the motor-boat to Hove to save time. It’s pleasanter, anyway. Won’t you have a cigarette or anything?”

“Thanks. But I say, you’re not going for good?”

“I’m afraid so. Do you mind not asking me to explain why? I had—reasons.” Anthony felt for a cigarette and lighted it, anxious to have something to occupy the betraying fingers. “You will be staying, of course.”

“I shall,” said Felix absently.

He found himself momentarily at a loss, guessing that it was an inappropriate time to blurt out the news of his own engagement, and his embarrassment did not pass unnoticed by the watching eyes; but his host's shy courtesy saved him from the necessity of offering an excuse. Anthony had, in fact, a suggestion of his own to make, and did it with his usual disarming diffidence.

“I have been wondering—I have this place till the end of the year, you know, and I shall not be using it. If you are staying I would be most awfully glad if you would make use of it. I hate to think of it empty. Do say you will!”

“It's frightfully good of you,” Felix admitted.

His comfort-loving soul had indeed been compelled to swallow not a few camels of inconvenience during the past few weeks at the village hostelry; but even the prospect of future ease failed to reconcile him to the prospect of Anthony's departure. He eyed him dubiously, striving to improvise a plan for his detention, and seized on the first idea which presented itself.

“I say, let me come with you to Hove, will you? You'll want someone to bring back the motor-boat anyway, and I've got nothing to do this afternoon.”

“Of course, if you like.” Anthony acquiesced cordially, “but—can you?”

“Can I what?”

“Run a motor-boat?”

“Of course I can. I can do anything with engines,” said Felix, with easy self-confidence.

He was still puzzling over his immediate course of action as he followed Anthony down to the boat-house. The sea was leaden, flicked here and there by a transient line of white, and the wind had fallen to an occasional chill, spray-salted puff. Anthony eyed it doubtfully for a moment before turning.

“Are you sure you want to come after all? It’s going to be a bit cold and choppy later on, you know.”

“Of course I’m sure,” said Felix. “I say, do you mind if I have the wheel to start with? I should like to get used to the boat before I’m left to my own devices.”

Anthony acquiesced at once, and abandoned his place at the wheel, curling himself up among the cushions to watch his self-confident companion, then, after one or two tentative suggestions, transferred his attention to the sky above him.

"It's funny," he remarked dreamily, "the way one gets into thinking that the clouds are a sort of painted ceiling. If one looks at them like this, straight up, one sees that they aren't flat at all, any more than a cauldron full of smoke is flat, only we happen to be underneath. I say, I shouldn't do that, you know! Not that it matters really, but the current round here makes it rather risky."

"Oh, right you are!" Felix obligingly abandoned a series of daring experiments. "Am I making an utter fool of myself? Sorry!"

"Oh, it's all right really," said Anthony, in hasty deprecation. "I'm fussy, that's all."

He relapsed into silence, his dark face sombre and brooding, while Felix gave himself up to the enjoyment of his new toy. The wind had freshened a little, roughening the surface of the grey water. The two symmetrical waves, breaking cleanly on either side of their bow, sent a fine veil of spray aft, to slap at his face with provocative horseplay. Felix, his eyes dancing at the challenge, glanced shoreward, and was smitten by a new idea. He acted upon it on the instant.

"I say, what are you doing?" cried Anthony,

sitting up with a jerk. A gay laugh answered him.

“That’s the girls’ cove, you know. I just wanted to see——”

Before he could finish his sentence, before Anthony, springing to his feet, could snatch the wheel from his foolhardy hands, a quivering shock threw them both together in a struggling heap, and the frail motor-boat seemed not so much to break in pieces as to fly apart. For a second the nose bent upwards like a paper spill tilted in the air, then snapped and splintered into fragments. The broken stern sagged drunkenly, flinging both men into the water, and Anthony, acting almost without thought, made a clutch at the bigger man, knowing instinctively that, once parted among the sucking rollers, any recovery would be out of the question; but the spray cheated him, and the next moment he was driven down through the stinging water, helpless himself to do anything but keep his breath. Once he felt himself battered against solid rock, fended himself off with nothing worse than a scraped hand, and struck upwards, escaping somehow from the downward draw of the water. In rising he saw and grabbed at a vague blur, which might equally have been man or driftwood, shot surfacewards, still keeping his hold,

was overwhelmed in a welter of flying spray, and flung forwards, helpless as a fragment of paper, against something solid, resistant, and shaggy with weed. Five minutes later he was lying panting across the back of a ragged barrier of rock, which projected well clear of the water across the mouth of the cove. His left arm was twisted beneath him in a manner exquisitely painful, but still retained its treasure-trove—a long, curving fragment from the side of the motor boat, useful as a support, worthless in comparison with the dislocated shoulder which had paid for it. A few yards away Felix was lying in a crumpled heap, arms flung wide, face tilted upwards, staring at the sky, and, as soon as he could fight down his betraying faintness, Anthony crawled over to him on all fours, thrust his sound hand into the drenched coat, and found a weak pulsation, steady enough in spite of its feebleness. Felix had been caught in the breakers and flung bodily into the air, falling battered slightly and stunned, but otherwise very little hurt, just out of reach of the waves. Luck had done her best for him, but Anthony, eyeing him apprehensively, was for a moment at a loss. He put his arm round the big body and made an effort to lift it higher, but was forced to desist,

sick with pain. Prolonged physical exertion was out of the question. Anthony was no stronger than most men, and, in any case, it needed no more than a glance at the rock to know that it was covered at high tide.

“Not that it matters much for me,” Anthony murmured, half aloud. “But you, you massive brute, Jan wants you, it seems. I wish I could kill you for it. But you will be decent to her in your way. You’ve got to get out of this somehow.”

He sat back on his heels, staring at the limp body, then crawled back to the broken plank he had himself retrieved, dragged it to the water, and deliberately tested it. On the landward side, where the sea was calmer, there was a reasonable chance of safety, and the current was setting in towards the shore. Clumsily, using hand and teeth, Anthony tore his handkerchief across from corner to corner and knotted the ends, rifled Felix’s pocket, and added to his cord; then, laboriously, cursing often at some new twinge of pain, he bound the board lengthwise, passing it through the arms and across the small of the back, so that Felix floated almost upright, unable equally to turn turtle or to slip down at the head. It was a clumsy arrangement, but it served, and when it was thrust out from

the rock the untidy argosy bobbed its way shoreward with occasional dipping immersions, but in the main bearing its cargo safely, the white face still tilted towards the sky.

Anthony, weakened by the effort, sank forward on the rock, his head pillowed on his sound arm, and watched its hazardous progress intently. He was not troubled by any particular fear for himself. Death might be very close, but that seemed somehow almost unimportant. Highly strung people are seldom visited by the same panic as their more stolid brethren. It seems almost as if they exhaust their fund of nervousness on the trivialities of life, and leave nothing but steady courage to meet the emergencies. At least to Anthony, the dawning of the awfully big adventure came almost as a matter of course. It did not occur to him that he had done anything particularly heroic in handing over his one chance of escape. At least, the temptation to use it had been small. For the last time he had bent his head and stood aside out of Jan's life, and custom had lent a sort of easiness even to that. He wondered drearily how long it would take Felix to reduce her remaining scruples after the extinction of what was, presumably, the main obstacle to their marriage—him-

self. Not long, probably, but that the dead would not be called upon to know.

A larger wave hurled itself up the face of the rock, and spattered him with a network of light foam. Anthony moved a little higher, knowing that the change meant postponement only, and rather despising himself for the weakness of making it. The spring day was drawing to a close, and the slow approach of death was a cold affair. Anthony shivered a little, and closed his eyes, wishing that at least his clothes were dry; also he wished that he could hurry the tide. The cold numbed him, and he drowsed; it was almost without surprise that he felt the touch of a small, cold hand, and looked up to find Jan kneeling beside him, drenched and half naked, her wet hair clinging to her cheeks. At his questioning glance she coloured hotly, and put up a nervous hand to draw the wet linen closer over her breast, but her frank eyes did not drop.

“I hadn’t any time to get my swimming things,” she explained hastily. “Felix was washed ashore, and I thought—I thought——”

“Of course, I don’t count,” Anthony admitted.

“Oh, this? My clothes don’t matter, but why are you here at all? Don’t you know that this will

be under water in half an hour? It isn't more than twenty minutes' swim to the shore. You can do it easily."

"Normally, yes. I'm all right, Jan. It was good of you to come, but—you needn't stay."

Jan ignored the snub, and showed no signs of going. Instead, she stared at him.

"Are you—hurt, Tony?"

"Of course not. Do leave me alone, Jan. I don't want you and I won't have you. If you try to stay I'll fling you into the water."

"Why?" said Jan, with ominous calmness.

She put out her hand and felt over him deliberately. Anthony pulled himself erect, but the effort to shake her off brought on another stab of sick agony which was apparent in his face.

"What is it, Tony?" Jan's lips were white. "Can't you—swim?"

"No. My shoulder is dislocated, I think. Don't worry, dear. I shall probably be washed ashore all right; and if I'm not I don't know that I care particularly. Please go, Jan. I should hate to drown before your eyes."

"You won't," said Jan.

She measured the distance to the shore with some misgivings, and then shrugged her shoulders

gallantly. "I'll take you in. You can swim a little, I suppose, and I'll keep you afloat. We can do it."

"I can't." Anthony coloured shamefacedly, as if confessing to an enormity. "It sounds a ridiculous thing to say, but I'm afraid I shall faint if I try even. I would try if I were sure you would drop me when you saw it was no use, but I'm not."

"I'm glad," said Jan tonelessly, "that you're not."

"Yes, you see it." Anthony's voice was eager. "It would simply mean your life for mine—your life as well as mine—it's all before you. Royd is safe, and I've left you everything and made it easier for you. Everyone will know that I didn't believe those things at the end. Jan, your staying here won't do me any good. I'm not coming with you to let you fling your life away."

"Very well!" said Jan, with deliberation.

She paused a moment regarding him, and then sat down on the edge of the rock, swinging her crossed feet half in half out of the turbulent water, steadying herself against the rush of the waves with outflung hands. For a little Anthony watched her, expecting her at any moment to slide forward and strike out for the shore, but when the minutes

passed and she still remained he came closer to her and stood staring down uncomprehendingly.

“Jan, why don’t you go?”

“Because I don’t choose to.” She glanced at him over one slim shoulder, mischievous as a water-nixy. “Think I’m afraid, Tony?”

“You are going to stay here till—till——”

“We both of us drown? Apparently so. How do you propose to prevent it, dear?”

“But why? Why?”

“That’s my affair,” said Jan, and broke into a little reckless song, her eyes given to the encroaching water, till Anthony caught at her shoulder and shook it fiercely, twisting her round to face him.

“Jan, didn’t you hear what I said? Royd is safe. You can marry him to-morrow if you like. Don’t you understand? You can marry him whenever you please.”

“Oh, Felix!” said Jan absently. “He is in love with Monica. Didn’t he tell you? I have known it for weeks. I’m glad of it.”

“Glad! Jan, is that why——”

Jan studied him for a moment with brilliant eyes beneath down-curving lashes.

“Why I want to commit suicide? Say it, Tony. Well, hardly. You thought I cared for him, I

suppose. If I had I might have married him months ago.”

“But there’s only one other reason I can think of, and that isn’t possible. Jan—you may laugh at me if you like—are you ready to die with me because you—care for me?”

“Maybe.”

“After being suspected, and divorced, and half-starved? Jan, you can’t! It isn’t possible!”

“If it isn’t, it isn’t,” said Jan cheerfully.

“Is it true?”

“You have just said it can’t be. No, don’t move, Tony. You keep the wind off as you are, and it’s cold, and I’m wet.”

Anthony ignored the latter part of her sentence.

“Since when? I’ve got to know.”

“Since the beginning, of course. Why else should I have married you, beloved?”

“But you were afraid of me?”

“Shy of you, yes. What else did you expect? I’d never even kissed a man before. And you never gave me a chance to show that I—liked you.”

“I have just realised,” said Anthony slowly, “that I am not only a fool, but a damned fool.”

A wave dashed, gurgling, up the face of the rock and deluged them both, but neither heeded it.

They were clinging together as children who have found each other after being lost for a long time in the dark.

“My Jan!” said Anthony triumphantly. “My beautiful Jan!”

“You are sure—quite sure—that you believe in me now?”

“Of course. I have known for days, I think. Jan, how *can* you forgive me for what I’ve done?”

“Oh, I’ll manage it somehow.” Jan settled herself more comfortably in the encircling arm, and tilted her wild-rose lips. “I hated you sincerely for months, of course, but all that was finished long ago, and I believe it was mainly my fault after all. I must have given you the devil of a time; I wanted you to be jealous, you see.”

“But, Jan, why?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It seemed to me about time that you realised that I was—rather pretty. Am I?”

“You are—oh, you know what you are, you exquisite thing! But it isn’t that. It’s the—the pilgrim soul in you, the courage, and the sweetness, and the fire—and you love me, you!”

“Like this,” said Jan, and wound her arms round his neck. Her slim, half-naked body, white as the

foam which splashed them, was strained against him in passionate ecstasy.

Another wave broke over them.

“Will you let me try to save you now?” whispered Jan, her lips against his cheek.

“I don’t care. What does it matter what happens so long as I have you like this now and for always? Why should we waste these last few minutes?”

“It’s braver to take a chance while there is one.”

“Perhaps. Very well. It’s all one.”

“I’m afraid I shall have to hurt you rather.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter.”

Anthony stumbled to his feet and held her close for a last kiss.

“Not till death parts us, Jan? For ever and ever?”

“Rot!” said Jan. “Death won’t part us. I should like to see him try!”

Half an hour later Monica, patrolling the beach in oilskins, found them rolling in the surf at the edge of the sand, unconscious both of them, but breathing still.

CHAPTER XX

“AND so you are going to get married,” said Monica benevolently. “So are we, but I suppose you know that.”

She was inclined to domineer as she dispensed hot coffee to the blanket-clad assembly. Even Felix, lying at her feet, swathed in a flaunting eider-down, was pinched of face and pallid of lip, and the Lovatts were shadow-eyed ghosts. She had been at some pains to point out that the blame for the joint condition rested upon themselves.

“Oh, I suppose so,” said Anthony, in answer to her last question. “Will you marry me to-morrow, Jan?”

“It would be nice,” Jan owned dreamily. “Can we?”

“Look at them!” mocked Felix from the eider-down. “They are holding hands under the blankets for all the world as if they were lovers instead of old married folks, while Monica and I, who are only engaged, are—most restrained.”

“That is just why,” said Anthony calmly. “We

are old hands at it, and we know. When you and Monica have been married as long——”

“And when will that be?” hummed Felix under his breath. “Monica, I have been engaged two days, and I want to be married. See about it.”

“Oh, I don't care,” said Monica, with studied ungraciousness. “I'm ready when you like. I intend to take this novel on our honeymoon, and then I can work at it when you are playing golf, or taking walks, or whatever it is that you usually do. I mean to get a lot of work done.”

“You do?” said Felix, slightly aghast, and then his eyes brightened with dancing malice. “You dare, young woman!”

Suddenly the room was filled with laughter.

THE END

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