

The green tabloids / a novel by Mrs. Barré Goldie.

Contributors

Goldie, Barré, Mrs., 1871-1938.

Publication/Creation

London : Hodder & Stoughton, [between 1920 and 1929??]

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THE GREEN TABLOIDS

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THE GREEN TABLOIDS

A NOVEL

by

MRS. BARRÉ GOLDIE

Author of

*"The Cotherstones," "The Hand of
the Waverleys," etc.*



ERRATA

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MRS. BARRÉ GOLDIE.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON LTD.

5th February, 1929.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
PUBLISHERS LONDON

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
FOR HODDER AND STOUGHTON, LIMITED,
BY RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

TO
MY SISTER GERTRUDE

Who walks with me and talks with me,
Together by the Way;
God grant her voice may waken me
At Dawning of the Day.



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Chapter I

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IT was nearing the hour of noon, and the Blue Train was rushing upon its jewelled course. Close to the edge of the sea which has been likened to a sapphire since poets sang. In and out of quiet little stations which peeped at it coyly from underneath their olive trees and trailing bougainvillæa—and ran away from it. Past tiny cottages and large villas, some red, some yellow, and all of them closely shuttered. Every window hidden beneath its pair of closely folded green hands, as if some grave secret lay behind them. Cool and dark amidst the flood of gold from the brazen sun, high up in the mid-day heavens.

“If I were only young once more!” thought Sir Edward Hemingford. “If I could put the clock back nearly seventy years and feel all over again what I once felt when I first made this journey!”

He shivered a little in spite of the heat. He was very tired. Not until this long journey from England had almost come to an end had he realised that he was an old man. Somehow it had all seemed *difficult*. Although he had his manservant with him, and there was really nothing to worry about—yet he *had* worried. Were the passports where they always should be, in his note case, just inside his inner coat? Ottershaw

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had wanted to take charge of them this time—damn his impudence! And the registration ticket? He seemed to have been continually feeling in his pockets. Railway tickets (why the devil did they want to put them up like photograph frames?), luncheon, dinner tickets—and a hundred and one bits of paper—Good God! one was simply a perambulating waste-paper basket. Why couldn't the whole show be combined in one single ticket? Perpetual searching and waking up with a jump. Yet he'd done about as much travelling in his life as any average man. "India and China and South Carolina," he thought, reminiscent of a song of his youth. Nothing had ever tired him then or seemed difficult.

"The fact is, it isn't growing old which one resents; it's growing *slow*," he mused, as he gazed with a certain amount of distraction out of the window of his railway compartment. "Stiff, when you've been sitting in one position for long. Not always understanding what people say as *soon* as they say it. Dropping asleep. Slowing down. Finding things a worry . . ." Even as he spoke, his chin dropped forward on his chest, and his book on the Near East excavations slipped to the ground.

With a slight groan Ottershaw stooped and picked it up. It was the first time he had travelled actually in the same carriage with his master. But the doctor had privately insisted on it.

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“ You mustn’t leave Sir Edward alone,” he had said. “ This valvular lesion—you understand? He doesn’t know he’s an old man, Ottershaw.”

“ He needn’t know it, sir, if I can ’elp it,” the valet had replied, and really meant what he said. Ottershaw was rather inclined to be fat, and honestly thought he liked the comfort of a first-class carriage in the Blue Train because he could best serve his master by sharing it with him. Many of us open our eyes when we’re throwing dust about.

For the rest, he looked like a bishop—stiff with saying and doing the right thing. Whether he always *thought* the right thing is between himself and his Final Employer. He had been with Sir Edward for many years, and, after all, “ the labourer is worthy of his hire ”—but we are forgetting that Ottershaw is *not* a bishop.

The Blue Train was terribly hot. Last night, outside Paris, it had snowed a little, for it was the month of November. But this morning was quite another proposition. Sir Edward dozed and Ottershaw wiped his forehead at intervals with a chequered silk handkerchief marked “ E. G.” Once he picked up a magazine which lay on the blue-cushioned seat beside him, and opened it with a slight sigh, only to be confronted by a page devoted to a theatrical chorus, prancing in the surf at a well-known fashionable watering-place. They looked so superlatively cool that he tossed it away, muttering. Then he composed himself to sleep, like his master. But when his

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eyes were closed, he still *saw*, he found. The landscape rushed past in a succession of coloured patches, first white, then red, then blue. The Blue Train seemed to be humming to itself, the noise rising and falling. Occasionally it appeared to shy like a horse, swaying gently till he reeled against the cushioned division beside him. Then, a shrill crescendo of voices pierced the humming, and he had perforce to open his eyes. It was some voluble French women, passing from the restaurant car, their tongues like the shriek of the gale in a storm—"Là! là! là!"

Ottershaw gave it up and glanced at his master. Then he let his gaze rest thoughtfully upon him.

"The old boy ought never to 'ave taken on this journey," he said to himself. "Too old. 'E's as blue as—as—this train."

Sir Edward Hemingford *did* look old. Happily we none of us know what we look like when we are asleep. Awake, we all unconsciously wear a mask and play up. Our subconscious selves are perpetual drill sergeants, it seems. "Eyes right!" "Form fours!" and we fall into the requisite pose. But asleep, with the "Stand at ease!" come the sagging of the muscles, the deepening of the lines, the mark of the beast—or the seal of an angel.

Sir Edward stood the test well. He looked, it is true, a tired old man, but it was just the face of one who has striven in the fight and sees the lights of home. Rather a sweet old mouth, in spite of the bluish shade around it. Obviously a man

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who had placed a great value upon personal appearance, for he was what is commonly called "well-groomed" in all ways. Though his dark brown travelling suit had all the ease which an old man requires, it was nevertheless cut by a master hand, and in the lapel of the coat was a deep red rosebud, which Ottershaw had cut from a bouquet left in the corridor by a spoilt beauty who had quitted the train at Paris last night. Sir Edward slept with one knee crossed over the other, and the foot which dangled was shapely and well shod. But his hands were very old, and they lay at each side of him on the cushioned seat—long, narrow and ridged with blue veins—telling as nothing else does the tale of years. Just now, of course, his eyes were shut, but when they were open they were the most surprising things about him, for they were a deep, hyacinth blue, and wondrously young. "I simply love to talk to Sir Edward Hemingford," one of London's famous artists said once, "because his eyes don't belong to him. They just got out of a spring wood somehow." But he was wrong. Our eyes always belong to us. We may borrow our hands, our feet, or even our hearts, but we can't play any tricks with our eyes. Sir Edward had those hyacinth eyes for two reasons—one, because his family had always had them, intermidentally, which accounted for the colour, and the other, because he had always looked up and not down, which accounted for their expression. Have you ever noticed the eyes of sailors or great hunters? Eyes

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which are always looking beyond the muddles and messes around their feet, into the distant peace and purity of the goal they seek? Of course it wouldn't do for nobody to look downwards, and most of us do.

But Ottershaw was quite right. His master ought not to have travelled to the south of France just now.

He was doing so because he wanted to visit his married daughter, who lived in Nice. She had made her home with him in London after his wife's death in the far past, until, some twelve years ago, she had met Frederick Brenderwood and married him. Her marriage had left him entirely alone in his rather roomy house in Cadogan Square. Not that this fact weighed much with Olivia, for she was one of those people who can always re-dress a conscience according to the *dernier cri*, and parade about with it before an admiring world. It was not necessarily wrong for her to marry and leave her father. But she would have done so in any case, because she wanted to. She had decided that it would spoil, not only her own life, but also Frederick Brenderwood's, should she refuse him.

"And I can't believe it would be *right* to ruin a man's life just because dear Dad may linger on for another twenty years and wants someone to listen when he talks," she said, with tears in her eyes and the liquid-sweet note which made her voice so entrancing a thing.

Sir Edward had never thought very much about

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himself all his life, because he had been a well-known explorer and excavator, and had for the most part thought of dead and half-forgotten civilisations all day and all night. So he accepted Olivia's marriage as a perfectly ordinary occurrence, and never allowed the world to see how grievously lonely it had left him.

And the marriage only lasted two years, for Frederick, who had always cultivated the unexpected, died the evening his small daughter was born. He asked to see her.

"So glad to have met you. Heard so much about you," he had whispered, with a shadowy smile, as he caressed the tiny face. The nurse, who had been hastily summoned from the same institution as that which had already supplied the monthly nurse officiating in the next room, swallowed a half sob instead of smiling as she had been intended to do. It all seemed so horribly tragic, this Box-and-Cox birth and death. Frederick Brenderwood had been knocked down by his own motor, driven far too swiftly round a curve of the drive, just as the shades of night had fallen. There had followed a hideous drama of whispered horror, urgent messages, professional men coming and going—nobody quite knew for which patient. Olivia herself had gone down into the depths where women have to go, in agony and fear, and knew nothing about it all. When the morning dawned, she had a daughter and no husband. And her husband had seen and kissed his daughter hours before she had even learnt the fact that she

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was a mother; and when she had gripped life again and knew that she was Olivia Brenderwood, he had passed on his way pretty much as the French aristocrats went to the guillotine—with a high courage and a smile on his whitening lips.

“Olivia thought she’d never get over it,” he said. “And all the time, They’d got Their Eye upon *me*.” Then, after a pause, whilst time still mattered, “Glad to have died instead of her—tell her—glad—glad.”

Unfortunately, Olivia didn’t appreciate the finer shades of things. She was a bit of a fake. That is to say, she came of good birth on both sides, with a long traditional history behind her—but she didn’t ring true. Her mother, Lady Hemingford, who had died when Olivia was a child, had said on one occasion, when the child had been guilty of some regrettable lack of feeling:

“Lovely—but a fake. A bad copy.”

Lovely she undoubtedly was, but Sir Edward, with all his knowledge of and study of human nature as expressed in buried palaces and history, could never make out whether her habit of persuading herself that what she wished was what was right came from stupidity or a kind of cunning. Not that Olivia was unlovable. By no means, for she had all the outward graces and allurements of a beautiful woman, and her effect upon men was one of almost instantaneous homage. For want of any other definition we must call it by the somewhat well-worn name of

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egoism. There are thousands of Olivia Brenderwoods in the haunts of the rich and well-groomed. They are on a great many committees which they usually only attend spasmodically—and very late. They dabble in philanthropy and go to church if the people staying with them at the moment do that kind of thing. They belong to various societies and reading clubs, and they really do read, for the most part; because they find themselves to-day in a world which demands much of women, and they know that they must have at least a surface knowledge of the histrionic arts. Bridge, of course, for hours and hours. Hair like the waves on the seas of a mediæval engraving, and wonderful, peach-like skins. Perfectly natural manners—and, frequently, habits. But the Shadow of Calvary has never fallen across their path. That is to say, they do not know what selflessness means. If they are absolutely confronted with the necessity for self-sacrifice, they become neurotic or ill-conditioned, for they are ignorant of the grace of self-emptying and it only makes them rebels. These women like Olivia Brenderwood have somehow missed the *sacramental* outlook upon life—the spiritual behind the material. Very often they are conscious of the loss, and then for the most part seek to make it good by a reversion to mediævalism. They want to hear spirits mutter, to get control of a kind of charlatanism which is infinitely more material than the earth conditions which sometimes chafe them. And then they find

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themselves with the herd of swine, and many of them perish in the waters. Perhaps not very many, though. For there is one thing which lifts the Veil, usually in good time, before the eyes of a woman in peril—and he has two little wings and a bow and very sharp arrows. He's a naughty little devil, for he doesn't care whether he brings peace or a sword, if he can only *hit*.

Frederick Brenderwood left Olivia very well off, indeed wealthy. He had estates both in Scotland and Ireland, but had always preferred foreign life and the "Côte d'Azur" in particular.

Sir Edward had cherished a secret hope that his daughter would return to London with her child, but was soon disabused. Olivia found the buoyant Latin temperament of her neighbours very amusing, and also she liked the social pre-eminence of her position in Nice and on the Riviera as a well-born English widow.

"Darling wee Desdemona isn't strong, Dr. Maddison says. So I must keep away from my *beloved* England for her sake," she said to the Marquis Carrouchi, with a pretty sigh and drooping head. That cavalier attendant smiled secretly. He knew Olivia's dust-throwing habit by heart, and that she would have stayed in Nice if Desdemona had never been born at all, just as long as he and a round dozen of other men continued to sun themselves in her pretty eyes. But she was perfectly virtuous, when it came to the point, as it often did.

So that was the way and the wherefore of

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Sir Edward Hemingford's visit to Nice. Olivia had asked him to come many times, but he had always refused for some reason connected with his work or his health, and it was only the second time he had come to see her since the death of her husband. But lately, a great yearning had taken possession of the lonely old man to see his child, to hear her voice, to kiss her lips. For he would not acknowledge to himself that a Shadow was creeping towards him—just like the clear-cut edge of the moon when it creeps across the sun in a solar eclipse. He would not admit that the air was growing chill, the light a little sinister. Or possibly he saw a Figure standing at the entrance to the Valley, and knew that all was well.

Suddenly a uniformed official appeared at the open doorway of the carriage.

"*Nous y sommes,*" he said in a detached and loud voice. "We have come."

Instantly, Ottershaw sprang to his feet and Sir Edward opened his hyacinth eyes and said "What?"

"We're at Nice, sir," replied Ottershaw, collecting the various impedimenta.

The Blue Train was slowing down beautifully, like a ship sailing quietly into port.

Quickly and efficiently he put his master into his light coat, folding over his arm the thick one which had been necessary as far as Paris. Dusted him, pulled the coat down, handed him his dark brown Homburg. Secreted the *Excavations in the Near East* and other pamphlets mysteriously

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about his person, and helped Sir Edward down on to the platform at precisely the right moment and with exactly the right things to hand.

Eagerly the old man looked round for his daughter and encountered the convex front of the butler from the Villa "Bon Repos"—an Italian who spoke perfect English.

"Mrs. Brenderwood——?"

"Madame thought you would prefer that she should receive you in the house, Sir Edward," said the man. "The Daimler is here for you, and another car for the *bagages*. I trust——"

"Ah, quite, quite," said the old man, feeling suddenly a little chilled in the brilliant sunshine. He didn't want to hear Delmino's platitudes. He seemed instead to hear a liquid-sweet voice saying:

"I'm sure dear Dad would rather not greet me in public. He hates scenes."

There would have been no scene. But he remembered how lazy Olivia was when it was hot. He got into the luxurious car and did not speak all the way through the town and up the twisting slopes to Cimiez, where the Villa "Bon Repos" was situated.

But he could not restrain an exclamation of admiration as they glided up the short approach to the great white entrance. It was framed in masses of purple bougainvillæa and scarlet geraniums, and roses were twisting about the trunks of the great palms which lined the drive, throwing mottled shadows across the grass.

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There was a vivid streak of sapphire blue right down below, beyond the town, where the Mediterranean swung in its tideless rhythm.

Ottershaw was wondering how long it would be before *déjeuner* was served. He was far more conscious of a sinking in the region of his waistcoat than of the play of light and shade around him. All the same, it was damned hot. Lord! what a world! Perishing last night when they skirted Paris. Talking, or thinking of *skirts*—had Madame still got that fluffy, demure little Mam'selle for a maid, who was with her when she last came to London? Hot stuff. And yet—he wasn't sure. Women are so dashed queer nowadays. You used to be able to take things for granted in the pre-war days, but, by Jove! you couldn't now. You could take a horse up to the water, but you couldn't make it drink. Well, here they were, and there was Madame, who hadn't put herself out to meet the old boy. He was looking better now—not so blue. All the same, he'd have to go slow. . . .

“Olivia! my darling child!”

“Dad, you old dear!”

The peach-like cheek was tendered, and the trembling old lips pressed against it.

Chapter II

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THE Villa “Bon Repos” was ill-named, for there was very little repose about it. It was full of French and Italian servants, of, it is true,

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the very best type. But one heard their Latin chatter round every corner, and one never got away from their restless gestures and shruggings. Moreover, it was part of Olivia's scheme of things that everybody she knew should at once be allowed the run of the house. Naturally, such permission was hailed with delight, for the Villa, if lacking in repose, was beautiful, luxurious, and furnished with a first-rate chef who was expected to serve delectable little meals at all hours of the day and even night—or explain why he didn't. There were large, cool rooms with close-shuttered windows and parquet floors which reflected the blossoms of the plants in the corners. Deep, soft rugs and divans. A music-room where some of the greatest pianists and violinists of the day had held the social world of the Riviera entranced—and even silent. One or two pictures which were known and scheduled by every dealer and collector in Europe, and some books which were one of the chief attractions to Sir Edward Hemingford, who loved them like children and asked after them in his letters to Olivia as if they were verily and indeed alive. A house of dreams and classics—which a post-war generation was beginning to jazz and rend asunder. For Olivia cared for none of these things. There was only one thing about which she did care, and that was the homage of men. At any and every cost she must attract, and all these beautiful things must be accounted valuable only so far as they made a suitable setting for herself.

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That was why she really wanted her father to come to Nice at this time. She read in the papers, both English and foreign, of his retirement from the front ranks of successful explorers, and realised that he was something of a celebrity and worth cultivating. Up till now she had taken him rather for granted, because he had been absorbed in his work in different quarters of the world, and had given himself no time for the lighter side of things. Then had come a severe attack of influenza and subsequent breakdown of strength. She knew of the development of heart trouble and wept gracefully to a circle of devoted friends over this sad crisis in her father's life. Yes, Sir Edward must come to sunny Nice, and submit himself to his daughter's tender ministrations—yes, yes, that was his last photograph. “Very distinguished-looking?” H'm—yes, she supposed so—she had never thought about it. She had often wondered how she could be the child of such a clever man—ah! no, indeed they must not flatter her like that. Smart? Of course he would *hate* the word, but—yes, well, he *was* one of the best dressed men in London—dear old Dad.

So it never entered her pretty head that he might have wished to dine alone with her on the day of his arrival in Nice, and Sir Edward was conscious of an acute disappointment, as he entered the huge salon punctually at eight o'clock, and realised that there were at least half a dozen people grouped around her. But, with

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his customary forgetfulness of self, he responded genially to her introductions. It gave him genuine pleasure to meet Lord and Lady Gravistock, who had quitted London three years previously on account of the Countess's failing health. They were old friends, and as a matter of fact were the nicest people in Olivia's set. They maintained a friendship for her simply and solely on account of her being his daughter, though Olivia would have deeply resented such a fact had she known it.

The Marquis and Marquise Carrouchi were unknown to him, as were Mr. and Mrs. Browne (spelt with an "e"), though he had seen the latter in London.

"And what do you think of darling little Demon?" asked Lady Gravistock, smiling with genuine interest, a few minutes after they had begun dinner.

Sir Edward looked interrogative for a moment. Then his face cleared, and his hyacinth-blue eyes almost disappeared in their network of wrinkles.

"Is that charming diminutive meant to indicate Desdemona?" he asked.

"Of course."

"I haven't yet been permitted to see her," he said regretfully.

Lady Gravistock glanced quickly at her hostess. Was there the faintest hint of disapproval in her glance, as she intercepted a look between that lady and the Marquis Carrouchi? Olivia was on her very best behaviour, but not for the life of her

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could she help an occasional "you-and-I-together" salute across the exquisite pink malmaisons.

"I gather she was at a party of some kind and came in too late," the old man said.

"Ah, your daughter lets her go to far too many parties. I always tell her she will spoil the child, and she is so utterly charming now."

"Does her—er—abbreviated name *fit* her?"

"Demon?" Lady Gravistock laughed. "Not exactly. Yet I always think she is a potential little firebrand. Or," she added thoughtfully, "perhaps it is that she is sincere—through and through."

"A child of ten? Isn't it ten?"

"Yes. It's rather unusual, but even now the child is exactly the opposite of——" Lady Gravistock pulled herself up sharply. She had very nearly been guilty of an appalling *faux pas*. Sir Edward had not been a keen observer of hidden things and meanings for nothing, however, and he was perfectly aware that his old friend had nearly said "exactly the opposite of her mother."

"Frederick Brenderwood was the soul of sincerity," he said quietly, and so saved her any embarrassment and paid a tribute to the dead.

"Did I hear you talking of sincerity, Sir Edward?" asked Mrs. Browne on his left.

The old man was conscious of a slight shudder—the voice was so unmistakably transatlantic. He turned to her with all his natural courtesy. Mrs. Browne didn't want anyone to answer her questions.

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"I guess this little show we act in 's just beginning to smell of sincerity for the first time," she said, turning her beautifully modelled shoulders broadside on. She was small, yellow and exquisitely undressed.

"Taking the form of——?"

"Well, knees—and cropped heads. They've only just begun, Sir Edward, but you bet they've come to stay."

"Didn't knees begin rather a long time ago?" he smiled.

Mrs. Browne sparkled.

"Why, my, yes. I never thought of it. When the little lizards in the primeval oceans began to grow their cute little legs——"

"You didn't realise it would all end in——"

"'Our Father, which art'—on our knees. Now isn't that just *amusin'*?"

"We seem to have got away from sincerity," said Sir Edward, smiling.

"Just as we've got away from protoplasm and what-not," said Mrs. Browne, dipping her pink nails into the finger-bowl at her left.

"But—*have we?*" asked the old man a trifle sadly.

Lord Gravistock leaned across the table.

"Yes, Hemingford—*have we?* The Armistice is signed, but can we *undo* the vision we've all had of what manner of men we are?" he asked in his soft, academic voice. His only son had been blown to pieces at Cambrai.

"Surely, though, the fact that there's a lot of

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mud mixed up in human nature doesn't matter, as long as it sinks—becomes sediment? The liquid above grows clearer and stronger——” said the jerky voice of Mr. Browne.

“Now we're in the soup,” said his wife in her crisp tones.

For some reason or other she always contrived to spoil anything effective which Benjamin Browne said. That was why he always spoke in little jerks, “like a flea hopping,” to quote his wife once more. He never knew the exact moment when she would jump on him. Yet he had a good many things to say, in reality, which were well worth listening to, could his Saidie, with her neat phrases and little jewelled brain-hammer, have been removed. All the same, he adored her with that kind of worship which is self-torture. It comes into the religion of a great many people—that never being able to *forget* that “Thou, God, seest me.” There's something wrong about it. It isn't “the glorious liberty of the sons of God”—it's a kind of oppression, and leads to spiritual jerks. Possibly the explanation lies in the fact that we are unwilling servitors. “Benjamin B.,” as his wife called him, didn't *want* to be tied to Saidie's personality at all. He wanted to express his own, *on* his own. But he couldn't. And so it may be with some of us and God. We feel that we've got our own ideas of self-expression, or that anyhow we'd rather life fell on us and ground us to powder than get through it as part

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of a Personally Conducted Tour. But few of us are such fools as to try, and so there is always—The Eye. Browning recognised that inherent rebellion, and being a wise man as well as a great poet, he told us that One Day (ah! “Der Tag” at long last!) we should be given permission to spread ourselves—and the odd part of it no doubt will be, that then we shan’t want to, because we shall have seen His likeness, and we shall be satisfied with it.

“That there Yankee woman’s barmy,” said Francis, the English footman, in the recesses of the pantry after dinner, to Delmino and other satellites. “When she’d filled herself with the grilled lobster and I took away the finger-bowl, she looked up at me and said, ‘Now we’re in the soup.’”

“But there,” he continued, “she was thinkin’ of somethink she was goin’ to say to somebody the day after to morrow, or that somebody said to ’er three days ago. She wasn’t thinkin’ of *me*. That’s what wimmin are like since the War. Their brains don’t concentrate no more. They’re never still.”

Whilst the preceding little conversation was taking place across and about the dining-table, Olivia and the Marquis seized the occasion for a few whispered words, being seated side by side. They were practically alone in the world.

“You’re a very—er—discreet little person to-night,” he murmured discontentedly.

“Dad’s rather—rather——”

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“What you call in England a moist blanket, *hein?*” he said. He didn’t always get his English quite correct.

Olivia laughed. “Isn’t he a darling?” she whispered.

He bent nearer. “No. There’s only one.”

For one brief moment his hand touched hers, as it lay by his champagne glass on the table. Nobody saw the movement except the Marquise, who never took part in any conversation except by a series of grunts. She had seen Ilo press so many women’s hands that she could have told him just when his chance had come, had he cared to consult her. It was such an old, weary game. She only wanted to be let alone now, to eat and sleep. A strange world, which can contain two such types as Saidie Browne and the Marquise Carrouchi! One life nothing more or less than a human sparking plug; the other lived out as a patient lies under the influence of an anæsthetic. Yet, when the Marquis pressed the hands of women, the cloud lifted and the brain registered. It read, marked, learned and inwardly digested.

After dinner, Olivia’s priest, from the Church of the Sacred Heart near by, joined the party. He would not dine because it was a Friday, and he would not feast upon material things upon the day of the Great Requiem. He was a passionate Catholic. Had he not been, he would have been a libertine. It is said that everything material has its spiritual counterpart.

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Father le Touche was a counterpart.

It was inevitable that Olivia Brenderwood should have become a Roman Catholic. Hundreds of women of her type find the richness and colour which they need in their lives, in the ceremonial of the Latin Church. Besides, for some reason or other it has never been considered "bad form" to become a devotee of the Pope, as it is if the convert becomes a Nonconformist. But had this not been the case, Olivia would have taken no step towards Rome. On the contrary, she felt that she had acquired a certain amount of prestige when she announced, soon after her marriage, that she had changed her faith. Frederick Brenderwood didn't mind. He was one of those people who attach little importance to Creed and Dogma. True to her characteristic, Olivia declared that she felt *compelled* to go through a great spiritual upheaval, no matter what it cost her in friends. In reality she knew that it wouldn't matter one iota to her friends, and that she would look very picturesque in black, kneeling about with a rosary. In fact, she contrived on one occasion that several of her admirers should "pick her up" in the Church of the Sacred Heart as they were all going to a picnic. It was a minute or two before she could withdraw her soul, it seemed, from her rapt contemplation of the Altar, and they stood about, feeling awkward. Then she came to earth, and laid her white hand on the sleeve of the enamoured Marquis Carrouchi.

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“Forgive me,” she said in the liquid-sweet voice.

“*Anything*,” he whispered, in duty bound.

But however much she could throw the proverbial dust in her own eyes, she missed her aim every time with the Marquis. He didn't believe in her sincerity for a single minute. But he didn't want her to be sincere. It had never amused him to flirt with women who had ideals. His view was perhaps that of the Eastern potentate—chocolates and a divan.

Father le Touche was of different calibre altogether. He was a Jesuit, a scholar and a gentleman. But he was something far greater than all these put together. If Heaven, as we are told, rejoices over the repentant sinner rather than over the spiritual prig, there must have been a notable *fête* when he turned his back finally and for ever upon the world, the flesh and the devil. For he was a man who understood sin, because he had been a sinner. He brooked no nonsense from Olivia Brenderwood.

She feared him as she feared nobody else on earth, and yet she would not let him go out of her life. Because she knew that one day she would *have* to reckon with the things which belonged unto salvation, and she believed that he would point the way. She never admitted this thought, however.

“How are Michael and Demon?” he asked her, in the drawing-room after dinner. He was very tall, and had to bend down considerably.

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In the light of an electric bracket on the wall, the lines and hollows of his naturally rather merry face seemed graven with ink.

"Little fiends!" she answered. "Desdemona dropped one of my earrings into the lily-pond this morning."

"What, if one may ask, was she doing with it at the edge of the lily-pond?"

"Fishing. It was Michael Ruffini's bright idea. He thought the gold-fish might be attracted by the colour of my jade drop earrings."

"And were they?"

"My, yes!" exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Browne, who was staying at the Villa together with her husband. "The way those fat little fish nosed around was the *cutest* thing! And then one of the slimmest swallowed it."

"Not really?" laughed the priest.

"Yes. I guess she's swimming around now saying she feels real *jaded*," she added, with the gravity which always puzzled people.

Lady Gravistock began to play the violin softly, far away by the piano in the music-room, which was next to the salon.

"It was just like—Michael—to think of the colour," jerked Mr. Browne. "Nice boy."

Father le Touche responded enthusiastically.

"One of the *very* nicest," he said. "And unusual."

"Unusual? Michael? Surely not. I always think he's just absolutely normal," Olivia said. "Utterly English."

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“*C'est entendu,*” murmured the priest, who occasionally lapsed into the language which was half inherited. His mother had been a Parisienne, his father an earl's nephew. “But—an artist all the same.”

“Poor lad!” suddenly grunted the Marquise, who had been listening to the music with her eyes shut. At least, so everybody thought.

“Why?” asked the priest, who was rather interested in this lethargic and stout lady.

“English—and an artist?” she said in her contralto voice.

“*Mon Dieu! ce pauvre Michel!*” said the priest softly.

Suddenly Olivia rose a little hastily, and crossed over to where her father was sitting.

“Dad, are you ill?” she asked.

“No, no,” said Sir Edward impatiently, “but I think I'll—retire.” He got up with some difficulty. Olivia had seen him turn very white. Now he looked a little cold and blue.

“Shall I?” said the soft voice of Lord Gravistock at her shoulder, and he touched a bell in the alcove near by. Then he slipped his hand under Sir Edward's elbow and assisted him to rise. The old man looked rather a pathetic figure in his well-cut evening dress, trembling a little.

“Thanks, Gravistock. Not so young as I was, eh?”

At the foot of the grand staircase he was met by Ottershaw. By that time the slight faintness had passed and he stood upright again.

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“Never ought to ’ave come,” thought the attentive man-servant, outwardly quite unperturbed.

In the meantime the small party had drifted into the music-room, and Olivia succeeded in inducing Lady Gravistock to play one of the new syncopated dances which had just become fashionable. For a few minutes she pirouetted daintily about the polished floor, all by herself. Then, somehow, the Marquis Carrouchi “chasséd” towards her with his foreign grace, and finally she melted into his arms.

“At last!” he whispered to the little golden sickle which curled round her ear. “Get rid of that priest!”

“Oh, hush!” she said. At that very moment she encountered the dark, inquiring eyes of Father le Touche. He knew perfectly well that she was flirting with this man beneath his wife’s eyes. He knew, because he had often done the same thing before—that sudden “touch on his shoulder,” all those years ago. So his glance was one of compassion as well as reproof, and perhaps that is why Olivia stopped dancing and said she wanted to listen to Debussy, and was tired of dancing.

“Is that the new music?” asked Mrs. Browne. “It makes me just hiccup.”

And upstairs, crouching in her little night-dress, listening when she ought to have been asleep, was Desdemona Brenderwood, aged ten.

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Chapter III

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THE next morning Sir Edward felt better. The sun rose in a golden glory, which poured into his bedroom, lighting up the grey-panelled walls and snatching sparks from the facets of the crystal toilet set on the dressing-table. Outside the long white mosquito curtains, the gnats drowsed in the shaft of pulsating light which streamed in through the open French windows. For a time the old man lay and mused, going over the events of the preceding day, taking them one by one, as his precise habits had taught him, until he had arrived at the point when he had said good night to Olivia. He recalled her appearance—her dress, her jewels, her hair. All good, correct and expensive. Her manners, taking them all round, only erred, in the modern way, upon the side of want of concentration. As Francis, the footman, had so neatly put it, women have lost the power—or shall we say charm?—of sustained interest. Olivia only skimmed the surface of things, as a butterfly darts from flower to flower. A word of conventional sympathy, a stereotyped congratulation, an appreciation, obviously borrowed, of some book or poem which the world was discussing, and even a thin padding of what she called wit. But everything was second-hand, and carried no conviction. Sir Edward shuddered a little beneath his blue satin eiderdown. Twice

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the preceding evening he had heard her quote from a novel which he happened to have read, and in both cases she had appropriated the words to herself. "And so, I told her what I thought in the matter. I said, 'You can't write books when you're old. Only youth, or perhaps an Indian summer, has the creative instinct. Women fail when they cease to be conscious of their own charm. So I said, when winter comes they must get into the corner, for they've nothing to say, because their teeth are chattering—if they have any.' That's what I said." Then the Marquis had murmured something about "a clever facer." Sir Edward tried to put the incident out of his thoughts. He was so transparently honest himself, and his life had been spent in a ceaseless endeavour to disentangle false from true. Then he remembered another thing. Mrs. Browne had raised the long pearl rope which Olivia was wearing, and said, "My dear, aren't you just skeered to *death* to wear it?"

"Oh no, I'm one of those people who never lose anything *really* valuable," she had answered lightly. Sir Edward knew the necklace was the imitation one, copied from that which reposed safely in the British bank. Of course that might have been justifiable, to safeguard the real pearls—but somehow—it hadn't rung true.

"Mustn't judge her. Mustn't judge *anybody*," he told himself firmly. Then he got out of bed to see the view. The morning was advancing

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with rapid steps, and he was horrified to see, from his watch on the table, that it was past eleven. Yes, he felt a lot better to-day, and quite able to get up. Slowly he drew on his brown Jaeger dressing-gown, and was just going to ring the bell, when the sudden scamper of little feet, together with a peal of childish laughter, made him pause. Two children were playing in the balcony outside his windows, which, although wide open, were on one side veiled in long, lace curtains.

Suddenly the chase ceased, and both of them subsided on to a marble seat which, in the Alma Tadema style, graced the balcony opposite Sir Edward's right-hand window.

"I'll pull your hair if you laugh about God again," said the little girl in a voice of singularly sweet purity of tone, which held, nevertheless, a quality of firmness in its dulcet timbre. Sir Edward smiled to himself, and watched the children unseen. Not a thought did he give to his intended toilet, and when Ottershaw entered the room presently, he held up a warning finger. The valet busied himself with hot water, wardrobe ritual and an orgy of preparation for his master's uprising.

"It wasn't me," said the grammarless and indignant boy of about fourteen years of age. "It was Camille and—and—Lulu."

"But you listened. Nanny says we're *méchants*—all of us."

"You're not," said the boy stoutly. "I

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knocked Camille down this morning because he said you were very pretty," he added, irrelevantly.

"The eternal Triangle," murmured Sir Edward, with a grin.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

Again the warning finger.

"I *am* pretty." Words would not express the outraged dignity of the lady's attitude.

"Well, anyhow, *he's* not going to brag about it—little cad of a Frenchie."

Desdemona, for it was she, edged nearer to the big boy on the seat and took his arm into her keeping. Sir Edward could see the adorable little profile which she uplifted to his face. He could hear the liquid note in the childish voice.

"Ruffles—is Lulu prettier than me?"

The boy grew scarlet, he couldn't for the life of him have told you why.

"She's *prettier*. But you're—*you're*—like Our Lady," he said, knocking the heels of his shoes together nervously. His voice was very shy. Sir Edward suddenly became conscious that he was eavesdropping. He was a man who would not desecrate the shrine of any living soul, man, woman, or child.

Suddenly, however, as he dropped the curtain, he heard a sound of sobbing, and hastily raised it again. Desdemona had thrown her little body across the end of the marble seat, her head on her hands, and was sobbing with complete disregard of time or circumstances.

"But you'd rather I was pretty," she cried

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suddenly, raising her tear-washed, intelligent little face. "Our Lady's like Jesus. Boys don't want girls like Jesus. I *hate* you for saying that. Do you hear—do you *hear*, Ruffles? Why don't you speak?"

Ruffles had evidently said the wrong thing, and was occupied with the eternal problem of Woman.

"But if—there's no God, like Camille said—there's no Our Lady," he ventured at last, in a timid effort to square things.

Desdemona arose in her wrath, and great was her scorn.

"Michael Ruffini," she said, "you're doing a sneak-trick."

He hung his head, his beautiful young sun-god head. For it had never occurred to him to doubt the existence of either God or His Mother. Now, he had implied the doubt—to comfort Desdemona.

"'The woman gave it me and I did eat,'" murmured Sir Edward behind the curtain, immensely intrigued.

Ottershaw was standing at attention now.

"Sir?"

"The Fall of Man," replied his master.

The valet coughed. "Would you like to take your 'art tonic now, sir?" he asked a little anxiously. But Sir Edward didn't answer, so intent was he upon the situation outside.

The young sun-god was walking slowly away, a convicted trifle with religion. Twice he glanced backwards, but Desdemona was gazing

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out to sea as she had seen done by meditating maidens in Christmas numbers of the magazines. She knew that she was enjoying herself far more than she had done yesterday, when she'd had to go to a young people's party—a dull affair.

Michael had the good sense to take his departure at this juncture. He was conscious of an acute sense of shame. He had "ratted." So he didn't look round again. If he had done, he would have seen that Desdemona had also looked round—and women never forgive *gaucheries* of that ilk.

"Poor old Ruffles!" she said softly. "Now he *will* be ruffled. I shall forgive him at twenty minutes to five this evening, when we've had tea."

From which it may be inferred that Miss Demon had a practical little head.

If it could have stopped there! But she reckoned without her host! As she bent down to stroke the cat, who had stretched himself in the sunbeam which always crossed the balcony at about this time every morning, Michael Ruffini stepped from around the corner once more. He looked taller because he had thrown back his head. He had something to say, and she did not help him.

"Demon—I—you're right. If Camille's a rotter, I'm a bigger."

"Why? What has this to do with me?" asked the woman-child, loftily. She had thrown up her young head like a stag.

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“He—He—God *is*, all right. He *did* die on the Cross—and all that stuff,” said the boy, bravely, his face very red, his head very close-cropped and gold in the sunlight.

“*Bravo!*” said Sir Edward, under his breath.

“Will you take your——” the now thoroughly alarmed valet began once more.

But Sir Edward was looking relieved. For Desdemona had suddenly said in her bell-like tones :

“Bet you I’ll walk along the top rail of the balcony with my feet turned out.”

“Right-oh!” cried Michael, in an ecstasy. His atonement had been accepted.

In a trice the child, whose emotions and moods were like the changing sea, had sprung upon the parapet.

Sir Edward did not feel in the least apprehensive, for his bedroom and balcony were alike on the ground floor.

He was devoted to children, as all tender-hearted, chivalrous men are, and he was looking forward keenly to the delight which his grandchild’s companionship promised him.

Desdemona Brenderwood was a very lovely and somewhat unusual little girl of about ten. Her brain was so quick to respond to and reflect the minds of others that she appeared older than she really was. Her small soul was just a reflection of all she had ever seen of beauty and purity. And as she had so far lived out her baby

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life by the side of the sea, her moods changed as did the waters of the tideless Mediterranean. Her boy-companion and playmate, Michael Ruffini, had fallen under the wonder of her almost before he knew right from wrong. Offended by some childish meanness amongst her companions, she would flush as if ashamed for them and usually avoided the offenders for a time. Then something absurd would happen. In an instant her mood would change. The storm would be swept royally aside and forgotten, her beautiful hyacinth eyes would begin to dance with merriment, and it was "Heigh-ho ! fol-de-rol" and peal after peal of tinkling, merry laughter. For she had a nature upon which joy and grief played as the winds sough in the branches at summer's high noon. Sensitive to a degree which often made her quite ill, she seemed to her governess, Miss O'Neil, to be one of those exotic plants which must be sheltered from the storms of life at any cost. Alas! would one really submit to such "espionage," even if it were actually possible to achieve such an end? No, a thousand times no. We would surely go forth into the storm and the rain and take our luck, conscious, at least, that we have upheld *some* tottering footstep, reinforced *some* forlorn hope. Miss O'Neil did not take into her reckoning the power of a noble character, which will outlast all storms, bringing the little tossing barque safely into harbour. Gold and Platinum! Such was little Desdemona's nature. Of course

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she had a passionate temper—for a moment, because she loathed the second-best, without knowing she did. But it was as quickly over as the lightning flashes from east to west, and the generosity which seeks to sympathise and excuse brought the sweet smile back again to her lips and her sunny soul.

Such was Desdemona in her temperament, as we meet her for the first time that beautiful morning. In outward appearance—"Who is that lovely little girl?" was the invariable question asked by those who had never seen her before. She had long, deep bronze curls, tossing about her shoulders, and just held in check by a ribbon of exactly the right shade of pink. A little oval face of intense vitality, with a flush of colour which kept time with her swift change of emotion. And the eyes which the London artist had said came right out of a spring wood—a wood of hyacinths. Eyes which curiously suggested the varying shades of the waves by which she had played from babyhood. Her movements had all the grace and lightness of the little fish in the deserted pools of sea-water—here one minute, gone the next. Of course she had only one wish, and that only half comprehended at this stage of childhood—to see and hear all the new sights and sounds which challenged her out of nowhere in this best of all possible worlds. The song of the nightingale in the orange grove at sundown? There was Desdemona, a warning finger on her lips, listening—listening. Or feel-

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ing her own little throat to see if it trembled also when she sang.

“ Oh, Ruffles—is it God practising ? ” she had asked once, and then threw herself like a wild-cat upon Camille Derussy because he laughed loudly.

The boy registered a vow, as he sucked the finger she had bitten, to be even with her one day—“ Little hell-cat,” he muttered. He wasn't a nice boy.

Or was it some small flower which she had never seen before, hidden amongst the grasses of the olive plantations. Tenderly she would “ cup ” it in her small hands.

“ Little angel thing,” she would whisper. And perhaps that's what the flower said too.

Only Michael Ruffini, amongst all her playmates, never laughed at her. That is to say, when she was in her “ Jesus-Mary ” mood, as he called it. He had a habit of heading the other children off without knowing he was doing so. Just as one instinctively draws away from anyone who is kneeling in prayer. But more frequently he was pulling her bronze curls, or chasing her about the lawns and flower-beds of “ Bon Repos,” determined to pay her out for some childish trick which had achieved success. It wasn't easy to catch the little “ Demon,” however. She could outrun the lot of them because she turned and twisted unexpectedly in a way none of them could achieve. When they thought she was straight ahead of them, hidden

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only by the gay shrubs—" *Bonjour, messieurs!* "—there she was, up the steep bank, right above them, dancing amongst the grape vines like a young Bacchante. And when Lulu, heavy with childish rotundity, clambered up to find her, hark! that was the clear ripple of her merry laugh right behind, where they had all started the chase.

Yet they all adored her.

"It's awfully bad for her," Father le Touche had often thought to himself. He knew a great deal about Desdemona, because she was of the Latin Church, and he was the custodian of her childish little spiritual exercises. Every week, Olivia sent her with her governess, secretly disapproving, to the dim, cool Church of the Sacred Heart, into one of the confessional boxes, to pour out her baby sins. If the priest, tenderly listening, had frequently much ado not to shriek aloud with laughter, nobody knew it but himself. To Desdemona it was rather interesting and always fun. For she had no idea what it meant to be self-conscious. Honest, generous characters seldom have. The fact that her nationality was really English made her occasionally break out from the atmosphere of sacerdotalism in a way which would never have occurred to a small Italian or French *pénitente*.

"But she *did* look so funny with the tea-cosy on her head, Father!" he would hear from the dim recesses of his side of the confessional, and his strong, grave mouth would soften to a whimsical

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smile. Nevertheless, he took her perfectly seriously and dealt very conscientiously with her.

“All the same, it was an *unkind* thing to have done. Be funny as often as you like, my child, but never when it gives pain to others,” he had said on that occasion.

A heavy sigh drifted over from the penitent's side.

“It's only 'musing when it does. If people don't mind, you see, all the fun's gone.”

“You will tell your governess you are sorry you—you——” he whispered sternly.

There was a small gurgle of laughter, quickly suppressed.

“It was the cosy that's in the shape of a rabbit.”

Father le Touche coughed slightly. He knew Miss O'Neil's kindly, homely features very well, and that the alertness suggested by the rabbit was probably just the one thing wanting.

“Unless you tell your governess that you are sorry you made her uncomfortable and ridiculous before a room full of people, my child, I cannot give you the Absolution of the Christ who loved little children,” he said.

There was a short pause, and then the priest heard what he expected—Desdemona's little heart-rending sobs.

“But He—He—*loves* fun, Father,” she stammered.

“Yes, indeed, *indeed* He does. But He loves a sad, lonely, hard-working soul like your gover-

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ness much more, my child. You will tell her you are sorry."

"I won't."

Father le Touche rose.

"Leave the church, Desdemona," he said very sternly, through the grille, and, child though she was, she knew that the use of her name meant that she was in that peculiar kind of disgrace which always made her think of St. Peter when the Christ heard his denial and turned to look at him. She couldn't have defined it.

"Oh, stop, Father. Am I a 'lost soul'?"

Father le Touche started violently, and mentally consigned to the nethermost regions of darkness whoever or whatever had put such a notion into the child's head.

"Certainly not. You're simply a very naughty little girl," he said.

Desdemona stopped sobbing.

"Oh, if that's all—I'll tell Neilly I'm sorry," she said, so clearly that the priest instinctively said "hush!" Again he smiled tenderly to himself as he gave her the Absolution of his Master. He very well knew that she would never have left the church without it. She *was* sorry and ashamed.

That was the kind of thing which occurred. Just a piece of mischief ecstatically enjoyed, but which had pained the sensitive governess publicly. Not being much of a personality, she had wept audibly afterwards, and Desdemona, without knowing why, had felt rather small and

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mean. Her attitude towards her governess was one of disciplined toleration. Towards her mother it was one of rather reserved admiration. The latter in no sense represented what she, in her childish mind, considered "goodness." Far from it. Desdemona was only ten years old, but she knew false from true instinctively. She had often heard her mother tell falsehoods and known of mean little acts, social or otherwise. But it was rather terrible that already in her young mind the idea had germinated that certain things and people had an evil side which *had* to be.

"Dead things smell and look *hijus*," she murmured one day over the carcass of a defunct blackbird. "But there's got to *be* birds. And they're darlings when they sing and hop about." She considered her mother one of the most beautiful things she'd yet encountered.

"Only God's beautiful *and* good," she said suddenly to Camille Derussy, as she stirred the dead bird with her small shoe.

"*You'll* be a beauty one day, Demon, my what-you-call 'pal,' *n'est-ce pas?*" the boy replied in his broken way of speaking English.

"I shall be good as well," she said defiantly.

"Not you!" came the answer, and something undesirable swept across the handsome, coarse features of the adolescent youth.

"You talk as if you knew things Ruffles and I don't know," the child replied shrewdly, her small head in the air. She often wondered why

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Camille's conversation held a hint of some knowledge, some secret, hitherto withheld from herself. Had she but known it, it was the knowledge of good and evil.

Camille was a scavenger boy. He was nearly fourteen, the son of a French doctor of some eminence. His mother had died in giving him birth.

Chapter IV

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OTTERS^HA^W succeeded in getting Sir Edward dressed in time for *déjeuner*, however, in spite of his absorption in the children outside. When he had given him the last stroke down and presented him with the small hand mirror in which the old gentleman always took a final look at his small check tie and general readiness to face his world, he heaved a sigh of relief and mopped his forehead. For it was most undoubtedly terribly hot that morning. After an almost arctic month of October in England, when the snow had fallen ere the leaves were off the trees, and the winds had hurtled through human frames and bricks and mortar as if they were not there at all—well, it was disconcerting to find oneself in a world of incandescent heat and exotic colouring, all in about the twinkling of an eye, so to speak. Not that the valet objected to it. But Ottershaw hated

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to be hurried. From the moment of his birth he had surely been destined for the perfect body-servant. He had first seen the light in a villa of suburban symmetry and had arrived precisely according to plan. His mother, who had a gift for psychology unusual in her class, declared that the baby thought in straight lines.

“That blessed infant knows what’s goin’ to happen each hour of the day before ’im,” she said on one occasion.

“If ’e knows just when ’e’s going to be sick, his life must be an ’ell upon earth,” murmured the somewhat disgusted father, who had bequeathed rather a poor digestion to his son—a delicacy soon thrown off, probably thanks to an inherent fastidiousness. It was perfectly true that John Ottershaw had a strange capacity for routine and a *flair* for all that savoured of personal delicacies. The modern attitude towards what is known as “service” had passed completely over his head. He pruned, weeded, groomed and polished his masters (he always used the word “master”) just as a gardener loves to tend his flowers—for sheer love of a perfect thing, and from personal pride in his handiwork.

He had valeted various men of varying positions in society without particularly caring about them as human beings.

But Sir Edward Hemingford he really loved. He had been in his employment now for about fifteen years, and had grown so accustomed to turning him out correctly, that it would have

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seemed a catastrophe on a par with the crack of Doom had Sir Edward suddenly fallen into a pond or slipped on a ploughed field, and so gathered unto himself any defilement. And no doubt it would have appeared much the same to the old gentleman. At every moment when the various engagements of the day or evening required it, the quiet, well-tailored valet had always appeared with exactly the right thing in the way of vesture or "pick-me-up." They had talked of the same things, frequently read the same books. For Ottershaw, like most men with geometrical minds, delighted in literature which dealt in details and tabulated them. He loved biographies of "Great Men," and no doubt never realised that the real personality of the dead hero had entirely eluded the writer because it could *not* be tabulated. He and Sir Edward had collected quite a respectable little library of grave authors with which his master had presented him. Only yesterday, Sir Edward had said to him, just as they neared their journey's end:

"You can have this—these *Excavations in the Near East* are the very devil—when I've finished it."

He meant that they were startling—illuminating, and Ottershaw had taken a surreptitious peep at the illustrations whilst his master slept.

"Them slaves 'ud curse, if they could see the jerry-building up Brixton way. But them Pyramids kept 'em in their place all right," he

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mused, face to face with the modern bogey of Trades Unions. Perhaps, after all, it was the abandonment of the heavy and the solid which had led to the degeneration of that spirit which creates to endure. He must talk to Sir Edward about that.

In the meantime the old gentleman sauntered out into the beautiful gardens of "Bon Repos," feeling at peace with the world and only a little unusually tired. Olivia joined him after a brief siesta, which, she said, she always took after *déjeuner*. Slowly they paced up and down the lovely paths, bordered by exquisite flowering shrubs, and mottled in the shadows thrown across them by the afternoon sun.

"You live in a very beautiful world, my child," he said, slipping his arm inside hers. "A little too much of the lotus perhaps, at times?"

"Now, Dad, you've only been here twenty-four hours and you're bored!" she laughed in the low, drawling note which held all the sweetness of indolence. She was wondering whether, after all, her father wouldn't be a little difficult at times to—escape. Had she made a mistake? Carrouchi said she had. But then Carrouchi was greedy. He wanted her to himself. Oh yes, she knew that very well. She knew that she had only to yield to be possessed. But she also knew that the game wasn't worth the candle. She had watched too many women become *déclassées* not to know that. It was a damned silly thing to do on all counts. Here Olivia lit her eternal

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cigarette and trilled a little chansonette in between the puffs. She looked very lovely, her father thought, and something made him sigh. With Olivia there was always the eternal regret that she was unsatisfying. To men of his calibre, at all events. To the Carrouchis—ah, yes! Chocolates and a divan—no, no, at least she was “straight.” He really did believe that. But how much did that matter if the mentality of the courtesan permeated her nature? It was only, no doubt, a matter of expediency. Sir Edward had spent his life in the facing of grim difficulties, and he never shrank from analysing them. But away at the back of the analysis, the weighing in the balance, was the eternal sadness. He so longed for a daughter who would have entered into the upliftings of his higher nature, who could have passed on the torch as he had passed it on to the best of his ability. She was so beautiful a thing. He looked at her this golden afternoon, as he paced by her side past the towering palms, the marble shelters of her gardens, and wondered what she had done with her beauty. For Olivia had a very perfect body. She moved very slowly, with the grace of a panther, and her long, rather massive limbs seemed to swing in a rhythm without conscious effort. She had not inherited the hyacinth eyes of her family. But Ilo Carrouchi thought the grey pools behind her sweeping lashes were the coolest, loveliest things he knew, unless it were the crimson sweep of her big, smiling mouth. Her hand-plaited cream straw hat, with

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just a suggestion of a pale green scarf, followed the lines of her head and neck, throwing much the same soft mottled shadow upon her cheeks as that which danced about on the path at their feet. She was always *cool*—like some moss-lined, deep well, the enamoured Marquis would whisper, choosing to ignore the fact which he well knew—that she had no depths at all. Gainsborough would have delighted in her, posed beneath some tree, presumably to shelter from the inevitable deluge threatened in the sinister distance.

“Bored?” the old man protested, smiling. “If you only knew the sheer delight of the change from England. Its like emerging from a tunnel.”

“Yes. What’s the matter with old England, by the way?” laughed Olivia, surreptitiously looking at her watch, a dainty affair of neither time nor eternity, which spanned her wrist.

Sir Edward sighed.

“I don’t know,” he said rather sadly. “Something. Perhaps the times have gone past me like the old civilisations! I—seem to be—well, out in a storm.”

“The weather must be intolerable, from all accounts,” she said. She didn’t see that he was not thinking in terms of rainfalls and Burberrys. At least, not altogether. That he might be *lonely* never troubled her. People had to put up with their circumstances. The Brownes were coming in to play tennis directly, and, of course, Ilo, if he could get away from the Marquise, who was sometimes cornered by a Bridge party.

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Sir Edward bent his tall body to look at a riotous spray of purple bougainvillæa which was displaying itself along a low, marble parapet. Then he straightened himself.

“Olive, child, would anything induce you to—come and live in London? You and Desdemona?” he asked, and it was not difficult to catch the faint trembling of age in the voice which had so often held the listeners spellbound in museums and international lecture halls.

Mrs. Brenderwood heard him in dismay. This must be settled at once. A liquid note of distress crept into her tones.

“Ah, Daddy, you old darling, if I only could! But—alas! poor wee Desdemona must not leave the South. It wasn’t the doctor here who said so,” she added hurriedly, fearful of complications. “It was the specialist in Paris. Her chest, you see. Such a tiresome cough sometimes. I hate to say so, but—she must live in the south of France he said.”

Even as she spoke, he raised his long, thin hand to dismiss the subject. He knew she was lying.

“I should have suppressed my comments upon the English climate,” he said, smiling a little on one side of his mouth. “What *is* that?”

It was hardly necessary to ask. Olivia welcomed the interruption. It so often seems as if the gods fight on the side of the *intrigante*.

“My! I’m just done to a frazzle,” cried Mrs. Browne, who had just stepped from her latest thing in automobiles, at the foot of the great,

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circular steps leading up to the house. Small, yellow, withered with indigestion and iced drinks, to say nothing of cocktails, she looked like a crystallised almond. She was quite right, however, to have chosen red for the colour of her hair. Nothing else would have done.

“How d’ye do, S’ Edward? I can’t” (of course she pronounced “can’t” as if it were spelt “cairn’t,” somehow) “shake hands because of Puddin’-Fat. Puddin’-Fat—yes, he’s my familiar. Isn’t it, my wee ’ity dawg?”

Sir Edward laughed. He liked Mrs. Browne. She clasped a very small Shetland sheep-dog to her flat breast. The very smallest which in-breeding could contrive in a small breed. Suddenly she shrieked aloud, on a note like a gas escape, to her departing motor. It was gliding away towards the garage regions. Olivia put her small hands over her ears.

“My tennis racquet—and Puddin’-Fat’s cushion!” she shrieked.

The perfectly controlled car stopped almost instantaneously, and a tall footman who sat beside the chauffeur descended. Gingerly he extricated a handsomely embroidered crimson velvet cushion from the depths of the car. It bore the arms of the English Royal House, embroidered in gold. Also his mistress’s tennis racquet.

“My footman’s name’s Pelman,” that lady screamed on, in precisely the same way. “But it’s done his memory no good, I guess.” The

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English servant coloured and smiled. "Mrs. B.," they all called her, and they would have died for her. "Yes, my dear," she turned to Olivia, "the cushion *is* a bit bumpy. The Unicorn sticks in Puddin'-Fat's eye—I mean the *corn* does—my gracious, what *do* they call the billiard cue that's balanced on its head—isn't it just *too* cute—that's a joke, by the way—what did you say, S' Edward?"

"*Why* the Royal Arms of England? Is it just a neat compliment, what?"

"Now, isn't that lovely of you to want to know? Well, I just thought of that song of yours, 'Safe in the Arms of England,' which I want my Puddin'-Fat to be——"

"Saidie, you're too inconsequent for words. You mean a hymn which begins 'Safe in the arms of Jesus,'" said Olivia.

Mrs. Browne's countenance fell.

"Is that so?" she said regretfully. "Then my maid 'll have to unpick it all."

So she rattled on—perfectly natural.

Presently the Marquis appeared, smart, epigrammatic and possessive. He brought a French actor with him, a guest at his house. Sir Edward found himself presently seated comfortably in a low wicker chair under a tree, watching the tennis. Other people had appeared, it seemed to him of all nationalities. He felt a little confused by the noise, and closed his eyes, listening with considerable pleasure to the rapid and beautiful French which he heard spoken around him. He loved the language and spoke it per-

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fectly himself. Desdemona was flitting about like a bit of thistledown, in her babyish short white skirt. The heat grew greater and greater. Cooling drinks were handed around. He wished the Gravistocks had turned up. He had much in common with them, for they were of his time and date. But they were not the kind of people who dine at a house one evening and spend the greater part of the next day there too. "The sea-side habit," Sir Edward had always called it. They would come and see him in a day or so, he knew, when they heard, perhaps, that Olivia would be out. She went out a great deal, and he remembered she was going to some musical party at six o'clock to-night, after these people had gone (most of them were going to the party too, he gathered), before the late, the very late dinner.

"I think I'll dine early," the old man thought. He felt just the least little bit drowsy and not quite so able to assert himself as usual. But it was very pleasant here, under the ilex trees, lapped in waves of such warmth as he hadn't known for years, so it seemed to him. And the birds were singing softly, as the sun dipped towards the west in a crimson glory. He seemed wrapped round in a subtle perfume . . . he was growing sleepy . . . this would never do. He'd never done such a thing as to fall asleep at a party before . . . people expected rather brilliant things of him, and he'd always loved to talk to well-read . . . funny song the birds were singing. Sounded more

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like human voices . . . angel voices . . . all that *lonely* feeling was going. . . .

“Better come in and rest now, Sir Edward, I think,” somebody said. Yes, *Somebody* said it . . . a Voice. . . .

“What, what? You, Ottershaw? Upon my soul, I’ve been to sleep. Nearly everybody gone, you say? It’s the heat, the heat.”

“Yes, sir. But you have to be careful in these parts at sundown, you know.” The valet was raising him deftly from his chair. There, he felt quite wide awake again now. Everybody *had* gone, except just a few people playing the last games in the two courts right away there.

“Madame has gone in, sir. She’s going out till dinner-time,” said Ottershaw, unable to hide the disapproval in his voice. He considered Mrs. Brenderwood altogether wanting on the occasion of her old father’s visit to her. Beside, he was behind the scenes of the Villa “Bon Repos,” and knew in what estimation Olivia was held by those who were well paid to serve her.

Nobody gave Mrs. Brenderwood the benefit of the doubt below stairs. The position of the Marquis Carrouchi was quite definitely defined, in this household composed largely of Southerners. They were only puzzled as to why she troubled to continue all the tiresome intrigues of a liaison when it could be so easily terminated by divorce and marriage. Of course they were wrong. Subtleties of sex were not easily understood amongst a people who recognised no necessity

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for them. Ottershaw had the acumen of the Britisher who knows his countrymen and women, and he gauged the position quite accurately.

“Cosy icicle,” was his mental comment—which was somewhat of a contradiction in terms.

“Good-night, Grandfather,” a soft little voice called above their heads, as they passed the front of the house towards the main entrance.

Sir Edward looked up. Desdemona’s lovely little bronze-red head was hanging out of an upstairs window.

“Going to bed, little one?” he asked, pausing, and something in the pure sweet child face made him instinctively take off his hat.

“Not just yet. I’m going to have a game of hide-and-seek with Ruffles first.”

“Tut-tut, young lady! These late hours! Now *I’m* a respectable old gentleman. I’m going to bed *now*.”

“*Are* you? Mummy’s going out to a party before dinner. She often goes with Ilo.”

“Who’s Ilo?”

“The Marquis. Listen, Grandfather”—here Desdemona leaned out of the window at a perilous angle and whispered audibly—“that *pig* of a Marquis. I hate him. I like Mrs. Browne.”

“So do I, child.”

Suddenly a second head protruded itself from the window—the head of the sun-god child, Michael Ruffini.

Sir Edward thought he had never seen a more beautiful picture. They were like two young

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angels, side by side, the gold and the bronze, their faces alight with just childish happiness and curiosity. Also friendliness. Suddenly the old man's eyes filled with tears. He had seen no friendliness on the lovely face of his daughter; only the artificial courtesy which civilisation demands of us. These two children were frankly interested in him.

"What do *you* do with yourself, boy?" he asked, resisting insensibly the quiet efforts Ottershaw was making to draw him onwards. The valet feared the miasma of sundown.

Michael coloured all over his broad young face.

"Out of school hours, I—I—model in clay, sir," he said, and then tried to withdraw. But the firm grasp of the small Demon was upon his arm.

"Ruffles is going to be a great—what's the word, Ruffles?"

"Nothing," said the boy, struggling with her detaining arm.

Desdemona's rippling laugh rang out like a peal of silver bells.

"A great *nothing*, stupid! Is there such a thing, Grandfather?"

"Heaps of them, little lady," he answered.

"I think Miss Desdemona means *sculptor*, from what I hear, sir," said Ottershaw, who was getting rather desperate, for he thought he saw his master shiver a little in the cooling air.

"Ah! The world has need of more than one. Good luck to you, boy." Then he replaced his

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hat, and with a smile of real pleasure, he waved his hand to the young people and passed on.

The sun was setting, and the sky was just one magnificent pageant of blood red as they entered the beautiful ground-floor bedroom. It poured in through the open French windows and lay in pools upon the parquet flooring. The room felt stifling in spite of all Ottershaw's efforts to reduce the temperature.

"Madame has gone out, then?" said Sir Edward, as he sank down into one of the luxurious armchairs.

The question was answered by that lady in person. With a light tap, Olivia's head, perfectly dressed beneath a smart little toque, peeped in.

"Just going out for an hour, Dad, to hear some Debussy. You'll be resting a bit, won't you, before dinner? I've got some people from Monte coming to dine, and they'll dance a bit afterwards, no doubt. You'll enjoy it. Ta-ta."

"Let me have a look at you, old lady," her father said, rather wistfully. He had always rejoiced in her beauty of body.

Olivia hesitated and glanced behind her. Sir Edward heard the suave voice of the Marquis Carrouchi.

"*Serons en retard.*"

"*Soit. Je viens.* So sorry I haven't a blessed minute, Dad. You'll see this gown another time though. Till dinner—*au revoir!*"

She was gone. The old man sank into a

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kind of reverie as Ottershaw made a few rapid preparations for his toilet. He was glad he had decided to come to bed. He hadn't explained to Olivia, but he could send a message.

"*Au revoir,*" she'd said. "*Au revoir.*"

Strange! Those words of Ottershaw's out there in the gardens seemed to be running in his head.

"Better come in and rest."

They were only the valet's words. Then why the devil did it seem as if some loud, sweet voice said them? . . .

"*Better come in and rest, Sir Edward.*"

Well, well, no doubt the journey had tired him. To-morrow he'd be better, and he'd be a great deal with Desdemona and Ruffles if he could.

Chapter V

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SIR EDWARD was ready for bed, clad in his slong Jaeger dressing-gown. He strolled to the open window, whilst his valet busied himself about the arrangement of the table by the bedside and all the small details of his requirements. There was his green-shaded reading lamp, the cord trailing like a snake to the floor and across the carpet to the connecting plug in the skirting board. He could switch it on in a second. There was a glorious little plant of crimson blossoms—an azalea in full bloom. He had so

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admired it, where it stood on a side bracket, and had told Ottershaw to put it by his side. He had always liked to be able to look at and smell flowers, in the silent hours of the night, in spite of the prevalent idea that they should be banished from a bedroom at bedtime. Then there was his book, the *Excavations in the Near East*. Ottershaw shut it with a snap, and placed it close to the edge of the table, where his master had only to stretch out his hand for it, if he felt wakeful at all. And a small tumbler of clear water.

All was ready, and the valet switched off all lights but the reading lamp on the table. Then he retired into his own bedroom, which opened out of Sir Edward's. He knew well that the old man knelt down to pray every night, though no word had ever been exchanged between them on the subject.

"Wish 'e wouldn't kneel," the valet thought. "Some night 'e won't be able to get up again."

That evening, however, Sir Edward did not kneel. The sun had set with that sudden swiftness which is unknown in northern climates, and it was practically dark. He gazed entranced at the lovely scene before him. It was an enormous panorama, down below where the town of Nice lay, clustering right up to the edge of the distant ocean. A nocturne in pearl and silver, lit up as if by some magic hand. Just enough starlike lights to illuminate the white walls of the shuttered houses. Sometimes they were street lamps, sometimes the radiance came from lanterns

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hung on nails in the narrow passages. Everywhere white, softened to pearl by the gentle yellow radiance. Now and again a brilliant electric constellation, where some hotel entrance challenged attention. Great, great palm trees stood out in black relief, their trunks like enormous pineapples. Away, away, street after street, garden after garden, till the distant line of white surf marked the swinging deep velvet of the sea. Velvety blackness. And above, the same soft canopy, with just a cloud wrack where the moon was stretching her crescent toes.

Sir Edward inhaled the subtle perfumes of the roses and mimosa in the Villa grounds. It was still very warm, but a little sighing breeze stirred the lace curtains.

“A night to live or die in,” murmured the old man to himself. His life had been so drab lately in England—so lonely. This soft night beauty stirred him to the depths of his soul. He felt some queer kinship with it, as if he were being shown all the beautiful thoughts, all the noble aspirations of his life, in a vision of reality. There was something *satisfying* about it. Somehow, he felt no need of prayer. He *saw* his prayers.

At last he turned away, as the deep night fell, and called to Ottershaw. A few minutes afterwards he was tucked up in bed, his face towards the room—a tired but not particularly sleepy old man.

He smiled once or twice as the sound of Desdemona's merry laughter drifted in through the

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open door of his room. She was skipping about the house, evidently enjoying her promised game of hide-and-seek. Occasionally the deeper notes of Michael Ruffini's voice joined in. Then they heard him call:

“*Bonsoir, Demon. Je m'en vais. Faut manger le souper à sept heures.*”

“It's nearly half-past, so you'll get your 'souper' jolly late,” called that young lady from the region of the music-room.

“*Entendu!*” the boy's diminishing voice replied.

They heard the child's light step in the hall outside—then silence.

Ottershaw drew from his waistcoat pocket a small glass phial about three inches long. It was full of tabloids of a pale green colour, and he had to unwrap a tiny swathing of paper to draw the wee cork.

They were the tabloids which Sir Edward was ordered to take by his London physician. Ottershaw always dissolved one of them every night in the glass of water which invariably stood on his master's table. It was put well within Sir Edward's reach, so that in the event of a heart attack threatening, he might drink the draught and ward it off. He rarely did drink it, but his servant, being a valet who knew his job and was something of a nurse in addition, never omitted the preparation.

To-night he did precisely as usual. He dissolved one of the green tabloids from the tube in

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the cold water. It instantly turned the water a pale green and effervesced for a moment. He placed it in the usual spot.

At that precise moment the telephone bell outside in the great hall rang out. Once, twice, several times.

Not a soul appeared to be within hearing. At all events, nobody came to answer it. Ottershaw remembered that "Madame" was out with her party. Probably the maids and men-servants were enjoying themselves immensely away in the kitchen regions. Again the bell rang—loudly, continuously.

"Damnation take them!" he muttered. He believed his master would sleep very soon. He must answer the beastly thing himself. He put the phial down upon the table for the time being, and left the room, leaving the door open. It took him a moment to find the telephone. Finally he discovered it half concealed behind a low screen on a marble bracket attached to the wall.

"Where the deuce are all these fine foreign servants?" he muttered, as he unhooked the ear-piece from the silver-plated stand.

"Oh, Olivia, *ma chérie*, I must tell you about to-morrow's arrangements," a thin, sweet voice called. "The Tournament begins at two-thirty, and *you* play with——"

"Mrs. Brenderwood is out, Madame, and I am here to take any message for her," said Ottershaw, wondering if the telephone would go on ringing all night.

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“Who are you? It’s not Delmino’s voice,” came the cautious reply.

“No, Madame. I—er—I am valet to Sir Edward Hemingford, Mrs. Brenderwood’s father. I came to the telephone because nobody seems about.”

There was an instant change of voice, so decided that the man smiled grimly to himself.

“‘Down with the people!’” he thought.

Then he was detained for nearly ten minutes, taking down instructions about a Tennis Tournament in which it seemed Mrs. Brenderwood and some of her house guests were taking part the following day. Something had gone wrong. Somebody had failed at the eleventh hour. There must of necessity be a shuffling of cards, and fresh partners. Again Ottershaw’s thin lips twisted in a smile as he noted that whoever changed about, Mrs. Brenderwood was always left to play with the Marquis Carrouchi.

At length he was free, and, hanging up the ear-phone, he placed the crocodile notebook in which he had taken down the message upon a prominent table, and re-entered Sir Edward’s bedroom. As he did so, Desdemona’s merry young laugh rang out somewhere upstairs.

“That child ought to be in bed,” he muttered.

For a minute or two he busied himself very softly in tidying the room and looking out his master’s clothes for the morrow. The windows were still wide open and the moon had broken through the clouds and was illuminating the pearl

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and silver town, so lately baked and blistered by the sun. On the table by the bed, however, glowed a deeply shaded lamp, which only shone just within its own small radius—a small pool of light. The rest of the room was, as Sir Edward liked to have it, in darkness. Suddenly there was a small avalanche of sound. That laughter, so hollow, and yet so akin to tears, which is the last refuge of the woman who lives on excitement and emotion. Several different laughs, for there were two or three people who had only arrived to stay at “Bon Repos” that morning, and two men, naturalised Americans.

“Horribly late. Just time for a warm dip though, for I’ve put dinner off half an hour,” drawled the sweet contralto tones of Olivia.

“Yes, and what price your old father, waiting up, dressed, for all *you* know, waiting for his dinner?” thought Ottershaw, who had no use for the mistress of the Villa.

Doors opened and shut. The rush of sound died away. There was silence.

Presently the man turned softly towards the bed. He had forgotten to put the phial back in his pocket. He picked it up, and glanced at it in order to tighten the cork.

Suddenly he raised it to a level with his eyes. Then he put it below the line of the green lampshade and bent to look at it—closely, intently. Extracting the cork, he peered into it. Then he replaced the cork and rolled it round and round between his fingers, still gazing with startled,

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bewildered eyes which seemed, in the greenish light, to be protruding a little. In fact his face appeared to have turned a little green, like the shade. This only took a few seconds, this examination of the phial, though it seemed to the man that he had been gazing at it for an immense time.

Then he turned his startled eyes towards the bed; bent swiftly forward, and peered into Sir Edward's face. Closely, almost touching it.

“*My God!*”

Was it his own voice which gave the cry?

“*My God!*”

Again someone had cried out. But it couldn't be *his* voice—his—Ottershaw the valet—that deep, agonised cry.

“*Oh, my God!*”

It was all he could say. His dry lips refused to part. Was his blood *really* rolling back from his heart in an icy wave? What were the strange shivers which were coursing over his skull? Why couldn't he move? Rigid as the figure before him in the bed, he stood, bent and fixed.

For Sir Edward Hemingsford was dead.

Time began to beat again. Slowly the valet drew himself erect and went swiftly to the door. Noiselessly he turned the key in the lock.

At all costs he must gain a few minutes' solitude before he called the world in to gaze upon—that—there—under the clothes.

Then he fell on his knees by the bed, his arms thrown across the form beneath the sheet, his

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head sunk down between them, on the blue-veined old hand which lay limp and inert over the edge.

“ Oh, master, master ! ”

It was an exceeding bitter cry. Surely Sir Edward must have heard it as he entered The Presence. For there is no time in eternity. But there is Love immeasurable, and Ottershaw had loved him.

Then the floodgates opened upon the soul of this man who had only thought in straight lines all his life, and washed away the hard outlines. Soundlessly he knelt and sobbed, his forehead pressed upon the thin hand which grew colder and colder. He had never dreamed how dearly he had cared for Sir Edward.

For a few minutes it was the *fact* of what had happened which alone overwhelmed him. Then, inevitably, came the question—*why* ?

Nobody would have felt the least surprised at learning of Sir Edward's death. Everybody knew he had heart trouble of an advanced kind. It had always been anticipated by his medical men. Ottershaw himself had been on the lookout for it for several years. A sudden death—like this.

But why were there only nine tabloids in the tube when there ought to have been eleven ?

He had given Sir Edward one only, as usual, opening a fresh tube, which contained, *could* only contain twelve tabloids. Two more had been extracted during his ten minutes' absence at the

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telephone. He had busied himself about the room and in his own bedroom on his return for something like a quarter of an hour, without looking at Sir Edward, concluding he was asleep.

The glass containing the tabloid, which he had dissolved as usual in water, was empty, with a small amount of sediment clinging to the sides—but sediment which was greener in hue than one tabloid only would make it. Suicide was out of the question. The tube had been placed on the table out of Sir Edward's reach, unless he got right out of bed. That was at all times a big effort for him, requiring the valet's assistance every morning. Besides, the bedclothes were tucked in at the foot of the bed in a way he particularly fancied, but which he could not possibly have done himself. No, it was no suicide. Sir Edward, moreover, was an absolutely sane, normal man, with a great horror of the moral cowardice of a self-inflicted death. His face was perfectly peaceful. Indeed, there was a faint suspicion of a "Mona Lisa" smile at the corners of his mouth. Who, out of all that household of light and perfume, colour and gaiety, had so black a soul?

Not Olivia Brenderwood. For at the time Ottershaw was occupied with the telephone, she had been three or four miles away, in her motor-car, with some of her guests. There was nobody in the house except the servants and the children. Of that he was absolutely certain.

The mystery was so profound that it must almost be attributed to supernatural agency.

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Nevertheless, Sir Edward Hemingford was dead with dramatic swiftness, and somebody or something had given him the two extra tabloids which had caused his death. And that during the ten minutes of the valet's absence. Somebody incredibly swift and silent. Somebody who knew, *must* have known, that three of the tabloids would prove fatal. And for what reason?

Here Ottershaw's forehead broke out in a cold perspiration, for he suddenly found himself thinking of the old man's will. Who benefited under that will?

He himself, for one. He had Sir Edward's word for that. Several times he had told him that he need have no anxiety about his old age, for he would find himself well provided for, should his master die suddenly. "My God, they'll say I did it!" he thought.

Now, Ottershaw was, as we know, a man of lifelong regularity of thought and action. This was the first great shock he had ever received, and as soon as the numbness and horror of his discovery had passed off, habit began to reassert itself, as it invariably does. Mechanically he set himself to certain tasks which seemed imperative. He removed the glowing azalea plant to the bracket on which it had originally stood. Then he washed out the empty tumbler in the "hot and cold" basin in his bedroom. The blue book on *Excavations in the Near East*, he picked up with a groan which was half a sob, for it was Sir Edward's last gift to him.

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“Nobody else shall have *that*,” he thought, as he thrust it into a drawer in his dressing-table. Swiftly he gathered up the gold watch, with its seal and pencil attached, and laid them on the dressing-table. How often he had wound up that watch for his master, night after night! For a second he stared at it, ticking away whilst its owner had done with time. Half-past eight. *Tick, tick, tick.*

Suddenly he became conscious that people were laughing and talking in the house, beyond the locked door. God! that woman would be asking for Sir Edward, possibly coming to his room. Dressed for dinner—all unconscious of—*that*—on the bed.

In one swift moment he came to a resolution.

He would say nothing about the green tabloids.

Well he knew that the doctor’s verdict would be “death from heart failure,” or some such wording. For he had heard Sir Worsley Crichton, the heart specialist in London, telling Sir Edward’s ordinary medical attendant that this new drug left absolutely no traces whatever. It was one evening, three years ago, after the old man had had a slight heart attack, and the specialist had been summoned. The doctors had discussed the new stimulant together, as a matter of interest, and he, Ottershaw, busy over details of service, had heard every word as he moved about the room. What was the *use* of saying anything? Opening up all the horrible complications which involved the police, the publicity, the suspicions—oh,

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God! he himself would be suspected! The mystery was impenetrable. Let it lie.

The fact of the matter was, Ottershaw became a prey to an agony of fear. It is difficult to realise what it meant to a man of his type to become suspect. Respectability and routine had been a fetish with him all his life. Anything to do with crime, the police, or lawlessness had filled him with so profound a disgust that he would never have spoken to a man or woman who had been in prison, unless he were compelled. It was not self-righteousness. It was extremely refined sensitiveness. The ex-prisoner had touched pitch, and belonged to another section of society, having nothing in common with him, Ottershaw, who touched and handled the bodies and lives of the *élite*. Suddenly to come face to face with the possibility of being accused of *murder* seemed so awful a thing that it must be avoided at all costs. It was so easy to keep silent. It was not as if Sir Edward had been a good life from an insurance point of view. Probably he would have died very shortly in any case—it had only been hastened . . . God! what was that damned noise? The great gong boomed through the Villa. It was always sounded at night, although Delmino, surrounded by his satellites, always announced dinner with pomp and circumstance, throwing open the folding doors of the blue and gold salon.

Ottershaw had come very swiftly to his decision. In fact, not more than ten minutes had elapsed since his discovery of his master's death. Yet,

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to his own dying day, he never forgot the eternal eternity of those ten minutes.

The gong sounded again, for Olivia brooked little waiting for other guests, once ready herself.

The valet unlocked the door, and then rang the bedroom bell. Loudly, insisently, keeping his finger upon the ivory knob. He was grey as ashes. His clothes were damp and cold, and clung about his body. He tried to keep his teeth from chattering, to be his usual grave, controlled self. Murder! murder! *He*, who would gladly have died for his master and had never given a thought to the will or the money. . . . Ring, ring, ring! Would nobody come? He had switched on the light, and it fell upon the white, peaceful face of the dead man, for he had not covered it, as perhaps he should have done. Ring, ring . . . God! would he have to go out and *find* them all? Would the Whoever-had-done-it come in too, to look upon the accomplished work?

Ah! footsteps at last. Many footsteps. He rang and rang. Voices were speaking hurriedly, questions and running footsteps, men's and women's. This was his last moment alone with the quiet dead. The world was rushing in.

He ceased to ring, and both his shaking hands went out in a long, last farewell to the still figure upon the bed.

“Good-bye, Master, good-bye. God avenge you!”

The door burst open. Men-servants and

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maid-servants, with scared faces and loud questions. Shrill, Latin voices and gestures.

“Hush!” said the valet, standing up in the middle of the room, tall and stricken with grief. “Sir Edward Hemingford is dead.”

They were all French or Italian but one—Madame’s maid—and she could understand English a little.

“*Comment? Il est mort? Seer Edwar’—mort? Mon Dieu! Quelle horreur!*”

Suddenly a regal figure swept into the room. It was Olivia—in supple amber satin, flashing, *diamantée*, her bare arms gleaming.

“What has happened, Ottershaw? Where is Sir Edward?”

“*There, Madame,*” he answered, a little grimly.

Olivia swept to the bed. Then she gave a shrill scream.

Ottershaw fingered the tube in his waistcoat pocket.

Chapter VI

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“**Q**UEER thing, life. ‘Ships that pass’ and all that.”

“Dear, do get up and shut the window, and then tell me why this sapient remark. There’s a terrible draught blowing about my head.”

Lord Gravistock did as he was requested and

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then took up his favourite attitude before the fire, his hands draping the back of his short blue coat in graceful folds about his hips. He is a very old man now, for it is eight years since we saw him last, a guest in the Villa "Bon Repos" on the evening preceding the death of his friend and contemporary, Sir Edward Hemingford.

"I was thinking of poor old Ned Hemingford. Meeting him again like we did just at dinner, after several years' separation, and then——" He turned out his hands with an expressive gesture. "What was the *point* of our meeting him like that, eh, m' dear?"

Lady Gravistock never made the mistake of not answering her husband's questions. She had become an adept at projecting startling theories on the spur of the moment, just as she would have threaded a string of beads. One on, another ready. Her husband had himself taught her this habit without knowing it. When he had married her, over half a century ago, she was a beautiful, placid Victorian product. She came of a family of nine daughters, and was the youngest of them. They had all talked in a kind of diminuendo. The eldest had shrieked from India to England, for she had been a kind of Zenana pioneer. The next had not made quite such a noise, because she had taken up rescue work, and in those days women were rescued in a very ladylike way, not dragged into the path of virtue by the heel, so to speak, as they are now. Still, it was very well known that the Lady

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Jane rescued morning, noon and night. The third daughter played a drum in the Salvation Army at Headquarters. It created a scandal which even now re-echoed dismally amongst the faded boudoirs of a bygone date.

And so on, each member of the family throwing out feelers towards the beckoning figure of enfranchised femininity.

At long last came Evelyn Wilberforce, and she hardly ever spoke, though she played the violin and piano when requested. But in those days Lord Gravistock, then Viscount Roade, was a masterful young man.

“The art of conversation shall not pass, like all other art is doing, to America,” he said. “When I talk, Evelyn, I expect you to respond without delay.”

She astonished him, therefore, that evening, when he remarked at the beginning of dinner that it had been a fine day, by saying immediately, “That depends upon your point of view. If your digestion has been good, your investments are sound and your opinion of yourself continues to be high, no doubt the sun has shone and the rain has kept off. Moreover” (here the astonished butler had dropped a fork) “the Meteorological Office confirms your——”

“For God’s sake, Evelyn, eat your mutton,” gasped Lord Gravistock, completely taken aback.

“You mean, to employ an old adage, ‘eat your words,’ dear,” responded his wife with the

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minimum of delay, and only a healthy appetite put an end to the flow of her conversation. Since then she had taken great pains to form in herself a fixed habit of conversation. As a matter of fact, they were both rather dears. They were devoted to one another, and were still living in a past which is as dead as the proverbial and royal Anne.

They were both people who had high notions of duty, not only towards one another, but to the world in general. The Victorian era produced people with Imperial minds and outlook much oftener than is supposed, only they were unlabelled and they worked and lived quietly. They belonged to no particular political party at that moment, but neither of them would have let anyone down, or backed up a policy of selfishness, because they believed sincerely in the mission of the well-born and the well-mannered. They were really Christians, but they knew nothing whatever about Anglo-Catholicism or Protestantism. They listened to conversation about it in a perfectly detached way, just as they would have listened to an account of a parochial outing to the seaside or a description of an epidemic. These things existed, but didn't concern them vitally. They went to church on Sunday (not before breakfast, because that was "silly"), and they still contrived to keep servants who did the same. They were so full of reverence for the Royal Family that they did not discuss them with people who were not born in the purple. They

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recognised the disintegration which was going on in the social and religious world, but believed that as long as their own class lived up to inherited traditions of loyalty and duty to "the masses," things would all come out right in the end. In other words, God and the King. They were immensely rich and had priceless possessions in the way of pictures and furniture. It never occurred to them to wonder if it was all as it should be.

"Those darling old Gravistocks! What a Fools' Paradise!" people said, and smiled when they saw them in the *Tatler* or some other paper, attending weddings or receptions. He with his Byronic collar and old-world stock, and she with her real downright bonnet and long skirt. Kindly, gracious, dignified—God bless them, inheritors of England.

"Yes, dear. It was a tragic little meeting, only we didn't know it," Lady Gravistock said, in answer to her husband's remark. "But I should imagine it was intended to give us a chance to say farewell to dear Edward. You see, we have a pleasant memory of him now, as we saw him that night. Whereas, if we hadn't seen him again after all those years, we should only have remembered him just after he'd broken his nose—you remember that fall he had in Mexico—and it was *very* disfiguring then, all on one side." She went on placidly with her crochet, which lay in white piles on her knee.

"Yes," said Lord Gravistock, "Mannering

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made a good job of that. Good-looking fellow, old Hemingford."

"The best man I ever knew," said his wife quietly.

Her husband placed his gold pince-nez carefully on his nose and looked down at her from his great height. All the Earls of Gravistock were immensely tall. There had been one exception, in the reign of Charles the Second. He was almost a dwarf, and it was said that his mother was the only Countess of Gravistock who had fallen from her high estate. For there was a startling likeness between the little Earl and a certain young and diminutive Squire-at-Arms. However, a great painter had been told that he must lengthen his portrait, the one now in the Long Gallery. Obediently, Sir Peter Lely had, it was said, taken thought and added one cubit unto his stature. But it was quite easy to see the trick.

"You're not very complimentary to me, my dear," he said, a little dryly. He had always had a lurking suspicion that his wife had been in love with the eminent excavator.

"The best man at a wedding is not the man one marries," she answered promptly. For the life of him, her husband could never be certain if Evelyn Lady Gravistock was pulling his leg or not. Had she really made a habit of grasping that still shapely limb, she would have been a much cleverer woman than she was. She was just good, simple, and stiff with tradition, for she had come of a family which boasted a longer

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pedigree than that of the Earls Gravistock. Sir Edward had liked them both because they were sincere, which was the reason why he had tried so hard not to dislike his daughter, who wasn't.

"Perhaps you're right, my dear," Lord Gravistock mused, for he never tried to find out if his suspicions were correct. "One shudders to think what the world would be like if every marriage spelt perfection."

"It couldn't, for all the children would be criminals or lunatics. It would be 'Checkmate,' wouldn't it, dear?"

He looked down at her once more, a little surprised and perhaps a trifle shocked.

"My dear, are you not a little—unorthodox?"

"I don't know, it seems to me like that. Look at Olivia Brenderwood."

"Well?"

"Two of the best parents a child ever had. You remember dear Marion Hemingford. Olivia—lives for *herself* entirely."

"Well, well," muttered the Earl tolerantly. He believed so intensely in never speaking evil of the dead that he almost extended it to their descendants, which means that he never said an unkind word of anybody, seeing that we have none of us sprung, like Aphrodite, from the sea foam.

"I believe she would be *glad* if she could get rid of Desdemona," added his wife, crocheting furiously.

"I've no doubt, then, that she'll soon be granted her heart's desire," smiled the Earl, polishing his

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pince-nez, and holding them critically to the light. "Such a lovely child is not born to blush unseen."

"Miss Brenderwood," announced the butler from the doorway.

With as much grace as her crocheting would allow, Lady Gravistock rose to greet Desdemona, fervently hoping she had heard nothing about herself. She reckoned without the Earl.

"Welcome as flowers in May!" exclaimed that old courtier, and he raised the girl's fingers to his lips, patting her sleeve with his disengaged hand. "I was just that very moment saying you were not long for this world, my dear."

"Heavens! why not?" cried Desdemona.

"I mean the world in which such old folk as my wife and I live in," he laughed. "Pastures new for the young and fair. Some young villain——"

Desdemona laughed her sweet, rippling laugh, kissed Lady Gravistock, and subsided into a chair, disengaging her small chin from her furs. It was bitterly cold that afternoon in London. Christmas was approaching, and everybody was suffering from depression and catarrh. It was barely light all day, and for three weeks a yellow fog had brooded over the West End. Business men were working all day by electric light and grumbling all evening about it. Doctors were reaping where they sowed, and bearing up very well. The shops were listless and colourless for the most part. The churches were full of dim wreaths of fog, and a few neurasthenic wor-

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shippers. England as we know her, for the greater part of the year. That is to say, on the surface, for, thank God, her big heart beats steadily and cheerfully, down, down, where the soul is of her greatness and her meaning. For we are all humbugs on the surface, and as long as we all know it, not much harm is done.

“Nothing doing at present, Lord Gravistock,” Desdemona laughed. But she coloured magnificently.

Lady Gravistock smiled serenely as she resumed her seat and her crochet. She was devoted to this lovely child of eighteen summers (no reason why we should mention the winters), and she knew very well that Michael Ruffini was her most devoted lover, though as yet unacknowledged and unsung. Desdemona was welcome at all hours of the day and night at No. 16 Cadogan Square, for the Gravistocks were the kind of people who understood the girl's highly strung and generous nature and loved it. People who were cultivating the new system of self-development, with its slogan of “Be happy, cost what it may,” were a little afraid of her and her outlook on life. They soon found out that questions of sex, with their exciting discoveries and speculations, didn't interest her in the least, and that she, in fact, wouldn't discuss them.

“Babies come just like the roses and the tulips do,” she had said once, to a would-be schoolgirl confidante. “You love—someone—for life and for ever. Then, of course, you both

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want them to come, and so they do. I think it's too wonderful to talk about," she had added, shyly.

The school friend had got very red, and had bent her head over her books in a very unusual silence. Later on she had said to another girl, who had imparted a good deal of information to her about what she called "things which go on":

"Hands off Desdemona Brenderwood, old sport. She's no good to us."

They never mentioned sexual things again to Desdemona. She bounded through her first youth like a young hart upon the mountains, leaping from point to point, exultant and healthy. Only people like Lady Gravistock understood how her young soul quivered with every fresh emotion, trembled with each new experience.

She had more than fulfilled her childhood's promise. She was quite small, in fact what is called "a little person." Beautifully moulded and proportioned, with only just enough flesh on her supple frame to make her very fair and desirable. Her hair clustered closely about her small oval face in pretty bronze curls, cut short according to the prevailing fashion, and looked like a deepening of the flush of colour which came and went in her cheeks far too readily. For Desdemona had not learnt yet, at the age of eighteen, that we *must* case our hearts in a certain amount of callousness, if we would come unscathed through the fight. People who knew and loved her would shake their heads and say to themselves

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or others, "The child is going to suffer a lot." For it was impossible to go through the battle of life with such a full heart as Desdemona's and not to get slashed about.

"She wants enamelling, I guess, does that child," Mrs. Browne of Boston had said, and she was not referring to Desdemona's lovely face.

Lovely is the only word which fits. Everybody loved her, because she had so rare a quality of purity, both in her manner and in her character. Purity which marched side by side with an accurate knowledge of facts of nature, but quite personally detached from them. Men would ask to be introduced to her, and afterwards they would be very silent about her. But they would return again and again to her side, glad, apparently, just to lose themselves in the depths of her wonderful hyacinth eyes. Just as tea was brought in, Mrs. Browne also arrived. She too was admitted to the friendship of the Gravistock circle, modern though she was. For the Earl, at any rate, knew a good thing when he saw it, and he had long ago gauged the real nature of the bright, crisp American mentality. "See you through a tight place," he had said when asked to describe her to a dubious inquirer.

"Now, isn't this real cosy!" she exclaimed, putting her absurd pointed shoes inside the low marble curb of the hearthstone. "I left 'Puddin'-Fat' wrapped up in Benjamin B.'s new woolly dressing-gown."

"My dear—will he be pleased?"

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“ Well, but you see he’s so old now, it really *cairn’t* matter——”

“ Puddin’-Fat or Benjamin B. ? ” inquired Lord Gravistock, with gravity.

Desdemona’s happy laugh rang out as she helped herself to the muffin her hostess handed her in a Georgian dish of suitable stamina. Lord Gravistock had always thought his wife a little unnecessarily heavy over tea-making, because he didn’t understand that it was the great silver teapot which was unnecessarily heavy. Her small old hands were often sadly rheumatic nowadays, and the violin had been given away.

“ Benjamin B. wears remarkably well, ” the little lady continued. “ Since he’s been in the Diplomatic Corps he’s developed a capacity for telling the bald truth. ”

Lord Gravistock looked shocked.

“ But that’ll never do ! ” he exclaimed.

“ No—will it ? I’m always telling him about it. He says he lives with her now, at the bottom of a well. ”

“ Lives with—whom, if one may ask ? ”

“ Truth. I said I reckoned she was bald, and he had the impertinence to say ‘ and quite naked ’ ! ”

Lord Gravistock chuckled.

“ All the same, Saidie, you look very well at the receptions, with your lovely gowns, ” said his wife.

Mrs. Browne sighed.

“ These everlasting curtsyings and tiaras,

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with my poor stiff knee," she groaned. "Some day it'll let me down. . . . My! though, what do you think H.R.H. said to me last Wednesday?" she exclaimed, her small brown face alert as a terrier's. "I said, 'I reckon my "dip" isn't very first-class to-night, Prince. But you know it's *there* all right, in my poor knee.' Then he smiled that cute little smile of his and said, 'A friend *in need*, Mrs. Browne'!" She put her cup down and helped herself to cake.

"Would you believe it, Benjamin B. never saw his little joke?"

Suddenly Lady Gravistock spoke.

"You bully that most excellent husband of yours, Saidie," she said, and there was something in her voice which made the American colour. She was very anxious to stand well with this gracious, old-world lady. There was that about her which resembled the atmosphere of Virginian drawing-rooms, of which Saidie read and dreamed, but which had never surrounded her alert little Boston spirit.

"May—I—pay—my—respects?" jerked the voice of Benjamin B. from the doorway.

He too was a welcome guest in that house, and had waved the butler aside. They were all in one of the smaller drawing-rooms, for the Gravistocks believed in comfort as well as beauty. It was a beautiful room, full of jade and ivory ornaments on inlaid tables which would have driven a collector into ecstasies of longing; shadowed by deep red curtains, which hid the cold, damp

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streets from view and drove inward the warmth from the glowing log fire. He thought, as he entered, how lovely Desdemona's face was looking, for it was directly lit up by the leaping flames, turning her hair beneath her small hat to burnished gold, the shadows of her mouth to velvet. He sat down, a little surprised that his wife didn't as usual greet him with some rather biting sally.

"Where's Puddin'-Fat?" he asked, for he rarely met her out without the dog.

"Pelman said he'd take him for a walk," she lied without hesitation; "but of course he'll forget," she added.

"Have you still got the Pelman who forgets?" asked Desdemona, amused.

"My gracious, yes. I've given him notice a thousand times, but he always forgets to go."

"My dear," said Lord Gravistock to his wife, suddenly, "you haven't said anything lately."

"I believe he'll say that to my corpse, an hour or so after I'm dead," she thought, whimsically.

"I was wondering again about those old days in Nice," she answered. "Desdemona, my child, when do you go to your beautiful Villa again?" turning to the girl, who was toying with the tassel of the sofa cushion, rather lost in thought. She started a little.

"Directly after Christmas," she said. "Mother's sent some of the French servants in already."

"How you are longing, I know, for the colour and the warmth! And for—— That reminds

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me, I haven't heard anything lately of our young friend Michael."

The girl blushed royally. The very name quickened her heart-beats a trifle.

"I mean, I haven't heard anything from you, dear. Of course, one hardly opens a paper without seeing his name in the Art columns. He is 'arriving' very fast, that delightful boy."

Again the tell-tale colour.

"Yes, isn't it topping!" she cried eagerly. "He just wins every prize now in the small Exhibitions, and he's been invited to compete for the next Paris Salon, and also in Rome."

"Strange gift—to handle so mean a thing as clay and turn it into things so beautiful that perhaps they are immortal. I never thought of it," the old lady went on, enchanted with a new idea—"is it that he is creating from humanity—for we are but clay—remoulding and giving out over and over again——" She stopped, confused by her own gropings, and picked up her crochet once more.

"It's just eight years ago to-night since Grandfather died at Nice," said Desdemona. "Mother happened to see the date in an old diary."

"Exactly how she *would* recall her father's death!" thought Benjamin B., who had been listening to the conversation, and who cherished a great dislike and admiration for Mrs. Brenderwood.

"Ah, is it indeed! Then that is why we have

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been thinking so much about him. How odd that his spirit should influence us all across the years!" Lady Gravistock said.

"Why, yes! Isn't it just *queer*? Do you know, I ran across Ottershaw in the Men's Department at Harrod's this morning. He looks a lot older—rather like a wrinkled grape. All purple and black and withered," said Saidie.

"His employer is dead. He wants to go to Nice to be Ruffles' man-servant," said Desdemona. "Ruffles is *so* untidy, he says when he can't *find* his clothes he just goes out and buys new ones."

"Ottershaw will soon alter all that. A first-class valet. I had him for six weeks after your grandfather's death, Demon, you know, whilst my fellow was ill. He was very happy with Sir Edward."

"Yes. I think Grandad must have been a very lovable old man," the girl answered a little sadly, for she often thought of the fleeting glimpse she had had of Sir Edward, and remembered a good many things he had said to her.

And so, after these eight years, five of the people who had known the distinguished old traveller met together in this London drawing-room on the anniversary of his—death. And remembered him.

And away down in Surrey, where his old sister gave him temporary shelter, Ottershaw the valet sat late in his bedroom, thinking and wondering—

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and fingering the tube which contained, not eleven, but nine Green Tabloids.

“I wish to God I’d spoken,” he cried in the depth of his soul.

Chapter VII

The Green Tabloids

IT always amused Desdemona immensely to stay with the Sax-Pelhams. They were so utterly different from the people she ordinarily met in her social life.

Muriel Sax-Pelham was the only girl she had really made a friend of in her school days. They had been together for two or three years at Marsh-in-the-Cliff, the English school which Olivia selected, on the advice of people who were willing to take the trouble of thinking about Desdemona off her hands. She didn’t care in the least what kind of an education her child would get there, but was willing to take their word for it. And the school was one of the best of the modern type. Of course for the usual reason—the personality of the Head Mistress. That lady had rejoiced greatly and secretly over Desdemona Brenderwood, for she was too observant and clever a student of feminine nature not to recognise the best when she found it in her path. Quite unconsciously the girl had passed unscathed through her trial years and had left her mark on her generation. She thirsted for knowledge, not of sex and

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all which appertained to it, but of nature and its marvels. She only took the propagation of the species in her stride, so to speak. The wonders of the heavens, the drama of history, science and evolution, all called to her in their turn, loudly, insistently, and she culled a little knowledge from each one of them, without the least desire to wear large spectacles and specialise. She had splendid, wholesome health, and was consequently first-rate at tennis and hockey. Yet not universally popular, for rare souls seldom attract the general community. She was great fun, always happy, but—girls who were of the scavenger type knew that there were certain pastures in which Desdemona never wandered. And they resented it, of course.

She was always happy, as we have said, but perhaps that was not quite the case, for sometimes outward happenings depressed or startled her so greatly that Mrs. Marchison felt almost anxious. Once, one of the girls had to be dismissed from the school, for it was proved beyond the possibility of doubt that she had stolen some money, and had been in the habit of doing so for a long time. Desdemona had taken the affair terribly to heart, though she had no personal friendship with the offender. It was at the end of her time at this school, when she was one of the head girls, so she ventured to plead for the culprit.

“Oh, Madame!” (the Head was always so addressed) “think of it—to be turned out *branded*. With all the years stretching in front of her. She’s only just seventeen. She may have

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to live till she's ninety, or something awful like that."

Mrs. Marchison smiled sadly.

"The world has a very short memory, Desdemona. And besides, Julia will not shout from the housetops."

"But she *will*. That's just it. She's reckless *now*. She'll tell everybody, because she's that type. It will be just like the leprous people who had to ring a bell and call, 'Unclean! Unclean!' All her life."

Mrs. Marchison sighed—not only because of the girl she felt absolutely certain she was doing right to dismiss, but also because of this young, sensitive spirit at her feet, desperately unhappy about someone she didn't really know. What if tragedy should ever touch Desdemona? Heaven help her if it did.

"Child, you don't quite understand. There are other reasons. Julia Farron must not remain here, because she has a *poisonous* mind. She would poison others."

Desdemona got up from the floor where she had been crouching.

"The leper!" she whispered, and her hyacinth eyes dilated with horror and pity. She knew the Head would say no more, because she was satisfied that she was doing right. But for several days, after Julia Farron had left, Desdemona went about with dark circles under her eyes and a look of undefined distress in her small face. The other girls were thrilled to the soul by such a spicy

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event as had occurred, and chattered about it secretly and in corners with immense appreciation. But nobody mentioned it to Desdemona Brenderwood, except her friend Muriel.

“Soldiers in battle can’t stop to fret about their pals who fall. If they did, they wouldn’t be any use themselves,” she said, abruptly, her round soft cheeks mantling with shyness. But Desdemona heard and thought. Muriel was right. Carry on! She supposed that must be everybody’s watchword, whatever happens in life. So she rushed to the swimming-bath and dived and swam till her white skin glowed and health of mind and body returned.

The Sax-Pelhams were Michael Ruffini’s people. Mr. Sax-Pelham was his uncle, whose sister had married a youngish man of Italian extraction and had died at Michael’s birth. There was one other child of the marriage, Michael’s sister, Margaretta, who was a cripple owing to hip disease. She managed the establishment for her uncle, who had never managed anything at all except the Wargrave hounds, but did that superlatively well.

They were Irish really, though they had lived at Wargrave all their lives. It was a great, rambling house of patchwork periods, unpainted and only just repaired enough to prevent it falling to the ground. For, to quote the words of the slipshod generation of the day, the Sax-Pelhams “hadn’t a bob.” Every halfpenny which could be spared from the simple housekeeping went on

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the hounds. There had always been a pack of hounds at Wargrave, and the M.F.H. was nearly always a Sax-Pelham. Nobody questioned the matter. The spare cash must be spent on the pack. But there really wasn't any spare cash. Margaretta had brought housekeeping to a fine art, and nobody knew how or why there always *was* just enough to satisfy everybody's healthy appetite. Not that Margaretta ever felt very hungry, poor little soul. She was hardly ever free from pain in her hip, and she often thought she lived twice the length of time other people did, because she always seemed to be awake when others slept. But she was a brave little soul, with the spirit of a race of soldiers and sportsmen in the maternal current of her veins. There was a strong family likeness between her and Michael. She had the same red-gold hair, only ill health robbed it of the lustre and strength it should have had. Her mouth, like his, was large and sweet, and only the deep shadows under her grey Irish eyes betrayed the physical struggle which so frequently had her in its grip. Only an indomitable will enabled her to carry on her busy, active life.

For the rest, the house was like a hotel. There were always people stopping at Wargrave. With and without horses. With and without valets and maids. Nobody cared two straws about their style and title, provided they took things as they found them and enjoyed themselves. Everybody consequently did enjoy him or her self.

Muriel Sax-Pelham was a cousin of the house

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of Wargrave, left an orphan on the threshold of life, with only enough money on which to dress herself. Her education, however, had been provided for, and she had gone on from Marsh-in-the-Cliff to Paris, with Desdemona—to “finish.”

“Finished, without any chance to begin,” she would say. For who would look at a penniless maid with green eyes like a gooseberry and a great ugly scar on one side of her neck, where they had thought fit to operate on a gland in the dim days of babyhood?

“You mean marriage?” Margaretta would say on these occasions. “But is that essential?”

“For me, yes,” answered Muriel, candidly. “For any chance of happiness. But nobody’s going to marry a tree that looks as if it had been struck by lightning.”

“You’ve got a dear, soft little face, as round as an orange,” Margaretta murmured, rubbing her neat head against the girl’s cheek. “And, do you know, I’m not sure that long scar doesn’t suit you.”

“It’s just like a pen that’s rolled across a letter you’ve taken great pains to write,” grumbled the girl, passing her fingers over the offending blue line. “But of course nobody could be like Desdemona. *She’s* just——”

“Now, Muriel, if you say ‘a peach’ again, I’ll murder you. Idiotic, silly, suburban phraseology,” said Margaretta, tying on her cooking apron. It was the morning of the day when they expected Desdemona for a few days before she

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left England with her mother for the rest of the winter.

She had written to say she would arrive by the 7.8. For some unknown reason, or no reason at all, the Railway Company had issued another time-table, and informed the small world that there would in future be two evening trains from town—at 7.8 and 8.7. When the girl got out of her train, she wasn't the very least surprised to find no carriage or car to meet her.

“Of course, they've ordered it from the garage—to meet the 8.7,” she thought. Fortunately there was a cab—an ark-like affair which followed a horse very slowly. So it was nearly a quarter to eight before the welcome lights of Wargrave picked them out as they crawled up the drive. Desdemona had been duly fitted with a French maid as soon as her school days were over, but she would never have dreamed of bringing her to happy-go-lucky Wargrave. She always hunted now with the Wargrave hounds, and kept her small mare at the old George Inn, in the care of a groom recommended by the M.F.H. She was a fine though necessarily inexperienced horse-woman, and had all the real love of the speed, the chase and the danger, without which hunting is as dry as a handful of dust. She had only just left school, and this was the first season she had hunted “properly,” as she said. There were already plenty of men, well-established members of the hunt, who asked nothing better than to give her a lead, and who enormously admired her cool

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daring, to say nothing of her lovely face. Not waiting to ring, Desdemona opened the hall door and entered. She at once became conscious of a stentorian voice shouting from somewhere upstairs :

“ If you’re not out of that damned bath in five minutes, young Alexander Drake, I’ll break open the door and stuff you down the overflow.”

“ Go to blazes, you blighter,” came the answer in muffled tones.

“ Undo the door.”

“ You know the lock’s broken, so I never locked it.”

There was a sudden assault upon the door evidently. Thenext minute an enormous sponge, heavy with water, flew down the stairs and rolled past Desdemona’s feet.

A baize-covered door opened and Margareta edged her way round it with her crutch. She dropped it promptly.

“ Desdemona, *darlint* ! ” she cried, holding out both hands. She became very Irish when she was pleased about anything.

“ Dear person,” said the girl, after exchanging a long, affectionate kiss with her. “ It was so sweet of you to send *all* the cars to meet me. I felt like a funeral, with the doctors’ carriages following.”

Margareta’s little face looked puzzled. Then through the open door she caught sight of the well-known features of the village cab-driver, and light broke in upon her.

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"The 8.7," she exclaimed.

"The 7.8," said Desdemona.

"Dear thing, it's all my fault. But I haven't a second. I'm just straining the soup. Do find your own room—the Blue Room, with the little blue sitting-room opening out——"

"The first time I've ever been in the blues!" laughed Desdemona. But Margaretta had hurried off to the kitchen as fast as her single crutch would allow her, and it was left to young Alexander Drake to appreciate the witticism and its maker. He had bounded half-way down the broad, shallow staircase to retrieve his sponge, clad only in his orange dressing-gown. He stopped short at sight of the small, well-tailored little figure at the foot of the stairs.

"Do you want your sponge?" asked Desdemona, no wit disconcerted. "Thanks so much for the cool reception." Laughing, she pushed an armchair aside and picked up the wet, sodden mass.

"I'm devilish sorry—upon m'soul I am. I never dreamed I'd miss."

In his agitation he clutched the wet sponge to his chest and set free a perfect deluge of icy water. A miniature cataract descended the stairs.

"Would you mind showing me the way to the Blue Room?" said Desdemona sweetly. She liked the look of this wet and very young man who stared at her so fixedly.

"By Jove, yes. Excuse my get-up, won't you? Dinner's at 8.30."

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“Or thereabouts,” laughed the girl, and Alexander Drake thought of little silver bells because of her laughter.

Feeling at an absurd disadvantage, he piloted her to the door of the Blue Room.

“This must be the young Drake Michael talks about, and says is such a duck,” Desdemona thought, as she thanked him in her bright, friendly way.

George the cabman appeared with commendable promptitude, carrying her neat cabin trunk. A fine rain had begun to fall outside, and he glistened in the candlelight.

“Have they had a good day, George?” she asked, as she tipped him.

“Good to middlin’, miss. Killed in the Marsh Wood, I’m told. Thank’y, miss. Glad to see you ’ere again.” And the sound of his retreating footsteps on the uncarpeted boards of the landing and stairs brought several heads out of their respective doors. Everybody knew each other’s business at Wargrave.

A splendid log fire glowed in the wide stone fireplace, and lighted up the large room cheerily. There were no legends or spectres connected with Wargrave, ancient though it was. Michael always said this fact ought to be suppressed, as it wasn’t respectable.

“It’s putting the place to open shame,” he had said to Desdemona, in one of his letters. “I wish you’d give the thing a start. Can’t you come down one morning (heaps of powder on

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your cheeks—the kind that's really white, not that stuff called 'Rachel') and say you wouldn't spend another night under that roof 'were it ever so'?"

It was of this that Desdemona stood thinking, about half an hour later. She smiled to herself. Dear Ruffles! Had he only been here also! But she knew he was hundreds of miles away in sunny Nice, happy amongst his clays and his marbles, moulding and modelling. She stood before the fire, looking into the heart of the flames, and her mouth grew wistful and tender. She had put on a gown of pale almond green, with no sleeves and just an exquisitely worked spray of apple blossom around the hem. It suited her small bronze head to perfection, making one think somehow of an English orchard in spring, with a rose-red wall.

Suddenly, with a start, she looked at the watch on her wrist.

"Half-past eight. But there's old Sax-Pelham kicking something about as usual, so there's no hurry."

Through the door a voice of thunder was booming.

"Damn it all, you're not stopping in a hotel, girl. Putting your boots outside your door! The next time——" Here an extraordinary sound of successive bumps and bangs was heard, continuing right through the door into the servants' wing, and so diminishing in sound.

"Right-oh, most illustrious M.F.H. I meant to carry them down, to make sure they went, that's all," answered the cool tones of Muriel.

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“Are there no servants, miss? No boots-and-knives boy?”

Here Margareta's soft voice intervened.

“All the butlers, the Household Brigade of footmen, the serving-maids and turnspits are ballooning to-night, darling, and can't attend to things.”

Desdemona opened her door, then hastily closed it again. Her host was only just getting into his dress trousers, outside his own room. She didn't quite know in what costume he had kicked Muriel's boots along the landing. All the Sax-Pelhams dressed on the landing. Nobody thought anything of it. If they knew you very well, they finished in front of your glass in your bedroom. Because all the doors were, as a rule, left open, and everybody talked and walked about. That was why Margareta never could get them to be punctual. There were so many interruptions, because her two younger brothers argued so terribly about things, and there were usually boy and girl cousins stopping in the house who wanted to see your gowns and hats, or else to know where you got your topping revolver or sandwich case, according to your age and sex.

With a soft laugh Desdemona also did the unexpected, for she dropped on her knees before the glowing fire and drew her rosary from her bag. For a few minutes she said her prayers there, on the hearthrug, her eyes closed, perfectly unconscious of the picture she made, with the crimson flames throwing their dancing reflec-

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tions up and down her gown and crowning her small head with a coronet of fire. It was absolutely natural to her to pray at odd moments such as these. She had all the absence of self-consciousness of the Latin Church, to which she had been devoted as a child. Indeed her child-like acceptance of the Catholic Faith had caused Father le Touche some misgivings. For he had a certain amount of modernism about him, and had never been able to idealise a blind acceptance of facts which science had discredited. He would have preferred that Desdemona had sometimes said, "I don't believe that," or "I don't see how that can be." It would have given him a chance to show her the path of legitimate criticism, to put her on her guard against doubts and problems which he knew must inevitably crop up, and which he firmly believed his Church could finally remove and resolve. But up to the time when his health broke down and he resigned his work in Nice, she had never questioned nor doubted. She turned to "Our Lady" as a flower turns to the sun, and the Gospel story was to her an absolutely literal succession of events, accepted as was the daily rising of the sun and the going down thereof.

Her faith had proved no difficulty when she entered upon her school life. Marsh-in-the-Cliff was run upon up-to-date lines, and all forms of belief were tolerated and provided for. There were several Christian Scientists, four Roman Catholics and a fair number of vague, unanchored

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girls who called themselves Theosophists at the request of their parents. Mrs. Marchison had prided herself upon her toleration, and it was a rule most strictly enforced that none of the girls might criticise their schoolfellows' religious faith. Of course the toleration was forced, artificial. But after all it *was* toleration, and perhaps the habit was formed for a lifetime. At all events, some of the parents would have been tremendously disquieted had they known that Desdemona's "Scarlet Lady" faith was secretly much admired and coveted amongst certain of the girls who were entered as Protestants—very firmly entered. For they were quick to recognise that, true or false, she was intensely sincere and childlike in her acceptance of what she had been taught were the eternal verities—and, after all, the world still doffs its hat to sincerity of aim and purpose. Father le Touche knew full well that life would bring the inevitable "Why?" and so all he found himself able to do was to prepare the way and to guide Desdemona's feet into the way of peace. He had grown very attached to his beautiful young penitent, and felt having to give up his spiritual care of her as not one of the least of his griefs at leaving the work in which he had offered up his health and lost his youth.

It was nine o'clock when Desdemona finally entered the long, low room which the Sax-Pelhams called the Parlour. There were about half a dozen people assembled before the fireplace. The old M.F.H., choleric and red in

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the face. Margaretta, white and tired, after devoting exactly five minutes to slipping into her velvet dinner-gown and half an hour to straining the soup and frying the fish. Alexander Drake, clean and spruce, "frightfully keen" to see Desdemona again. The two younger Ruffinis—who were known generally as the Ruffians. Muriel Sax-Pelham—and two other women, both middle-aged, who hunted foxes as well as hospitality where they could do it for nothing.

There was the aforesaid soup for dinner, fried soles, cutlets and a real Stilton cheese—"not yet entered for the Marathon Races," one of the Ruffinis remarked, after prolonged scrutiny. His brother had never taken his eyes off Desdemona, and recked nothing of food or drink.

"Damned nuisance this fellow turning up so late," grumbled the M.F.H. as they sat down.

Margaretta looked up.

"Camille Derussy. He comes by the ten train," he added.

Chapter VIII

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IT was characteristic of Mr. Sax-Pelham that he had not mentioned to his niece the fact of another guest's impending arrival. He was, as far as she was concerned, entirely without any consideration. There are an enormous number of men like him. They take the ministrations

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of their women-kind absolutely for granted. It is the outcome of either of two things—egotism or stupidity. There wasn't the least doubt, in the case of Mr. Sax-Pelham, to which characteristic Margaretta owed many a weary hour which could easily have been avoided. He was supremely selfish. He meant to be an absolute autocrat both in the hunting-field and in his own house. A good many members of the Wargrave Hunt said that the firm will of the M.F.H. was what made it the famous pack it was. Be that as it may at the covert side, it wasn't a success in the domestic circle because it didn't come off. Mr. Sax-Pelham was continually at war with those of his own household, because they—to use a homely phrase—“stood up to him.” Had his niece, his nephews and his cousin been of plastic mould, he would no doubt have ruled as successfully in his own house as he did at the Kennels. But when he shouted unreasonable or impossible orders about the place, the quartette merely said they were damned if they would. *Then* there were wigs on the green. The two younger Ruffinis were not always there, for they worked respectively at the Foreign Office and the Bank of England. They only came down to Wargrave to hunt. So Margaretta and Muriel were the domestic targets.

“Why didn't you tell me, Uncle?” asked his niece, realising that every mouthful she ate was so much time lost now in preparing another room for this late guest. And she was dog-tired.

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"Tell you? tell you? Well, I *have* told you," he roared, his soup spoon at his lips. He was a red-faced, good-looking old man, with a short beard which matched his rubicund cheeks.

"How's his room to be ready for him now, sir?" asked James Ruffini, who loved thwarting his plethoric uncle.

"Room? Room? How do *I* know? What are the servants for? What do I pay 'em for?" the old man asked. Then he swung round in his chair and faced the stout, inexperienced parlourmaid.

"You understand, eh, Phipps? Get a room ready for Mr. Derussy."

That was where his stupidity came in, as well as his selfishness, for Phipps didn't prepare the bedrooms, and these scenes only complicated matters. Fortunately all the neighbourhood understood the old man, and only enjoyed the domestic scraps which invariably occurred at Wargrave. But Desdemona had seen the pain-weariness on Margaretta's thin face, and, moreover, was annoyed to hear that Camille was coming. Frankly she hated this old-time play-mate, and always had done. She leaned across the table and said to Margaretta:

"I'll lend a hand, Margot. We'll do it in the twinkling of an eye." And her gay smile seemed to dissipate the crippled girl's weariness.

"Surely Camille Derussy doesn't hunt?" she continued, addressing the party generally.

"Not he. He's coming about the electric

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light," volunteered Mr. Sax-Pelham, who, now that the question of the guest chamber had been settled as he believed by his orders, was willing to expand.

Fifty years ago, a man who came "about the electric light" would have been received, if a head official, in the smoking-room, perhaps, and regaled with a glass of wine and sandwiches. He would merely have bowed as he passed any member of the house-party. But nowadays we've changed all that. Our intimate friends and relations are in business and trade. The final decision about our scheme of decoration is made by Uncle Jim, now a partner in the firm of Daring and Daring Bros., and it is more than probable that the spirit of clanship will make us give Aunt Jobisca the order for the cushions and curtains. Of course the head of our family, the man with the title, will motor down about the drains. So nobody was the least surprised to hear that the new guest was coming on business. What *did* occasion a mild wonder was that Wargrave had no electric light. But there, again, it was exactly like old Sax-Pelham to withhold information about a fresh scheme.

"Electric light?" asked everybody at once.

"Yes, yes. Can't stand this tumblin' over m'feet any longer. I can't see the whisky at the bottom of the glass in the dinin'-room when I come in from huntin'—confounded dark days we have now."

Always himself. He had never, all these

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years, wondered if Margaretta could see as she limped about the cold passages on the long winter days. He'd always had the best lamps in his smoking-room and bedroom, and if one went wrong occasionally he wanted to know if anybody could tell him *why* no woman could be trusted to trim a lamp?

"I trimmed it as carefully as usual this morning, Uncle George, but you've turned it up too high and now it's stuck."

"Well, dash it all, you aren't goin' to sit there with the blacks all fallin' about, are you?"

"No, I'm going to sit in the drawing-room." And he would be left to ring the bell for the wrong person to remove and readjust the lamp. Nothing would ever make the Sax-Pelhams meek.

The rest of the dinner went off fairly well, for the conversation was entirely about the day's sport. It seemed there would be no meet the next day, however, which accounted for an increase of cholera on the part of the M.F.H. One of the prominent members of the Hunt had died suddenly three days before, and to-morrow was the funeral.

"Poor old Swinnerton!" said John Ruffini, who had only arrived from abroad that day, and hadn't heard the news. "Sudden idea, wasn't it?"

"Only *got* the idea at ten o'clock on Wednesday morning, and carried it out in three seconds," said his brother.

"Heart, I suppose."

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There was a pause. Then Mrs. Ellwood said, hesitatingly:

“In one sense, yes. He shot himself.”

“Because——?”

Mr. Sax-Pelham struck in clearly:

“His mistress—Madge Rusherton, y’know—went off with Lord Dannerly.”

There was silence. Desdemona felt the blood mantling her cheeks. This was the way people talked now about things—over the coffee, out aloud. It wasn’t decent. And she knew Mr. Sax-Pelham knew that she felt like that, and was staring at her.

She liked the two women who were dining there, however, and talked as much as she could to them.

After dinner, just for a few minutes, she listened entranced to Alec Drake, as he played the banjo. This was in the days when musical matters were simple, and people had not yet become accustomed to pianolas and strange forms of boxed-up music. Very few men could play the banjo like this correct, pink-faced young man. He perched on the edge of the dark old gate table in the middle of the hall, one leg crossed over the other, and literally shook out negro melodies—so rapidly that it all seemed like a sweet, pathetic appeal from the mammies and the piccaninnies of the old slave days, without any suggestion of the instrument or the player. Softly crooning the old songs of the plantations, or swaying to the intoxicating “clack” of the

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nigger dances, young Drake conjured up the thin, silvery notes of the cotton-fields "out West," till they penetrated right up into the rafters and re-echoed in the distant kitchen. It was absolutely the only thing for which the player was distinguished, and his wealth and property were forgotten by his acquaintances because he played the banjo so astoundingly well. Truly the world has a strange method of classification. And yet Desdemona fancied she could understand it, for she felt curiously exhilarated by the odd little performance, and reluctant to leave the small group of listeners. Old Mr. Sax-Pelham soon went to sleep in his armchair by the fire, and looked a most unpleasing sight, she thought. "Like a burst tomato," with his red beard, rubicund jowl and old pink dress-coat.

"Poor little Margaretta! what an old tyrant he is!" whispered Mrs. Le Grand, the elder of the two women who were her fellow-guests. She would have been very glad, nevertheless, to have risked that tyrannical sway, had she been asked to be the second Mrs. Sax-Pelham, in the days gone by. For she was one of those people who have to refuse most of the little gaieties of life because she had not the clothes which an inexorable law demands. The M.F.H. did not ask her to Wargrave out of pity, however, for he, to do him justice, did not care two straws whether his guests were rich or poor, but because he had horses from time to time which needed the special kind of breaking in to be given only by an accom-

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plished horsewoman. In fact, like "Niggy Drake," she was distinguished for one thing only. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Le Grand had qualities which far transcended her skill at schooling an unruly filly or controlling a horse with a temper. But it needed the Desdemonas of this world to find them out. She liked the rugged, weather-beaten face with its frame of short, white hair, and the masculine dinner-gown. Mrs. Le Grand was glad of the hospitality of Wargrave, for she had long outgrown everything which pretends or varnishes. She was quite simply glad of help.

Mrs. Ellerton was quite different, for she was tiny and feminine. The old Squire asked her to Wargrave for quite another reason, and that was that she had reduced the art of flattery to a science. He was subconsciously aware that his world did not always find him attractive, and it produced a feeling of irritation in his inmost soul at times. That was where Mrs. Ellerton came in, for she massaged his soul. She contrived, after he had given some unreasonable order, or delivered himself of some offensive ultimatum, to make him feel that he had been justified in what he had said or done. That was because she was as clever as Mrs. Le Grand was stupid. She could read the old man's mind like a book, and she would not have married him for untold wealth. But she dearly loved luxury and good horses to ride. Her little busy hands were like steel cased in velvet when she was nearing a

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difficult fence—and her soul was exactly the same. She hated Mrs. Le Grand as a cat hates a dog. Probably because she could not endure that her poverty and makeshifts should be known, for she was of the adventuress type and disliked honesty when she met it. Yet she amused Desdemona because of her very transparent hypocrisy, if one may employ a contradiction in terms.

“Well, I must go,” she sighed, conscious of Margaretta’s pale face and tapping crutch. So she whistled an accompaniment gaily and softly to the tune of “Honey, cairn’t ye talk some?” as she skimmed up the stairs.

Margaretta was getting out fresh, lavender-sweet sheets from the dim, dark recesses of the great oak linen-press on the landing. Her crutch lay across two chairs beside her. Desdemona picked it up and flourished it round her head, for she was as strong as a young giant.

“‘Honey, cairn’t ye talk some?’” she crooned, darting the point at Margaretta’s nose—the little tip-tilted nose which was her one beauty. The distant silvery twang of the banjo floated vaguely upwards.

“Spare the only gift the gods bestowed upon me, Mona darlint,” laughed the little cripple.

Desdemona seized the sheets and towels, placing the crutch under Margaretta’s arm.

“You don’t really think that, Gretta, do you?” she asked, marching off to the selected guest-

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room, her round, bare arms piled with the snowy linen.

Margaretta limped behind her, like a small crow, in her short, black satin dinner-gown, her hip protruding from its straight lines.

"What else?" she said, with a laugh, as Desdemona tumbled her load down on the bed, lumpy under its reversed coverings.

"I'd give all I possess to have your *patience*, Gretta," answered the girl rather gravely. "I should brain that old uncle of yours every day if *I* had to live with him."

Margaretta laughed again. "No, you wouldn't, because, to begin with, he hasn't any brains, so you'd only beat the air. And to conclude, he's rather a dear really. You know—no, of course you *don't* know—he's got an incurable disease, and suffers *agonies* sometimes."

Desdemona stared at her, and her emotional face grew a little pale and intense.

"Oh, Gretta! I didn't know. I've said such horrid things about him. And they're nothing to the things I've thought."

"Oh, I'm not denying he's an awful old beast," said Margaretta candidly. "But somehow—it's the pluck of it. Going on being M.F.H. and all that. He knows he may fall dead at any minute."

Desdemona sat down on the edge of the unmade bed. Things like this appealed to her enormously. She *felt* them so keenly, just as she felt great joy.

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“Never, never again!” she said, gazing at the floor, reviewing the facts.

“‘Quoth the Raven’—*what*, never again?” asked Margaretta, who thought she had never seen so perfect a picture as Desdemona made, sitting in her small apple-green gown, her bronze head downbent, and the flames from the newly-lighted fire caressing her grave, troubled face.

“Never another horrid thought about him being like a burst tomato, and things like that,” she said. “Gretta, what *beasts* we are without meaning to be.”

“‘*Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner!*’ And now, please, miss, this bed must be made. Dolly’s got to wash up with Gandy, so she can’t help.”

A few intelligent minutes sufficed to get the guest-chamber into order, even to the arranging of a few small chrysanthemums in a vase. It was Margaretta who fished them out of one of the large vases in the drawing-room.

“No, I decline to offer sacrifices to Camille Derussy,” said Desdemona, firmly.

“How about being beasts when we don’t *know*?” Margaretta said softly. Desdemona turned upon her like a young deer at bay.

“If there’s one thing I *do* know, it’s that Camille’s a beast,” she said. “The very thought of his being electric lighted——”

They were standing for a moment by the great window of the bedroom they had just arranged. Margaretta had not yet drawn the curtains, which

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were long and heavy. The window was leaded in little diamonds, and was beautifully curved outwards. The moonlight was pouring into the fire-lit room, and the figures of the two girls stood out in black relief, their arms intertwined. Margaretta had her crutch under her left arm. The garden lay below them, stretching out to the distant woods, white and silvered like a coin fresh from the Mint.

“ I *must* breathe this crystal air,” said Desdemona, and she struggled with the ancient window fastening. “ An old gipsy told me once I should never know sorrow if I always filled my lungs with moonstruck air.”

“ And my doctor told me I’m bound to get pneumonia if I do, so I’ll hie me to the linen-press to lock up several things. It won’t take me five minutes, so if you really want to soak it in, ta-ta ! ”

Desdemona listened to the tap of her small crutch. The pure night air blew in for a moment and stirred the tiny curls around her ears. Heedless of its caresses, she gazed on the beauty of the scene which stretched before her, lost in thought. Just below lay the flower-beds, dry and stark in the night frost, flung like the pattern from a witch’s loom on the green turf. Then came the old yew hedge, which had sheltered many a knight and dame in the time of bluff King Hal. What a black, sharp shadow it cast upon the broad walk this side of it—black as ebony! Over the hedge she could see the two

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tennis courts, one hard, of asphalt. It had a hole just on one side of the net which nobody seemed disposed to fill in. She could see it now, like a blot of ink on a fair white cloth. Then came the glass-houses—almost empty, alas! Beyond and beyond, outbuildings, stables for many horses. And then the distant woods and coverts. A very goodly heritage, poverty or no poverty, she thought. A sudden sense of the deep meaning of tradition and past history forced itself upon her. The air seemed to quiver with the breath of past and gone Sax-Pelhams. The footpaths surely echoed to their resolute footsteps. She could see none of them, but she sensed them all about her, with their firm faces and stern mouths. For they had ever been a race which mattered. Sportsmen, all of them, but sometimes much more. Fine soldiers, efficient naval commanders, legislators. And the women? Always, well, perhaps nearly always, chaste and beautiful. To think it had all come down to old Sax-Pelham, the M.F.H.! Here Desdemona mentally shook herself.

“It’s all the great Past which makes him carry on, as Gretta says he does. It’s all these strong lives which have lived themselves out here which have given him *pluck*. Of course it is.” Then she stretched out her small white hands in the moonlight, and said softly and aloud, “Oh, how I should like to have a baby in this house!”

There was a dry little cough behind her—a

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cough she knew well. She turned swiftly from the window, her cheeks aflame. Camille Derussy stood there, grinning. She knew in an instant that he would pigeon-hole her remark for future reference, without giving a thought to its context and probable meaning. For what Desdemona really meant, right down in the depths of her mind and soul and body, was, that she would have liked to be Michael Ruffini's wife, to carry on the race, here where it was cradled. But of course Camille Derussy couldn't be expected to know that, and young ladies, even in this century, don't go about in country houses saying they would like to have babies there.

"What an unexpected pleasure! To find little Demon here! I could hardly believe it when old S. P. told me. But although the honour is overwhelming—*why* am I being received in my bedroom—*hein?* *Charming*——"

"How do you do, Camille? Don't be a fool. I've been helping to get your room ready, and—and—what the *devil* do you come here for?" she asked, tears of rage in her beautiful hyacinth eyes. She tried to brush past him, but he took hold of her soft, white arm and drew her forcibly close to his face. The Latin face she so hated, with its pointed little beard and white teeth, always grinning.

"Kiss me, little Demon. You must. You *shall*. You struck me once in Nice——" He was immeasurably stronger than she, though she was no weakling. The struggle was brief,

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and the victory to the strong. He kissed her, hotly, madly, full on the mouth.

"So you want a baby, little Demon, do you?" he whispered in her ear, gripping her tight. "Well—*nous verrons*."

"Oh, God—kill him! kill him!" she sobbed, as she broke away from his arms and rushed out of the room. Right into the arms of the M.F.H.

"God bless m'soul, child," he cried, "kill what?"

"That—that—thing. In there," she panted.

Camille Derussy strolled out, cool and controlled.

"Miss Desdemona was frightened by a rat. She was kindly putting flowers in my room just as I came in."

"A rat, eh?" stuttered the somewhat bewildered old man. "You—you, child, frightened of a rat? Why, you fear *nothing*, eh?"

"There are—rats—and rats," she answered, making a mighty effort to regain her self-control. Then she laughed somewhat loudly, and Camille Derussy bit his lip, for he knew to whom she likened the rat.

"Queer creatures, women, when there's vermin about," said the M.F.H. "Comfortable and all right, eh, Derussy?" He looked in to the fire-lit room.

"Rather, sir. But I quite realise the necessity for electric light."

"Perhaps, perhaps. I've committed myself to nothing as yet. May change m'mind,"

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growled Mr. Sax-Pelham. He wasn't quite sure about that rat.

He knew Desdemona Brenderwood pretty well, and he'd seen her take some fences which brought the heart into your mouth. Feared *nothing* on God's earth. She'd as soon walk up to a rat and twist its tail as look at it, by Jove! Well, he'd only really liked one fellow in his life, *worshipped* him, and that man was Fred Brenderwood, God rest his soul. No harm should come to his girl under the roof of Wargrave. This Froggy, with his awful little black moustache—well, he might know a lot about electric light, but he, Squire Sax-Pelham, knew a thing or two about rats.

“Can I come in, sir?” asked the flurried voice of Gandy, the stout parlourmaid, outside. She staggered in with Camille's suit-case, and deposited it with a thump on the floor.

Chapter IX

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A WEEK later, Michael Ruffini began to count the hours—the very minutes. First it was “In three days she will be here. She has written to say so.” Then, “The day after tomorrow.” Followed by “To-morrow,” and then the glorious Southern sun rose in all his glory upon “To-day.”

Could he believe it? After all the long toil

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and study of the winter months, the disappointments, the hopes, the successes, unshared and self-contained? Alone, without Desdemona to talk to, to look at, to think and dream of by night and by day. To-day, to-day, this very evening, he would, God grant, hold her little heart once more to his, gaze his fill into the depths of the wonderful purple-blue eyes which haunted him waking and sleeping. Desdemona, Desdemona. He could not do anything but trace her name in the white clay, up there in his big studio, amongst the models, the busts, the shapeless lumps of gleaming plaster, under green palms and great grey curtains. Over and over again he erased the letters, and tried to work at his "Hermes." Nothing worth preserving came of it. Whatever he did, his long, nervous hands seemed only capable of moulding the curves of Desdemona's lips, the twist of her merry smile, the curve of her ear, under a truant tendril of hair. He could not even do that for long together, for he felt unable to stand still. Sometimes he sat down to his modelling, but that was just as bad. He just had to walk up and down. Irritably, he swept aside an enormous linen curtain which was drawn across the skylight in the ceiling. It threw a pale, cool green light on to his work. Now, the sun poured in in molten radiance, and he could see the brilliant blue of the sky. Heavens—what heat! With one swift movement he pulled the ropes which controlled the apparatus and replaced the curtain. The light reminded

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him of some of the tanks in an Aquarium. How well he remembered the day last winter when he had gone with Desdemona to see the wonderful Museum at Monaco! How happy they had been, wandering from tank to tank, in the fish part of the building, below ground and in semi-darkness! How she had laughed at the millions of merry bubbles, just where the oxygen entered each tank, lighted by electricity! Strange fish swam about or lay motionless in the greeny-blue water, and she thought some of them so beautiful that he had found it difficult to drag her away.

“Oh, Ruffles! come and look at this blue fish! For-get-not.”

“I never said I should,” he had answered, but she was too excited to notice his words.

“The injured dignity of it! Watch the light sparkling on its coat—I mean its scales. Oh, *look*, Ruffles——”

“How about this Johnnie?” he remembered answering, and she had flown across to look at a weird, deep-sea creature, diminutive of body, but with eyes set in a curious raised square like a photograph frame. She shuddered suddenly.

“I don’t think—I like its eyes, all lighted up like little lamps. It’s staring at me—oh, Ruffles! I don’t think I want to stay here any longer. There’s something—sinister—that old Prince going down, down into the sea, raking up these monstrosities—and then just dying.”

“He was a great savant,” the French sailor who took them round had said. He had spoken

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quietly and well. They had tried to draw him out, but he had persistently headed them off. It was the same with all the attendants. The wonders were *there*, and they could look their fill at them—but no gossiping about their princely master. He had made the town of Monaco a royal gift—but they must not ask the price of it.

Up in the sunlight, all her *joie de vivre* had returned. She was so rapidly and completely responsive to each passing emotion, sad or gay. He would consecrate his life to making her happy always, seeing that no sorrow touched her. She had never, he knew, seen or encountered death, except that time when her old grandfather had died so suddenly at the "Bon Repos," and she had been quite a child then. He shuddered to think what might happen to her when she should first come up against the Dark Shadow, as of course she must one day, really to see the end, to know the grief of human severance. Or when she should learn the meaning of all the social sins which percolated through her widening world, unseen and unrealised. She was like a small pearl, cradled in the dark oyster shell. It was unthinkable that anyone but himself should ever marry her. Nobody else understood her as he did. To no living soul other than himself should be given the task of soothing her into the waking dreams of passion. In rough hands, what might not become of her joy in living, her generous gift of only half-understood impulses? She would turn aside, revolted and appalled, as

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she did from anything which was unclean or crooked. Only the sheltered, happy side of life had hitherto touched Desdemona, and Michael Ruffini, in his chivalrous, inexperienced youth, believed that he could preserve this immunity, which was a great mistake. The second mistake he made was to think that such detachment from the seamy side of life, or from personal suffering, could make for happiness to Desdemona in the long run. His own path in life had so far been one of few thorns or stumbling-blocks. Until he met her he had kept women outside his life, for he was very young and clean-souled. His wonderful sculpture had been all-sufficient for him, because from the very day when he attained to man's estate, his one ambition had become an active thing. And it certainly looked like succeeding, for he had already exhibited in Rome, Vienna and Paris, and the latter had gone rather mad over his technique and composition. But he would have told you that Desdemona was his inspiration, that every line of beauty, each thought which was ideal, came because he knew her sweet soul, derived his supple skill from her young virility. Without her, his fingers would have been dead and cold, and his brain would have been inert and chaotic.

Suddenly the door of his studio opened swiftly, and Ottershaw entered, a telegram on a salver.

Michael took it with a chill feeling of apprehension. Did it mean that Desdemona and her mother were delayed?

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“Er—what?” he stammered, not knowing that he was speaking, as he turned the blue envelope round. Why couldn’t Ottershaw open it, damn the fellow? Ridiculous! One’s servants don’t open one’s telegrams. Besides, he often had wires, about his work and no end of things that were the outcome of it. He tore it open.

“Mother stopping three days in Paris. Coming Saturday.

“Desdemona. Hôtel Meurice.”

His first feeling was one of intense relief, for at any rate the worst had not happened. Suppose it had said the plans were altered and they were not coming to Nice that winter! It wasn’t that, thank God! Yet, to wait three days!

“Any answer, sir?”

“No, no. Thanks, Ottershaw.”

The valet left the room, and Michael stood for a moment lost in thought, his hand, with its long, nervous fingers, outspread on his hip. On a great tray at his feet stood two great piles of granite and sandstone dust. On his right, on a mediæval stool which just reached his waist, a big bowl of marble contained the cloudy water into which he was continually dipping his hands. His faded blue smock hung in long, classic lines from his wide, square shoulders.

“By Jove! Of course!” he exclaimed presently, leaping to action—in other words, ringing the bell.

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Ottershaw reappeared.

"Pack me up a suit-case, please," he said. "This—er—telegram—I shall have to go to Paris by to-night's train. Back on Saturday."

"Very good, sir. You require me?"

"Good Lord, no. I never travel like a Maharajah. No, you get my things into order, will you? You'll just have the chance. I suppose I've *got* clothes to wear in Paris, *hein?*"

Ottershaw permitted himself to smile. He had found his new master's wardrobe distinctly amusing. He had only arrived himself the day before, and had merely so far discovered that there were dozens of collars and socks, hardly any shirts or underwear, and a bewildering number of lounge suits. Smocks which were old and smocks which were new, together with an amount of London shoes of the very best makers. Handkerchiefs thrown about anywhere, all stiff with plaster and clay.

"I shall have to telephone for several things, sir, chiefly connected with your evening wear," he said, in his usual measured accents.

"*Entendu!* I must catch the 6.30, *voilà tout,*" replied Michael, unfastening his overall feverishly. Then he ducked his head, the young red-gold head, and Ottershaw deftly peeled off the smock.

"And your address, sir?"

"The Hôtel Meurice. You know? Rue de Rivoli."

"Know it, sir? I should rather think I do.

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I lived in it for some months, off and on, with Mr. Gideon Sandys before I took service with——” He stopped suddenly. A shadow seemed to pass over his face.

Michael glanced at him.

“You’re not looking over fit, you know, Ottershaw,” he said.

The valet started. It would never do for Mr. Ruffini to think he’d taken on a crock for a manservant. Besides, he was really all right. It was only those night terrors—those dreams. They took the heart out of a man.

“I’m quite all right, sir. I’m a little subject to insomnia, that’s all.”

“Ah! that’s bad,” said Michael, kindly. Then, as he filled his cigarette case from a box on a side table, he turned with the sunny smile which Desdemona so loved.

“Surprising too—with your easy conscience, eh?”

Ottershaw grew a trifle paler, and coughed nervously. He too smiled. “There’s few of us ’as got that, sir, I reckon, when it comes to the point,” he said quietly.

“*When?* So you believe in a day of reckoning, do you?”

“Well, yes, I do, sir.”

Something in his level voice made Michael glance quickly at him and drop the subject.

“Looks a lot older, does our friend Ottershaw,” he thought. “Wonder if he’s got anything on his mind—once stole a handkerchief, or forgot to

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post a letter perhaps! Bless his innocent heart! I believe he'd brood over a thing for years if it had thrown him out of his groove. Very chap for me, with my scatter-brain," he mused later on as he changed his clothes. Then he forgot his valet's very existence, whistling in his dining-room as he swallowed a whisky-and-soda, according to English custom, and scribbled a few notes.

"If the mountain won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain," he told himself with a grin as he awaited his taxi.

He reached Paris in time for *déjeuner* the next morning, and then endeavoured to justify his visit by going to see an important "Exposition" of Belgian sculpture in the "Musée" opposite his hotel. There he met one or two artists whom he knew, and lost all count of time.

They talked, they gesticulated, they fondled the sculpture, grew contemptuous or enraptured in turns, and finally parted from "ce cher Michel" in a veritable orgy of sound and admiration. For this boy with the head of a sun-god was going to arrive. There was no possible doubt about it. They had seen his little statue of "Fatigue" in the last Salon, and were immensely intrigued by the fact that it had been sold to an American for £400. To them, veterans of the marble, he seemed just a joyous boy. One day he would work a great miracle—a *chef d'œuvre*, so they told him. But he only threw back his fine head and laughed loudly, showing all his strong white teeth as his Italian father

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had done. He was so Latin at one minute, so Irish at another, they said, and told him so.

“How happy could I be with either—*hein?*” he quoted, laughing, as he parted from them. Then he laughed again as he watched them—three of them—walking down the street. Short, dressed in black, with huge bows at their throats, and Homburg hats of the same sombre hue. Somehow he knew that their talent was merely mediocre compared with his own. The consciousness of power would often well up in him at odd moments, making him humble and grateful. But it was only to Desdemona that he spoke of his innermost feelings. His British breeding kept him reserved and silent towards general society, although he was sometimes frightened himself at the depth and intensity of his emotions over his sculpture. A talented, clean-souled boy, come to man’s estate with very few ideas in his head beyond the expression of his sense of beauty, wherever or however he should find it. “Lucky devil I am, to be able to offer her everything. God knows it’s little enough,” he thought, as he dressed for dinner in the rather gorgeous bedroom the management had given him. Red satin was everywhere—curtains, bedspread, cushions.

“Why the devil didn’t Ottershaw buy me red satin pyjamas?” he thought to himself at a much later hour.

Once again his pulses began to throb, his heart to quicken, as he realised that it was only

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a question of perhaps three hours before he met Desdemona again. He had ascertained that they were expected, she and "Madame" Brenderwood. He was, indeed, fairly sure that they were in the hotel now, dressing, as he was, for dinner. Paris dined very late just then, and he was desperately hungry, had he but known it. But it would never have occurred to him to eat until Desdemona came.

When he was dressed he went downstairs and sat down in a corner of the great Lounge, where he could see all and attract the minimum of attention to himself.

The orchestra, one of the best in Europe, was playing some very rapid music with a shrill cry repeated at intervals. For a time Michael sat on and watched and listened, quite unconscious of the interest he himself called out in others, merely curious as to the personalities who came and went. Many of them belonged to the social world of both London and Paris, and now and again he recognised some collector of pictures or sculpture with whom he was acquainted. At any other time he would have jumped to his feet, followed, and waited for an opportunity to make himself known, for Michael's intelligence was of far too high an order to make him an egotist. Full well he knew, artist that he was, that the more he knew, the more he could learn. Indeed he was unconscious, at this stage of his career, that he had anything to impart. He was thirsty for knowledge, for criticism. Later on, in after

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years, when he became a Master, he would teach, and even then with a certain amount of diffidence about himself. For he belonged to the type of artist who can absorb and create rather than impart. But to-night his histrionic side was in abeyance. He was conscious only of the seconds ticking away on the big Louis XIVth clock behind him. His eyes were fixed on the open doors of the Lounge, right away over there, behind the group of palms. Every time he caught sight of two ladies coming into the room his eyes grew blank and dark, so great was his emotion. But many came and went, leaving him in despair. Why, what a damned fool he was—of course they would be tired, and were dining in their rooms upstairs. He rose to his feet to go and make definite investigations, when round the screen by the entrance—she came. Slim and white and graceful. Followed by Olivia Brenderwood, rolling slightly in her *diamantée* black satin, short to her silk-clad knees. She always insisted upon Desdemona entering public rooms before her, because the possibility of treading on her heels and so confusing her entrance was always present.

“*Demon!*”

“*Ruffles!*”

They met in the centre of the Lounge, amongst the tables and groups of people, yet their voices were low and neither showed to the outside world the joy they knew.

With a word of greeting to Olivia, who was

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charmed to see him because he was so good to look at, he explained his appearance—"had to see this Belgian Exhibition, *n'est-ce pas?*" and Mrs. Brenderwood was not clever enough to put two and two together, and ask how he got to know their hotel. She never thought out a subject beyond a certain point. It suited her to be gracious to Michael Ruffini, because she was instantaneously aware that they were all three the cynosure of all eyes in the Lounge, and Olivia dearly loved that to be the case. She was, it is true, eight years older than when we last saw her, but they were years which she wore as an added grace. She was merely a little more matured, a little riper. She still smiled her honey-sweet smile, drawled in her rich contralto voice, exacted homage and service from willing admirers; whilst her art of implying self-sacrificing rectitude as the mainspring of her actions had grown still a little more subtle, and deceived the very elect at times. A very beautiful woman.

But to the two young people with her now the world had turned turtle, if something the shape of this planet can execute that feat. They were alone, amidst very loud noises drumming in their hearts and souls, confusing all issues, blotting out all material things and sights.

"What made you come? Why are you here?" she said, looking up at him so that he might see the hyacinths alight in her eyes.

"Are you glad? Tell me quickly, before we

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go into the dining-room," he answered, bending his tall frame so that he might not fail to catch her answer. But even so she found she could not speak. It was Olivia who did so.

"You'll dine with us, of course, Michael?"

"If I may!" he said eagerly.

Olivia glided with her sinuous grace past the various tables. In reality, her vain, small soul was in a state of irritation. She was not accustomed to being unsquired. But the faithful Carrouchi was at that moment lying in bed at Nice with a temperature of 103, cursing the fate which had laid him low with *la grippe* just when it would have suited him to pay a visit to Paris. He would have been able to cadge a good many free meals, and generally improve his financial status, had he been able to go about with Olivia, who always paid for everything. The Marquis had got through a good deal of money in his day. Olivia was, like many lazy, beautiful women, very simple over money matters.

Neither Desdemona nor Michael could have described their dinner that evening. It might have consisted of a succession of plates of porridge for all they knew or remembered. Mrs. Brenderwood, however, was not in love, and was extremely particular what she ate and drank. She started with caviare, wrestled with sauce-hot lobster, toyed with juicy cutlets, and finished with tiny strawberries drowned in mountains of cream. But it was dull work drinking champagne without a sympathetic soul to pledge her

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over the crystal rim, and she suddenly decided that she was not only very well fed, but bored.

“Desdemona” (she had always cultivated her musical crooning of her daughter’s name), “I’m going to leave you to drink your coffee with Michael in the Lounge. I don’t want any, and I’ve got a *migraine*. I shall go up and sit by my fire. Imagine—a fire! But I insisted—made of logs of wood. To-morrow we shall be warm again, thank God. Come up to me, will you, dear child, at 10.30, and brush my hair?”

“Of course, Mumsie—but—Lucie?”

“Oh, my dear, of course it’s always the same after we get off the Channel. She’s as sick as a cat, and I had to send her to bed.”

“Poor Lucie! Yes, of course, then, I’ll be there, Mumsie.”

Olivia rose with her usual grace, and for a brief second Michael raised her hand to his lips, as the waiters drew back the chairs. He rarely saluted Englishwomen in the foreign manner, because he fancied they dislike it, but Olivia was an exception. It exactly suited her temperament.

“What a handsome trio!” an old Irishman exclaimed to his French wife, at a table near by.

“*Madame est belle—exquise. Mais mademoiselle est beaucoup plus. Spirituelle—virginale,*” his companion replied.

“*Le jeune homme? Je le connais un peu—Michel Ruffini, celui qui—*”

“Ah, the sculptor? Is that so—that young sun-god?”

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And so on. Different comments from the tables around, covert looks of admiration and envy.

Chapter X

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BUT afterwards, in the Lounge, Michael contrived that they should be practically hidden from view. There was one corner, shrouded by very tall palms and screened by glass panels in frames, and by great good luck it was vacant as they left the dining-room.

It seemed too good to be true, that he and Desdemona should find themselves alone like this, with at least an hour of undisturbed bliss. Low down on the settee they sat in a dream of trembling propinquity, shoulder touching shoulder, knee to knee. The waiter, with a look of admiring sympathy, placed the coffee on the table before them and retreated.

"Demon, little Demon, isn't it good to be here, alone with you?" he whispered, taking her small hand in his strong clasp. "I'm just about off my head."

"Silly boy!" was all she could find to say. She loved to look at the three golden freckles just below his left eye, and she put up her free hand and touched each one with a rosy finger-tip. Michael closed his eyes.

"Go on," he whispered hoarsely. She removed her hand.

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She was dressed in some white, sparkling gown, which only just covered her breast and thighs, according to the modern dictates of fashion. Her long, shapely limbs were silk-clad in the palest pink, and ended in tiny silver shoes.

"You look like a crystallised snowdrop," he said, softly.

"You're very sentimental to-night, my celebrated young sculptor," Desdemona said. She felt unaccountably nervous, and hardly knew what was coming next. "I want to tell you some more about the Sax-Pelhams."

"Damn the Sax-Pelhams!" he said fiercely, and his arm went round her waist.

"Ruffles! Your relations?" A wave of blushes tore round her body. He had come so very close to her. His blue eyes seemed so—terribly blue. The golden freckles were very big when they almost touched you. She struggled a little.

"The coffee's going cold," she said, desperately.

"Well, I'm not," he answered, and now his strong sweet mouth was almost upon her lips—oh! she *must* get away from the pressure of the long, artist fingers which were about her left hip—he had never behaved like this before. He was dragging the very soul out of her. She must free herself—and yet, she knew that if he suddenly drew away, she would creep up to him again—shamelessly.

Suddenly, behind the palms, in the dim light,

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his hot lips were upon her mouth, crushing it, melting it away. His hand had drawn her little body right into himself, it seemed. It was a long, long kiss.

"Oh, Ruffles!" was all she could say, and her breath came in little sobs. Suddenly they became aware of the distant orchestra, heart-stirring.

"My Desdemona, my little wife!" he whispered.

"Is that what you mean?" she whispered.

"That's what I mean. And this, and this, and this."

Once again his arm was round her, caressing, drawing. His lips buried in the soft white flesh of her shoulder, her throat, her eyelids.

The world seemed to stand still.

And the coffee grew cold.

Just beyond the screen, voices were chattering in French, in Italian, in a medley of tongues. The incomparable orchestra paid out its sweet plaintive melodies.

For Michael and Desdemona, time stood still.

But exhaustion always follows upon satiety, and the dictates of civilisation came to the rescue. Some instinct made Desdemona look at the little jewelled watch on her wrist.

"I must go!" she cried, smoothing her bronze hair, which had, it must be confessed, lost a little of its lustre. "It's half-past ten."

"The devil it is!" he said, impatiently.

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Upstairs they lingered for a moment before her bedroom door. She intended to undress and then go to her mother, whose room was three doors away.

“Good-night, Ruffles,” she said, and her voice was very tired. But he raised her face with his hand and gazed at the deep happiness which lurked in the depths of her eyes. The corridor was dimly lighted and utterly deserted. The bedroom doors were all padded in thick white leather. Slowly he inserted her key and opened her door. Just beyond, as he switched on the light for her, he could see the pink and white hangings of the low, carved bed—the glitter of her dressing-table.

“Thank God I can give you all you’ve ever had,” he whispered, kissing her softly on her forehead.

“A thousand, million times more,” she whispered. “Dear, *dear* Ruffles!”

She looked so soft, so white, so desirable, standing there, with her dewy hyacinth eyes uplifted, that he caught his breath in pain. What is this strange Force which restrains a man from entering into his kingdom when the way is open? Is it Civilisation? Is it God?

At any rate, Michael found himself standing outside a close-shut door, leather-bound, staring at three brass numbers—112.

What was he going to do? It was only about eleven, and sleep was out of the question. His heart was beating still, it seemed, at a tremendous

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rate, his pulses all astray. There were many things he could do, for he had a number of friends in Paris. But they would be out, no doubt, at this hour. What about Gideon Sandys? Yes, he would go and see if old Giddy was at home.

Gideon Sandys was a somewhat mediocre artist who lived in Paris and painted there entirely. He was twice Michael's age, and twice as wealthy. Michael had made his acquaintance when he was wintering in Mentone one year after a brief breakdown in health. The two men had a common bond in their artistic aspirations, though Michael was infinitely the more gifted of the two. Of Gideon's private life he knew nothing, beyond the fact that he had an Italian mistress. To Michael's half Latin temperament this meant very little. He was so accustomed to it that he never gave it a second thought. Practically every friend he had in the world of sculpture and painting indulged in irregular connections. He had always considered that it was his British blood which held him, personally, aloof from a similar habit of life. Also, he took a great deal more exercise than the French and Italians usually do. Once a year, during the winter, he went to England and hunted with his uncle's hounds at Wargrave for a week or so. In the summer he played a great deal of tennis before breakfast, sometimes with other English people. Moreover, he took cold baths and went in for massage. So he had rather got into the habit

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of thinking himself immune from a certain side of passion, believing that when it came into his life, it would do so in the guise of something rather exalted and spiritual. Perhaps this was the only form of self-conceit known to his sweet, humble nature, and to tell the truth, he was considerably taken aback to find, after his evening with Desdemona, that he had been living in a Fools' Paradise. Until he had held her in his arms he had never dreamt that he could be so shaken by passion. Real physical desire, such as he had only heard and read of, and never experienced. Until now his skill as a sculptor had manifested itself in instinctive rendering of abstract beauty. He had experienced no wish to mould any image of physical desire, though he had created some very lovely little images of love-making such as he knew it. But to-night his conception of things seemed blurred and confused, and he was rather appalled at what he felt was, not a degradation, but a very stupid mistake on his part. Perhaps it was this swift realisation of the great insistencies of nature which turned his thoughts to his friend Gideon Sandys.

He was told by a sleepy concierge that "Monsieur Sandys" was in, and so Michael shot himself up in the lift and rang at the door of his friend's *appartement*. It was opened by a woman whom he instinctively knew must be Gideon's comrade. She had at any rate once been very lovely, but was now a little blousy and clumsily made up.

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“No, no,” she said, in pretty, broken English, “the concierge mistake. He is not in. But in one, two, three minute” (she counted the numbers on her not over-*soigné’s* fingers) “he be here. You come in—yes, yes, Monsieur.” She opened the door wide, and inside he saw a room so beautifully furnished, so alluring to his tastes, that he walked in without hesitation. It was a room which might have been transported from the *Arabian Nights*, so rich was the carpet, so low the divans, so subtle the sweet perfume which permeated it. In a few minutes he found himself seated amongst the cushions of the great sofa which lined one side of the room, drinking fresh and delicious Turkish coffee from a tiny porcelain cup. He felt rather drunk. There was no doubt he *had* rather overshot the mark with the champagne, but he had never noticed that he was drunk till he had come into this heavy, perfumed air. Perhaps that was why he had felt so—mad, when he was with Desdemona. Was he just what his English friends called “a bit squiffy”?

Meanwhile, “Madame Sandys” had taken stock of him, and liked what she saw. It wasn’t true that she expected Gideon home in a few minutes. It would be two days at least before he returned, she supposed. This young half-foreign Englishman was astoundingly good-looking. She had never seen such blue eyes, such wonderful lashes. She felt sure he was *somebody*.

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“Are you the Monsieur Ruffini to whom our late Ottershaw has gone?” she asked in French, showing her white teeth, and “setting” her black hair with her long, white fingers. He had told her he could not speak Italian.

“Why, yes—Madame. I’d forgotten he was with Gideon and you.”

Madame threw back her head and snorted a little.

“Not with me,” she said. “He was only in Gideon’s London house, and travelled with him. He would not have been *seen* with me!” she added, for she knew instinctively that her relations with his friend were well understood by this very attractive Michael Ruffini. “He is the perfect English man-servant is Ottershaw—a bishop, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Michael laughed rather loudly. He was still feeling a little giddy, and somehow the coffee didn’t seem to be improving matters.

The minutes passed, and he found himself looking at the beautiful works of art which were scattered about the room, followed closely by Madame. It struck one o’clock after a time.

“Gideon isn’t coming just yet evidently, Madame,” he said. “I must get back to my hotel. Tell him I called, will you?” But even as he spoke, his legs seemed to fail him, and he felt unable to get up. The room was very warm, and heavily perfumed, the curtains very closely drawn. He tried to think of Desdemona and her cool sweetness.

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“ I’m so happy, so divinely happy to-night. I suppose that’s why I feel so queer,” he told himself.

Madame placed a warm, plump hand upon his knee.

“ There is no hurry—and—I am so lonely,” she purred.

Michael tried to pull himself together. He was no fool, and he knew this woman had not even the grace to be faithful to Gideon Sandys.

“ By the way,” he said, trying to speak lightly, and edging away a little from her perfumed warmth, “ why did Ottershaw leave Gideon? Do you know? He wrote to me about him, but it didn’t seem quite clear.”

He felt relieved to find he was capable of saying this long sentence correctly.

“ He got on Geedeon’s nerves,” she answered. “ He seemed—haunted, if you understand. *Comprenez ?* ”

“ By what? ”

Madame shrugged her white shoulders impatiently—so impatiently that one of them slipped out of her shoulder-strap, and she made no attempt to replace it. Instead, she raised the freed arm and placed it behind her dark head, a cigarette between her carmined lips.

Michael tried to get up once more. Suddenly he found himself bound by two soft, white arms.

“ You beautiful Englishman ! ” she whispered, mouthing his cheek.

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A vision of a slim, girlish body and two lovely, shy hyacinth eyes rushed suddenly across Michael's troubled mind. Tighter and tighter grew the naked clasp of the Italian woman's arms. And then Michael Ruffini learnt his lesson, for temptation came swift and sudden. Remember, he was tremendously excited by new emotions, that he had drunk too much champagne without knowing that he had, and that, finally, Madame had put God-knows-what into the coffee. He turned and kissed her fiercely, ferociously, with lust and desire. But suddenly the door-bell rang outside, and a key rattled in the lock.

With a terrible Italian oath, Francesca Tialni sprang from his arms, baulked of her prey, and Michael staggered to his feet.

He stayed just long enough to see that it was not Gideon Sandys, but the concierge, who had a midnight telegram in his hand. Perhaps from Gideon. He did not wait to see. Into the cold, refreshing night he plunged as quickly as the lift would bring him downstairs.

"Thank God! Oh, thank God! On this night of all nights. Never, never again shall I feel superior. Heaven help me, I'm not fit to touch her white soul."

He went back to the Hôtel Meurice and to bed.

Backwards and forwards, round and round he tossed, half asleep, half awake, until the dawn broke and deep sleep came.

It had been a time of tremendous revelation

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to both these two young people, in different ways. Michael got the full onslaught of nature's awakening, for he was not only a man steeped in the mystery of art with all its craving for self-expression, but a very strong and healthy specimen of manhood. The storm of passion which seized him in its grip was not only physical but spiritual, and he really suffered acutely. All the more because he was so utterly unprepared for it. He had loved Desdemona for years, almost from babyhood, but love has many sides. He had loved her for her beauty of soul, her sweetness and purity. The side of the master-passion which demands physical possession had lingered for some reason out of his sight. Then, suddenly, he had turned a corner, and lo! it broke upon his view and he saw that it was to be desired to make man wise. Whether Dame Nature is really a great *farceuse*, and meant to have her little joke with him that night, nobody can ever know. But it is a sad fact that Michael very nearly played into the hands of his friend's mistress, when he was half delirious with love for Desdemona. Life is full of these strange happenings, call it the subconscious self or what we will. We are for the most part unstable as water—unless we have something greater to cling to than the eternal primitive.

And Desdemona? How did this awakening come to her?

Curiously enough in exactly the same way—with a difference.

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She undressed swiftly and went into her mother's room, only to find that lady in bed, but smoking.

"I brushed my own hair, child. I felt too lazy to wait up. And this new novel of Loretta's is too engrossing to put off till to-morrow."

Desdemona picked up the lurid-looking volume. It had a "jacket" depicting a man in evening dress—a girl practically thrown across his knees. She picked it up, and Olivia was slightly surprised to see her look at it rather intently. She was so accustomed to Desdemona's instinctive rejection of the false or the second-rate that it had become an understood thing.

"Have you finished it, Mumsie?" she asked, and even as she did so her cheeks grew hot.

Her mother concealed a smile beneath her cigarette. Had Michael been awakening this frozen child?

"Yes. Take it if you like," she said, carelessly.

But it was strange that a tiny pang of regret swept across her mind as she saw Desdemona take the book. Was it possible that she would have kept the child—frozen?

"It cannot be right for me to teach her nothing, to keep her ignorant," she said to herself, true to her eternal dust-throwing.

For she very well knew that *The Way he did it* was a book which ought never to have been published at all.

What made Desdemona read it, far into the

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night, she who had never read any but the best and purest of fiction ?

What made Michael very nearly yield to the invitation of Francesca Tialni ?

Nothing more or less than the awakening of nature, which will not be denied, because there is no love which is of the spirit alone, between man and maid, and sooner or later they have to know it. For with the great awakening comes with swift onslaught the need to understand, the emptiness of ignorance. Desdemona knew, instinctively, after she had lain in Michael's arms that evening, that she must know more or perish. And, alas! she would have perished sooner than have turned to her mother for information. To the pure, all things are pure, and it is only from the clean-minded that a woman will seek enlightenment, if she has seen visions. Desdemona sought understanding from a book because she felt, without knowing why, that her mother would *misrepresent* the strange revelations which had come to her that evening. She knew that Olivia would try to gloss everything over with a veneer of false righteousness. Better a thousand times over the bald truth from one of Europe's literary scavengers. Then she could "take it or leave it." For the girl had a very clean, sweet mind, and *something* told her that she could bear the truth and all would be well.

So far into the night she read of naked passion and its consequences.

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"Yes, I see," she said to herself thoughtfully, as she closed the book. Then she slipped out of bed and took it to the open window. The dawn had broken and she could see, far down below, an enormous cart for collecting rubbish from the courtyard of the hotel. She had heard it rattle up over the cobblestones.

With unerring aim she flung *The Way he did it* out of the window, and heard it drop with a slight thud upon the garbage and refuse which filled the cart.

A man looked up in amazement, and she quickly withdrew her head. Then she knelt down by her little white bed, in her white night-dress, and prayed, her figure drooping with fatigue.

"I think I understand, Mary, Mother of God—and it's all very strange. But it's all right, because Christ is Love."

Then she crept into bed and fell sound asleep.

So to both these young people had come that evening the shock of self-revelation, and they had come scathless out of the ordeal. Yet changed, for the knowledge of good and evil as it affects oneself is a devastating affair. It involves a focussing, a mental attitude which must endure through life, and a complete readjustment of ideas. Either we see God in the business—or the Devil. It is given to very few to get the balance properly adjusted between the Two.

The dustman went back from his unsavoury

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rounds that morning with quite a fresh tale to tell his young wife. A sudden vision of scantily draped womanhood in the grey light of the pearly dawn. A sudden "plop," and—well, there was a brand-new book for her. He'd carefully wiped it free from cold coffee grounds and cabbage juice. It's true it was in a foreign language—but what did that matter as long as it looked gay on the chiffonier.

But Madame knew a thing or two worth more than that. She had a friend in an old Professor who taught English. He would translate this so exciting little book which was so bad that someone had sought to rid the world of it. For he was a bad old man.

Thus difficult is it to stop the drop of poison from mixing with the wine of life, and the latest exponent of sex gained yet another worshipper at his shrine.

When Desdemona was ready for the railway journey to Nice two days afterwards, she went into her mother's bedroom and told her of her engagement to Michael Ruffini. Until then she had kept silence because she was too happy to speak of it.

Chapter XI

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MRS. BRENDERWOOD was all sweetness and honey. Of course she had seen it coming, why, ever since Michael had ceased

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to wear little sailor suits ! Nothing could be better. He was rich, good-looking, well-born, and gifted of the gods. What more could any girl ask of life ? It would be such a delight to get the trousseau ! She knew exactly the shops in London and Paris where they understood the *jeune fille*, and especially the *jeune fille anglaise*. Where they realised that she doesn't spend her whole existence in pursuit of *le sport*, but is occasionally seen without a horse, a tennis racquet or a golf club. Neither is she perpetually standing up to her waist in a river, hunting for something. They would live—where ? Not in Nice, surely ? But that would be imprudent for the rising young *artiste-statuaire*. Michael must live in Paris or London, or both, of course. That was *entendu*. Olivia had got into the habit of speaking a broken mixture of English and French with an occasional smattering of Italian. She had lived so long abroad, and talked so much with the Marquis Carrouchi, that it had become a kind of natural affectation, if one may employ the term.

The real truth of the matter was, she was inwardly desperately annoyed by the engagement ; for she didn't like Michael Ruffini.

She knew that from boyhood he had weighed her in the balance and found her wanting—without making it in the least obvious, or indeed realising it himself perhaps, because she was Desdemona's mother and must be considered immune from criticism. But deep down in her

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heart Olivia knew it, and it was a fly in her ointment. She had been so accustomed all her life to admiration and homage from men that it was a deep offence to encounter disapproval, even when unexpressed. And her resentment grew all the stronger because she knew, with all the shrewdness of a spoilt woman, that she must conceal it. So she welcomed Desdemona's engagement with an eagerness which to one of her admirers at least did not ring quite true. The Marquis twisted his small dyed moustache and smiled discreetly to himself. Olivia had always been as an open book to him, and he had frequently asked himself *why* he had made her a lifelong habit. He could not have told you. But in all probability it was that she made few demands upon him beyond those which come natural to an Italian. She *must* live in an atmosphere of flattery and command, and nothing is easier to the beauty-loving southerner than to create such a *milieu*. Moreover, she was rich and generous, and the Carrouchis as poor as rats. There were many pickings, many privileges to be shared by Olivia's friends without having to make much return. He would have been a fool, he told himself, to have declined the post of Cavalier-in-Chief to the lovely English widow. And now, as we have seen, it had become a habit.

Olivia would vastly have preferred Camille Derussy as a son-in-law. They spoke the same language. That is to say, they understood one another in the game of life, and would at any

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minute have played a good hand together with the same system. But Michael—never. He could have pitied her, despised her, saved her; he could never have understood her. But she knew that the skies would fall, the earth crumble to dust, before Desdemona would plight her troth to Camille Derussy, and so she made the best of a bad job. But when the girl had left the room after making her announcement, her mother's congratulatory kiss upon her warm cheek, Olivia picked up the bouquet which the Management had sent upstairs to her bedroom, and flung it across the room against the opposite wall with considerably more energy than she usually displayed about anything, and her face lost its suggested softness and dimple, growing strangely hard and lined.

“I will not submit to a kind of spiritual ‘espionage’ from him!” she cried fiercely. “They shall live in London.”

Then she gathered herself together and remembered that anger is an emotion which endangers the skin around the eyes and mouth, and hastily massaged her face with a tiny rubber roller which she extracted from her dressing-case. When Desdemona came back a minute later, she received her with all her usual gracious sweetness.

“It breaks my heart, darling, to think of my lonely life without you, but I must think only of what is best for you and this dear Michael, and of course he must be at the fountain head.”

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Lucie, who adored her indulgent mistress, twisted a length of black tulle deftly around Olivia's throat, just where the least little bit of a pouch bore witness to the stealthy advances of the years of maturity. Truly it was the last touch needed, for nobody would have guessed that Olivia was nearing the dangerous forties. Her skin was like a sun-kissed nectarine, her heavily-lidded eyes luminous and appealing. But Desdemona only thought how beautiful her mother was and what a good thing it was that she liked Michael so much and welcomed him so gladly as a son-in-law. Truly there seemed to be no rift within the lute, for all the world was rosy and alight with joy and melody.

This does not mean that Desdemona was stupid. But she had never been separated from her beautiful mother for any greater length of time than her school life had involved, and had never particularly associated her with anything but good-nature and tenderness. She was a girl who had never acquired the habit of criticism. She took people just as she wanted them to be, and up till now she had encountered no disillusion. If an environment is one of easy wealth, everything harmonious, completely plastic, the necessity for adverse criticism does not arise in a noble nature. She often wondered why her mother allowed the Marquis Carrouchi to occupy so much of her time, and secretly regretted it because she thought it was not in the best of taste. But that was the bad taste of the Marquis, who, after all,

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didn't belong to, perhaps, the *most* exclusive circles of Italian society, should one inquire closely. In fact, Mumsie was just beautiful Mumsie, and had always been there, with her friends, her cushion and her flowers and bon-bons. Desdemona, be it remembered, was very innocent of evil. Michael suffered under no such disability. He disliked his future mother-in-law pretty healthily, had he but known it, but he had always loyally dismissed his criticisms, because he wanted to be able to place Desdemona upon a pedestal in a garden where no weeds grew.

So it was like a fairy journey into their kingdom, that return to Nice, in the glory of the sunshine, the perfume of the flowers. Every mile which left the uncertain climate of northern France behind them, their young hearts grew lighter, their spirits higher. Two days had elapsed since the night of their betrothal, and Michael had decided that he must await the psychical moment for telling Desdemona, as he meant to do, about his momentary peril in what he mentally labelled *l'affaire Gideon Sandys*. And she, in her turn, fully intended to tell him of how she had read a book which had explained much which had puzzled her, and that she had ungratefully "chucked it down into the dust cart." But the time was not yet. They were young, they were happy, they were guileless. Let sleeping dogs lie.

That first night of their arrival at the Villa "Bon Repos," Michael dined with them, and

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after bidding Desdemona a long, tender farewell beneath the rose-hung canopy outside the drawing-room windows, he went back to his flat and decided to put in an hour's work in his studio.

There, he told Ottershaw of his engagement. The valet's face lit up with genuine pleasure. He liked and admired this, the youngest employer he had ever served, and derived a certain amount of vitality from his youth and exuberance, even in these early days.

"I'm downright glad of it, sir," he said. "I've seen Miss Desdemona now and again all these eight years since—since I served her grandfather, and I'll never forget 'ow 'e took to her, sir, little thing as she was."

"We were both just kids playing together then, Ottershaw," said Michael, who would have made any excuse to talk about her.

"To be sure, sir. And I mind Sir Edward sayin' of you too, sir, if you'll excuse me saying so, 'Nice lad, that. Nice lad.'"

Michael laughed as he ducked his head into the overall which Ottershaw was holding for him.

"I'm a lucky devil if ever there was one."

"Couldn't have picked out nobody nicer, sir—as long as——" The man stopped abruptly.

Michael glanced at him and wondered why his grave, blue shaven face suddenly grew tense, inscrutable. Rum chap, Ottershaw. Thinking of the time-worn gossip about old Carrouchi, no doubt. Oh, well, that was an old story and there was nothing much in it. Nothing to hurt

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Desdemona, at any rate. But Michael was the last man to discuss private matters with his valet, and Ottershaw would have been horrified had he volunteered to do so. So presently he gave him a cheery good-night, told him he wanted nothing further, and the man left the studio.

Into the early hours of the morning Michael worked, moulding, shaping and unmoulding. He had conceived a great idea, he thought. He would get Desdemona to sit for him, and the statue which he was going to execute for, he hoped, the Paris Salon of next year, should be her sweet self. As a modern flying girl. Yes—"The Flying Girl." She should be standing on a rock, gazing up to the sky, her eyes shaded by her hand, her leather coat in classic folds about her feet; her leather hood hanging down her shoulders. Poised as he believed only he could poise her, on the point of one slender foot, the other upraised behind, as if she could scarcely tolerate the contact of earth, so eager was she to scale the heavens. Yes, yes, "The Flying Girl"! How her short, wavy hair should stream back in the breeze! What a smile of fearless eagerness on her beautiful curved mouth! Her whole slender frame expressing nervous energy and grace—no living sculptor could do it as he would do it—his *chef d'œuvre* in this, the year of his unspeakable joy. Quickly the light of the creative artist sprang into his eyes, the fierce lust of achievement into his fingers. Rough image after image he sat down to his plank table and

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moulded in miniature. Something to catch the *idea*, the inspiration. Again and again he cursed between his teeth and destroyed his handiwork. Over there, behind the screen, where stood an armchair, a table and a clock, the hours ticked away, and the moon at last found her way through the chinks of the great curtain across the skylight. Not a sound broke the stillness of the studio, except his own exclamations of satisfaction or disgust, and the occasional splashing of water or the thud of the plaster on the slab of marble.

Somewhere down below, Ottershaw awoke from a restless sleep.

"If only there's never no inquiry. I wouldn't like trouble to come to either Mr. Ruffini nor any of 'er family."

He turned round with a sigh.

"But God help us—*who murdered Sir Edward?*" he moaned.

Silence. There had been no answer all these eight years. There probably never would be now.

But in Ottershaw's pocket, in his left-hand pocket, he always carried the tube which ought to have contained eleven Green Tabloids, and only held nine.

Why did he carry it? He could not possibly have told you, for he did not know, except that he *dared* not destroy it.

It was not until about three o'clock in the morning that Michael achieved a certain amount of satisfaction over his work and went to bed,

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where, fortunately, he was able to sleep without dreaming or moving. He had always possessed the faculty of being able to dissociate himself from his designs and studies, probably because of his perfect health. It was not till the next morning at *déjeuner*, which he found he was expected to eat at the Villa, that he broached the subject of his hopes about "The Flying Girl." Desdemona coloured gloriously all over her little face. She was not vain, and took her looks very much for granted. The idea of a figure of herself, of her face, for all the world to come and gaze at, startled her. For she knew enough of her lover's position in the art world to know that, once executed, there would be no question of whether or no the work would be accepted.

"Oh, Michael, I'm too *small*!" she cried.

"You don't suggest that I should 'sculpt' an Amazon, who'd need a special weight-carrying airship, do you?" he answered, laughing.

"I think it's a splendid idea, *mon cher Michel*," purred his future mother-in-law, firmly. Olivia at once saw the social prominence which she would gain as the mother of Ruffini's masterpiece.

"But it means every day, every day, for a long time," he said, "in my studio."

"By myself?"

"Why not?"

Desdemona looked swiftly at her mother. Would she permit this? Mrs. Brenderwood shrugged her shoulders. Did a vague thought pass through her shallow brain? Would there,

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perhaps, be a chance that this distressingly correct young man might get carried away one day and make somewhat too ardent advances to his "Flying Girl," which would enable her, Olivia, to put an end to this exemplary betrothal? Nothing *wrong*, of course not, but just sufficient to make a peg to hang it all on—at any rate nobody bothered about chaperonage and all that tiresome ritual any longer. She laughed her low, sweet laugh, and placed her plump white hand caressingly upon Michael's sleeve.

"Where could my girlie be safer than with you, dear boy?" she said. And so the happy days began of that ever-remembered winter. Everybody watched the idyll and marvelled at its beauty. In every Villa where the rich and the leisured world gathered along the Côte d'Azur as the days shortened in colder and more northern climates and people hurried south, Desdemona and Michael became familiar figures. Both of them young, good-looking beyond the ordinary, healthy and possessed of all the money they could need, no social gathering was complete without them.

All the world loves a lover, and even those who were ill and in search of the elixir of life grew a little self-forgetful, a trifle better and happier after they had watched them and talked with them. Desdemona's beauty seemed to glow and mellow under the influence of love and the approaching change which marriage entails. The date of the wedding was fixed for some time in March, before everybody went away again.

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Or, again, it might be a little later in London. One day Olivia suggested one thing, the next day she had changed her mind. Desdemona expressed no very definite opinion. She was perfectly contented to dream on in this enchanted garden of love in which she found herself. All sense of time seemed to have escaped her. If she were asked the day of the month, she had no idea. Every day in the week seemed alike, as long as she saw Michael, and very few days passed without her doing so. The visits to the studio for what she called "real business" took place, however, only twice a week, always at three o'clock in the afternoon. It was curious that, after the first few "posings," Michael had insisted on this. He told Desdemona quite firmly that she must only come to the studio on Tuesdays and Fridays at that hour. For he was very careful of the reputation of this precious treasure which had fallen into his care. At first it had not been so, and Desdemona had spent the mornings or the afternoons in the studio without let or hindrance.

But then, one day, Camille Derussy appeared in Cimiez, black, smiling and debonair. It seemed he had not made a success of his partnership in the firm of Messrs. Daring and Daring Bros. Nobody ever knew quite what happened, but the partnership had come to an untimely end. He had not even put in the electric light for the Sax-Pelhams at Wargrave. Somebody else had done it, and Margareta wrote, "Were

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not altogether sorry, for Uncle took a violent dislike to your friend Monsieur Derussy, and announced that he was 'one of these international crooks,' he thought. As I know you disliked the Derussy yourself, I don't mind telling you of this diagnosis, which is quite near enough for Uncle!"

And Michael ran into him suddenly one day as he was rushing across to the Villa after a hard afternoon's work.

"Hullo, Derussy! Thought you were incandescent or something, in London."

"Couldn't stand the glare. Too much work, *n'est-ce pas?* Wanted to go on the English what-you-call *dole*. But they were too mean—*voyez?*"

Michael laughed. He wasn't at all pleased to see his childhood's playfellow, for he knew it meant annoyance for Desdemona. Well, thank God he was the man in possession now, and Camille might go to blazes.

"So, you and *la belle petite* Demon are *fiancés* now? *Mes félicitations*," that gentleman said, with a slight twist to his mouth.

Michael nodded acknowledgment quite in his best English manner, and continued his way. But not until Camille had said, lightly:

"I hear of so charmin' leetle rendezvous in ze studio, with Mam'selle. *Toute seule, hein?*"

He had merely looked Camille Derussy straight in the face with his very blue eyes, entirely ignoring the remark.

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But that was why, that night, he delivered an ultimatum to Desdemona. "Tuesdays and Fridays only, at three o'clock."

But he did not suggest that she should bring her mother or anyone else. There were limits to his conventionality, and those glorious two hours of inspiration, alone with Desdemona and his marble, were infinitely too precious to be sacrificed to "Mrs. Grundy," scream she never so loudly. And nobody thought anything at all about it in Nice, for such things have passed away for ever.

As to Desdemona, when she encountered Camille Derussy, she treated him as she acknowledged the presence of one of the footmen in the Villa "Bon Repos"—very pleasantly and kindly. Camille gnashed his strong, white teeth with rage. What a damned fool he'd been to have lost his head at Wargrave as he had done. He'd played right into the hands of his rival. One *must* remember that these English women are cold-blooded until they've entered for the eternal marriage stakes and authorised some clerical mountebank to say "Let go." Well, she would be worth even that handicap. Let Michael Ruffini look to himself. They'd had many a rough-and-tumble together as children, and Michael hadn't always come off the victor. Alone, were they, for two hours twice a week, in the inaccessible high-up studio, so he heard from Michael's chauffeur. Well, the Ruffini was made of flesh and blood like any other man, and it was only a question of time.

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Of course Camille thought in those terms, because he knew no other view of humanity, or perhaps it is more correct to say he had never looked for any other. His mother had been extremely *dévoté* and had overdone his religious education from his cradle, so that as soon as he attained to man's estate he threw off the shackles.

Chapter XII

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DESDEMONA had many letters of congratulation upon her engagement, of course, for she had a large circle of friends and a wide popularity.

Lady Gravistock wrote with genuine pleasure:—"You have no idea how we rejoice, both of us. One's congratulations are always a little dubious when one doesn't know the young man. But we have known Michael so long—indeed, I was the first visitor his mother had after his birth, and I sat with him on my knee! Tell him. He had three little golden freckles under his left eye! I remember them well, and how they distressed his pretty mother. She need not have feared for his looks, for you'll make a wondrous couple, my dears. So take hold of life with both hands whilst you can, and thank God for the joy which isn't spoilt by sorrow, for it just makes all the difference in life. . . ."

And from Muriel Sax-Pelham, the only letter

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which made her vaguely sad:—"I don't suppose I shall ever marry, dear, but that doesn't prevent me wishing you all the luck in the world, etc." Desdemona had always suspected that Muriel had set her affections on Michael Ruffini, and the quiet, definite finality of this letter set a seal upon her intuition. "Come and see us soon again, you lovely thing, and bring me some Italian novels to read. But find some 'without love interest,' as the publishers say."

Margaretta was characteristic:—"You must let me arrange your home whilst you're honeymooning, you infants. I should hate you to come home to rooms without flowers and a bad dinner. Demon, you sweet *sister*, etc."

Then Mrs. Browne, and Desdemona wiped away her happy tears and smiled over the huge calligraphy, the untidy lines on the Embassy paper.

"I'll have you know that young man" (it would be pronounced "marn"!)" "is going to turn everything he finds into graven images that'll make the world just hum with joy. But he'll have to get up very early to make anything so lovely as little Desdemona—*sure*."

In the meantime "The Flying Girl" made slow but certain progress. Many artists and sculptors found their way up to Michael's studio and stood enraptured in front of it. He had, contrary to the usage of modern sculptors, made two models of his conception before he forsook the clay for the marble. He had selected his

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block with infinite care and all possible tests, so that the risk of a flaw was reduced to the minimum. Several hundred pounds had changed hands before the cold rough-hewn rock stood in the centre of his studio, uncompromisingly shapeless. A short step-ladder leaned against its sides, to enable him to get to the top of it. He had made up his mind that this should be his best work for the present, and that the figure should be modelled in one solid piece. No moulding of Desdemona and then placing her upon the rock, itself then to be added. No. She was to look as if her little feet were part and parcel of the earth they yet longed to leave, and she should be literally of a piece with it. It would be the largest work he had yet done, and he knew that anything larger would involve a change of studio to the ground floor on account of weight. That was the last thing he desired, for Michael loved to be near the sky. He was a very goodly sight, half-way up his short ladder, clad in his faded blue smock; one foot on the lower step, the other two steps higher, and as likely as not a glint of sunshine falling through the shrouded skylight across his fair hair. His hands, long and nervous, worked with great rapidity, either with chipping tool and hammer, or in actual moulding of clay.

At half-past four precisely, Ottershaw brought her a dainty tea, and Michael would cease work to sit with her behind the old tapestry screen whilst she rested. Not nearly so many posings

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were required after a few weeks or so, for Michael had his clay model to work from, and only needed her occasionally for actual verification. It was a beautiful piece of sculpture in the clay, rough as an outlined suggestion, but only the hand of "a Master," however young he may be, could have produced the intensely alive look on Desdemona's face, the nervous force of her high spirits, which seemed to part her half-opened lips in a shout of kinship with the elements. It was the very embodiment of the modern spirit of mechanism and fearless courage. A "Flying Girl" indeed, and it was with this statue that Michael eventually won his undying fame.

"A real good thing, Demon, you enchantress," he said one day, hugging her to himself as lovers will. She noticed that he was trembling a little, and that his hands were cold.

"Ruffs, you're sticking to it too closely," she said. "Come and have some tea with me. You must cry 'Halt!' to-morrow, and come out into the country somewhere. I insist."

She looked at him somewhat anxiously as she poured out a cup of the delicious tea which Ottershaw had been carefully taught to make by Gideon Sandys, who was a teetotaller.

"I believe I *have* been concentrating a thought too much," he said, as he sat down beside her. Then he coloured deeply. "Look here, little one, I want to tell you something. I've wanted to ever since that wonderful evening at the 'Meurice.'"

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"Heavens, Ruff, have you been married once or twice before, or something?" she laughed, a little surprised.

"No. But you said the other day you thought I wasn't capable of anything mean or low. Well, you're wrong. That very evening, after you'd gone to your mother, I went out to call on a pal, and he was out—but—there was—a woman——" He stopped. Did she know what a "mistress" meant?

Desdemona grew very pale. What was he going to tell her?

"Well?"

"She—wasn't like you, Demon."

"Well?"

"She—tried to make me—make love to her——"

"And——?"

"Well—I didn't. But I very *nearly* did."

"And why do you tell me this—if it—didn't matter?"

He turned and put his arms around her, pressing his lips to her breast, as she sat in her little green gown.

"Because I want you to know what a *beast* there is in me—in all men."

"So there is in me," said Desdemona calmly.

Michael raised his hot face and looked at her incredulously.

"There is. That night I read a hateful book of mother's—at least" (she added loyally) "of Ilo Carrouchi's, and learnt all about—beasts in it.

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Then I shot it out of the window, and it landed on the dust cart down below.”

Michael looked at her lovely face, flushed but resolute, and then he began to laugh.

“You *darling*,” he said, huskily. “So now we’re quits. But, little girl,” he said, and he turned her round in the big armchair till she faced him, as he held her two arms to her sides and looked deep into her eyes, “you *do* understand, don’t you? Because—it’s to be in April, you know.”

Desdemona bent forward and touched his brow with her cool, sweet lips.

“Yes, Ruffles, I do really understand. I’m quite happy—about it.”

“Thank God! That’s all right. And now I’ll tell you what we’ll do to-morrow,” he said, releasing her, for he rarely even kissed her when she was alone in the studio with him; “we’ll go and see old Katerine at Roquebillière.”

“Yes, yes. You’ve told me so often about her. I ought to know her better.”

Katerine Rameaud was Michael’s old nurse, and one of his best friends. She had been a widow for many years and lived with her niece in her cottage at a village two or three miles out of Cimiez, up amongst the mountains. Very often, when Michael was tired or hipped in any way, he used to walk up the valley to Roquebillière and sometimes stay the night with the old woman and Julie. Katerine always kept a spotless little room ready for her beloved Michael.

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She absolutely adored him, and his visits were the brightest spots in her life. She was a fearless, happy old woman, who had never harmed a soul in her life. Limited, of course, in intellect, as harmless people always are, and equally, of course, subject to occasional fits of blind rage. And as obstinate as the well-known mule.

"I've often noticed," said Father le Touche once, in ruminative mood, "that rather stupid people live very fragrant lives."

Old Katerine was one of the first people Michael Ruffini told of his engagement, and Desdemona was taken up the mountain to see her before he thought of presenting her in her new relationship to himself to anyone else. She never forgot her first sight of the wrinkled old face under the stiffly starched and goffered white cap she wore, or the look of inquiry in the dim old eyes. Was this fair girl worthy of her boy, her Michael, for all women were kittle-kattle? Apparently her close scrutiny satisfied her, for she released Desdemona and muttered, "*Je cherche. Je trouve.*" After that, nothing was good enough for her. She had baked her most delectable cakes in her little oven, poured out the hoarded syrup which she had stored in her little cupboard for many years, until it had grown mellow and rich, and kept patting the small white fingers with her own wrinkled hands, peering still occasionally into the girl's eyes.

The niece was rather a pathetic figure, for she was half-witted, and lived and died without the

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knowledge that Katerine Rameaud had given her all the love she had ever known, for poor little Julie did not know about love. She was sixteen, and practically a dwarf.

So one afternoon Michael changed into a brown suit, settled his Homburg at a becomingly rakish angle, locked up the studio and drove Desdemona in his powerful Daimler to the village of Roquebillière. It was a glorious afternoon, with a languorous stillness which seemed to give the wonderful perfumes of the orange blossom and roses a chance to justify themselves. Up and up the white, winding roads they climbed smoothly, past acres of neglected vineyards, out of cultivation since the Great War had taken the heart and courage, to say nothing of the life itself, from the simple, hardworking peasantry. They were just beginning to realise the fact that it was not only a little temporary distress which it behoved them to bear with fortitude or indifference, but that their very land had been lying fallow before their doors for so long that they wondered if it would ever be worth while to restore it. Dire poverty existed in some of the wayside hamlets, and Desdemona was continually stopping to throw coppers to the poor little half-starved children who besieged the motor-car.

“ Oh, Ruffs, is there never going to be an end to the punishment this awful war has brought? We're only just at the very beginning of the aftermath! ” she cried once. Tears stood in her eyes.

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"Honestly, no, I don't think the punishment will end in *our* lifetime, only I prefer to call it 'consequences.' We brought the whole show upon ourselves," muttered Michael, who hated to see little children underfed or animals hurt.

"I suppose we *always* do that," Desdemona answered; "but surely there is atonement!"

Michael hesitated. He was so much a Britisher that he didn't call up his deepest thoughts without reluctance even to Desdemona.

"Well, old lady, what I think about it is this—that the *punishment* stops as soon as it is *accepted*. But we've got to take the *consequences*."

"But that's the same thing, surely?"

"Not a bit of it. As soon as we know we've jolly well deserved a thing, the *guilt* goes, but if we've any decency, we shall want it well rubbed in—see?"

"I see," she said, thoughtfully. She could so rarely get Michael to speak of things below the surface. "There's something about that in *The Dream of Gerontius*, I remember."

He turned a corner adroitly, almost on two wheels, right over a precipice which would have alarmed most chauffeurs. Desdemona shut her eyes.

"Rather," he said, as if there had been no break in the conversation. "Tell it me, if you can," he continued, conscious of a longing to hear her repeat the beautiful words.

"I can't," she said regretfully. "But I know Gerontius is granted just one sight of Christ, and

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then he *asks* to go to the discipline of Purgatory—to be got something like *fit* to see Him again.”

“Right-oh. If I do a bad piece of work and some Committee turns it down, I’ve got to stick the humiliation—but it’s all right as long as I feel ashamed of myself.”

Desdemona turned to him and nearly imperilled their two lives by putting her hand on his arm. Besides, it brought the perfume of her hair so near to him, the sweetness of her breath.

“Dear old Ruffles! I’d no idea you brought all that—right into your daily life,” she said.

He smiled broadly down upon her. “Good God, where else would you put it?” he said.

Desdemona was silent for the rest of the drive, lost in thought, her eyes fixed on the glorious blue and green valley stretching into the far distance before them.

Old Katerine made her presence in her cottage evident before she materialised, for they heard a volley of patois French from somewhere in the back regions. It grew shriller and more vituperative with its own impetus, and a huge brindled cat flew out of the tiny kitchen on the wings of fear, followed by a frying-pan which just missed Desdemona.

Then the old woman appeared, and changed in her mood without the smallest difficulty or self-consciousness. She was enchanted to see them, and busied herself preparing cakes and wine, popping her huge-capped head in and out of the cupboards.

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“*Maintenant, mangez, mes enfants,*” she said at length, and Michael and Desdemona were astonished to find how hungry the mountain air had made them.

Katerine was full of the news that Father le Touche was coming to be the priest-in-charge at Roquebillière.

“*Ah, le pauvre,*” she said, shaking her goffered frills. “*Il est tellement fatigué. Il lui faut du lait, de la crème. Se reposer, après tout son travail, si dur, si dévoué——*”

“Dear Father le Touche! Nice won't be the same without him,” said Desdemona, sadly. She had been much grieved to hear how ill her friend and director had been, and that he had been ordered to give up all town work and take only some little country parish. Michael, however, rejoiced that the priest was going to settle in Roquebillière, as he knew he would often see him. He had broken down from sheer overwork—the last thing he would have allowed himself to do, had he realised that he was doing it, for he would have thought it foolish. But although he knew well what were his spiritual limitations, or thought he did, he gave little heed to those which were physical. Because he gave himself no time to realise them, for he was amongst the poor, the sad and the suffering as long as the daylight lingered, and often far into the night. He was verily and indeed “about his Father's business.”

“*Voyez, ce prêtre là,*” continued Katerine,

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picking up her black stick to throw at the cat again, on guard because of the furtive shadow of Puss on the passage wall outside, "*il est bon, parce que, comprenez-vous, il était une fois mauvais.*"

Suddenly her brilliant black eyes shot flames, and the stick shot through the door. There was a squeal, a rush. Once more the cat abandoned all idea of getting possession of the raw fish on the kitchen table.

"You're glad he's coming, eh, Katerine?" asked Michael, speaking in the Breton French he knew she loved.

"*Mais oui, Michel.* It is time I make my soul—*hein?*"

At this moment the niece entered the room and proceeded to put something away in the cupboard. She gave the visitors no greetings, looking neither to right nor left. She was a heavy, misshapen creature, with a slack mouth, and Desdemona instinctively thanked God she was not as this girl. But she got up, and when Julie turned sullenly to leave the room again, with down-bent sideways glance at them and a hurried shuffle, she offered her the box of chocolates from which she had refreshed herself by the way. Julie stared from the box to her, and then back again to the box, until she had satisfied herself that the devil wasn't in it, and then took a large and succulent chocolate. Desdemona turned away from the unpleasing sight of the large, loose mouth working round the bon-bon, and concentrated her attention on the girl's really

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pretty coarse gown of huge red and white checks.

Katerine watched the incident, and her brilliant dark eyes, set like agates in her lined, rosy face, grew very soft and kindly for a moment. It was a happy hour in the clean little parlour, with its polished floor in imitation parquet, its stiff, short green curtains and strange collection of flowers made of mother-o'-pearl. On the round, polished table stood an old cut-glass decanter full of the orange syrup which Desdemona sipped out of a thin cup made of some deep blue porcelain. A plate of tiny cakes, crowned with marzipan, stood in the centre, under the group of mother-o'-pearl snowdrops, set in a box of sand. On the walls were two pictures only. One was over the stove, a photograph of Michael Ruffini's mother—"so, so like Margaretta," Desdemona thought. The other was the late respected Gabriel Rameaud, in what appeared to be some kind of military garment. But it had so frequently encountered the stick or frying-pan directed towards intruders, canine or otherwise, that it had become a little nebulous, and the glass was broken. There was one entirely blank wall, of grey distemper, which reflected the mottled sunlight, playing about the green curtains. An utterly un-English "parlour." For some reason or other Michael found himself gazing at the blank, grey, unpictured space. Did he see some "writing on the wall," or was it the dancing of the afternoon shadows?

Katerine herself was the central figure of the

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group. She was a very big woman, with a curious rhythm in her movements. Her brown stuff skirt was very short, and her goffered cap seemed to put her kind, strong peasant's face in a sort of shrine. She had the most extraordinary eyes, of very unusual brilliancy. To most people she was alarming, and rather suggestive of the *tricoteuses* of the French Revolution. To Michael she was the very embodiment of rest and consolation. From a baby he had turned to Katerine when he was ill or in trouble, and she had always mothered him, taking him to her great, broad bosom, charming away his dark moods with her Breton songs, her deep love. Very often he would leave his studio and spend the night in the spotless little bedroom she always had in readiness for him, descending the mountains again the next day, soothed by her memories of his mother, strengthened by her sober, sensible counsellings.

When he got back that evening to his studio he encountered an incident which never afterwards left his memory. Refreshed by his afternoon in the country, he turned to his "Flying Girl" with renewed energy. Standing on his short ladder, in his smock, hammer and chisel in hand, he became aware of several footsteps outside, and a soft knock on the door. Before he could say "Come in," it opened, and in walked Girodin—the greatest sculptor in Europe. A little, grey, rough-haired man, known affectionately as "The Grey Monkey." With him were three men of renown—two painters and a sculptor.

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But they merely grouped themselves in the background.

"*On me dit faut voir ce beau garçon, ce Michel Ruffini,*" he said, with a broad, kindly smile. "*Bah!*"

Michael stood dumfounded, his heart thumping like a gong.

For ten minutes Girodin looked at "The Flying Girl," examining, patting, measuring. Then he turned and seized the hammer and chisel from Michael's nerveless fingers. Two tiny chips fell on the floor from Desdemona's wrist, raised above her eyes.

"*Voilà! Mieux, ça!*" Then he turned to Michael and extended his small, hairy hand.

Michael took it eagerly, and the two men looked at one another—this grey monkey of a man and the young sun-god.

"*Nous deux. Girodin et Ruffini. Nous deux. Le singe gris—et le beau garçon. Bah!*"

Then he was gone. But Michael knew that those words, "*nous deux,*" would percolate through every art school and studio in Europe—and beyond.

Chapter XIII

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THE days of that wonderful winter in Nice sped by on rosy wings. Sometimes Desdemona wondered if she were "fey." It seemed

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impossible in this world of tribulation that such happiness could be real. She would almost pinch herself to see if she were awake or dreaming, the skies were so blue, the sun so hot, the flowers so full of colour and perfume. Never, surely, had the birds sung so loudly or so sweetly, and it seemed as if they sang to her personally. There was one little songster who perched outside her bedroom window every evening, and his twitter sounded like "Be happy. Be happy." She would laugh low as she brushed out her short, soft hair in the glinting sunset light, and wave a gleeful salute with her brush to the little serenader. Her maid found her task a light one that winter, for Desdemona liked to be alone with her happy thoughts, and was, moreover, very arbitrary about her clothes, and hardly ever put on what Véronique selected. The girl could not know how often the choice was decided by something which Michael had said to her young mistress. "I want you in that misty, purple blue this evening—the gown that matches your eyes." Or, "Put on that ripping little brown hat with the amber buckle." So she always had her own ideas on the subject, and "*Mon Dieu, qu'elle est belle!*" Véronique thought. For verily Desdemona blossomed like a rose that winter. People turned to look wonderingly at her when she entered a room, or when they caught sight of her face when Michael met her. She seemed to glow with some inner light which made everyone as well as herself happy. Those who spent that

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winter on the Riviera never forgot her, she was so radiant, so sweet. Many a man gazed into the wonderful hyacinth eyes to his own undoing, and wished he had never seen her only to lose her. But to Desdemona they none of them existed, for her whole love and worship were given to Michael. For him, life flowed on like a noble, rushing river. He, too, was *exalté*, and the work he did that winter upon his "Flying Girl" seemed veritably inspired. The fact that the great Girodin had visited him, when passing through Nice, and had claimed kinship with him, was soon well known, and he sometimes wondered what he had done to deserve a double inspiration—the approval of the Master and the love of such a girl as Desdemona. His brain almost reeled with the wonder of it. When they were together, as they so frequently were, at social gatherings, people watched them and pointed them out to one another in amazement, so perfect did they seem in their youth, their beauty and their love.

And yet—Desdemona *was* at times conscious of a slight minor humming in the pæan of her joy. She decided that it was the presence of Camille Derussy in Nice. Wherever she went he was always there, and seemed to be the first person she met in every house. Apparently no other firm of electricians or any other profession seemed anxious to offer him more work, and he was free to indulge in anything he wished. He was not openly objectionable, but he always

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contrived to convey some unpleasant insinuation about something or other, whenever he spoke to her or Michael, who frankly hated him. He loved to hover round the subject of Desdemona's visits to the studio, hinting at the fact that the young couple were alone there. Then he discovered about their visits to old Katerine, up in the mountains. One day he elected to go and see the old woman himself—to find this cottage with the ever-ready bedroom, the devoted old nurse. But the visit wasn't a success. Katerine took his measure with astonishing correctness. She looked at him from under her bushy brows, her black eyes growing blacker, and said :

“ Better not come in. There's a cat I throw a stick at. It often hits people by mistake—people who pry—*ceux qui sont curieux. Ferez mieux de ne pas entrer.*”

Then Julie had appeared in her red check skirt, looking like some malignant witch. He had no chocolates, this man with the pointed ears. Moreover, he looked at her, at her humped-up shoulder, and uttered a contemptuous word. Her face grew black and sullen and she shuffled into the kitchen. Presently, as Camille Derussy lingered in a vain effort to propitiate Katerine and gain a footing in this mysterious cottage, a terrible smell began to fill the house. Julie knew at least this, that a lump of rather rancid fat thrown on the hot stove will generally make a person move on. He should not come in, this so ugly man with the pointed ears—and no

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chocolates. And Camille turned with considerable celerity and not a few muttered curses. Baffled.

One day he met Michael at the Villa "Bon Repos." The two men were by chance left alone in the upstairs salon. Olivia had gone down to see her head gardener about a new crazy pavement around the pond with the gold-fish, down by the olive grove. Desdemona was obliged to write a letter, and had, though with some misgiving, left the two men alone. Camille had been announced whilst they were at tea, for Olivia still gave him the run of the house, and refused to be in any sense of the word an antagonist. Camille was in a very bad temper, for he had dined out the night before with some boon companions of both sexes, and had drunk anything and everything offered to him without discrimination. Michael was completely master of himself, indeed strung up, as he always instinctively was in the presence of his rival.

For a moment there was silence. Then :

"When's the wedding to be?" asked Camille.

"Soon. Probably April," answered Michael, shortly.

"After that there won't be any need for—the little so secret visits to the old *bonne*." There was a perceptible sneer on the thin lips.

Michael's forehead flushed an ominous crimson. He rose, drew himself to his great height, and walked up to Camille Derussy with clenched fists. The Frenchman looked up and quailed.

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Then, like a bully and a coward, he said what he thought, without considering his words.

“I’ve been there. The old woman showed me—the bedroom.” He spoke in rapid, defiant French.

“You damned liar!” said Michael, in a low voice, between his teeth. Then he dragged his rival to his feet, for he would not hit a man who was down, and drove him a staggering blow between his eyes. Camille went down like a stone, absolutely knocked out. Michael wouldn’t have cared two straws at that moment had he been told he was dead. White to the lips, drawing short, panting breaths, he stood above the prostrate man, making as fine a grouping for a statue as he was ever likely to execute.

Camille’s unconsciousness was only momentary. He was no weakling, and was soon on his feet again, his handkerchief held to his forehead, where his left eye was badly cut and bleeding freely.

“Now you know what you’ll get if ever you breathe any of your filthy lies again,” said Michael, quietly, sinking into an armchair. “Go—or I’ll have you chucked out.” He was breathing a little heavily.

“You shall hear from me—of course,” muttered Camille, who was feeling rather sick. He only wanted to get downstairs and out of the house before Desdemona returned. Already he could hear her singing somewhere or other—

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“Grow, little mushroom, grow,” softly and happily.

“Some day, yes, some day I will catch you both,” he said, or rather hissed, at the door, from under the handkerchief, which was growing wet and crimson. He managed to get downstairs and out of the house without attracting Delmino’s attention. Then, hidden in the azalea bushes, he fainted quietly, thankful for the sudden twilight which fell upon the garden.

Michael never told Desdemona of the incident, but she wondered, when she re-entered the salon, with a song still on her lips, why he was rather pale and quiet, and why Camille had left. She noticed that his nostrils were working as if he had been running.

“This room is too hot,” she said, and opened one of the long windows.

Michael fully expected a challenge from Derussy or his seconds. But none came, and this added one more to the list of shortcomings which were tabulated in his mind against him.

“*Coward!*” he decided. He was right. Camille Derussy meant to attain his end, if he could, by methods which had nothing to do with the laws of honour or duelling.

There was one other anthem chanted in the spring song of Desdemona’s life just now, which was in a minor key. The Brownes came out to Nice in January, ostensibly for a month. The busy Ambassador had managed to get leave to absent himself from London on “urgent private

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affairs." Olivia was the first to make those affairs common property.

"The Brownes arrived this morning," she announced in her honey drawl, at the dinner-table one night. The Marquis was dining with them, and various other younger people. Michael, of course.

"Oh, Mumsie, why didn't you tell me?" cried Desdemona, delighted. "I long to see them. Has 'Puddin'-Fat' come?"

Mrs. Brenderwood sipped her *petite marmite*. She did that very carefully because of her scarlet lips.

"Of course. With a back like a billiard-table. She's very ill."

"Puddin'-Fat'?" asked one or two of the guests simultaneously. The dog was so well known as an adjunct of "Mrs. B."

"No. Mrs. Browne." Olivia felt annoyed with herself when she saw the look of dismay upon the faces of her guests. What had possessed her to introduce a melancholy topic at the dinner-table?

"Oh, Mumsie, what's the matter?" said Desdemona, putting down her knife and fork, her food untasted.

Her mother shrugged her plump white shoulders, almost displacing the slender straps of beads.

"That's what they've got to find out," she drawled.

It spoilt the evening. Both Desdemona and Michael liked the Brownes.

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Next day, "Puddin'-Fat" ran into the morning-room where they were eating the *premier déjeuner*. Or, rather, waddled, wagging her sweeping tail with all the energy which growing years and fat would allow her to expend. She was followed by the Brownes.

"I know we're appallingly early, my dears," said Mrs. Browne, "but I guess you won't mind."

Desdemona was conscious that she hesitated before she answered. She was terribly shocked. For Mrs. Browne was no longer Mrs. Browne. She had turned into a little, yellow old woman, with very beautiful clothes on. There was some terrible *seal* set upon her. The girl thought of the words she had heard a doctor use about a dying servant once. "The decree has gone forth."

"Oh, Saidie!" she heard herself cry out, as she took the cold little hands in hers. Then the Ambassador spoke his greetings, and she noticed that he no longer stammered or seemed afraid of his wife.

"We've come South to get Saidie fit again," he said. "She's been a bit seedy all the winter—your detestable climate, eh?"

"Fussy old man, my Ambassador," said Mrs. Browne. "Just a chill on my Amurrican liver, my dears," and her little face grew curiously mutinous.

But they knew it was more than that. So did Mrs. Browne, but not for one single instant would she admit it, even to herself. She dug a grave

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for the knowledge and refused to drag it into the open:

Desdemona cried a little afterwards, and Michael drew her within the shelter of his arms to comfort her. He thought it very wonderful that she, so young and of altogether another generation, should pause in her flower-decked youth to mourn this little old woman, more than double her age.

“ I suppose I’m just *too* happy,” she said, “ and these things make you think of something besides yourself.”

That evening Father le Touche came in to say good-bye, for he was leaving the next day to take up his life at Roquebillière.

“ It will be like *playing* around the eternal verities,” he said, with his whimsical smile, “ after the storm and stress.”

Late that night, just as he was about to extinguish his lamp and go to bed, Mr. Browne opened the door and looked in. Father le Touche had sent his housekeeper to bed long ago. He started violently, and then recognised his visitor. His thin, worn face lit up with pleasure. He had liked the Ambassador from the first moment he met him.

“ Come in, your Excellency, and a thousand welcomes,” he cried in his own language, which he knew his visitor understood well.

“ Father, I won’t beat about the bush. I want to see you about my poor little wife.”

“ Yes? But first sit down and have a cigar-

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ette," said the priest, drawing up a chair. Then, as the light fell upon the Ambassador, he saw that some great grief had brought him there.

Mr. Browne would not smoke.

The priest waited in perfect silence. He knew the moment would come.

"Father, my wife is—dying."

"Surely not?"

"Yes. The usual thing—where they daren't operate."

Father le Touche laid his hand upon the Ambassador's arm and his voice broke.

"It's absolutely impossible to save her?"

"Utterly."

The priest did not speak for a full minute. He was praying. This damnable life of the flesh.

"O Lord, *how long?*"

"What is it you most *want* of me, my friend?" he asked at length, for he never wasted time.

"Nothing—for myself. For her—everything."

"You mean?"

The stricken man turned to him passionately.

"It's not her having to die, Father. I hope I can take it as a man. But what I *can't* stand, what's taking the heart out of me, is——"

"Yes——"

"*She's frightened.* She won't face it."

"What is she frightened *of?*"

"I don't know. She's never even let me tell her the truth."

"She has lived a harmless, useful life?" asked the priest, softly.

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“One of the kindest, straightest little women God ever made,” he answered, and buried his head in his arms on the table.

Father le Touche got up and went to his corner cupboard. When he came back, he carried a glass of whisky-and-soda.

“Drink this, Excellency,” he said, his hand on the shoulder of the strong man, shaken with sobs.

The Ambassador drank it, and the priest waited till he had regained his self-control.

“What made you come to me? You are not Catholics?”

“My wife is. There are plenty of you in America, you know. God knows what *I* am. But I believe you can help Saidie.”

“God grant it. When can I see her?”

“*Now*, if you will.”

Father le Touche glanced at the clock. Time did not matter to him, but would not Mrs. Browne have gone to bed?

“She never sleeps before dawn. All night, nearly, I hear her pacing up and down.”

The priest got up and took his long black cloak from the hook on the door.

“I’m ready,” he said simply. He was dead tired, and earlier in the evening had felt a little faint.

Mrs. Browne was a good deal surprised when her husband opened the door of the hotel sitting-room and said softly:

“Father le Touche wants to say good-bye to

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you, my dear. He goes to his new work to-morrow."

The priest entered and gave one swift look at the small, shrunken figure amongst the sofa cushions. Saidie was in a lovely, fashionable rest-gown of lace and crêpe de Chine, palest champagne in colour. Her dog lay contentedly asleep within her thin, clinging arms. He took no notice of the priest, for his mind was sluggish with cakes and sweets.

"How nice of you! Of course it's *very* late" (glancing at the clock on the writing bureau), "but that's what makes it like—well, I guess you've never read *our* Arabian nights, unexpurgated?"

"I find all the scandal I want in the Bible," answered the priest, smiling. He fancied he knew how to treat this woman, and indeed he did.

"So you're off to-morrow, Father?" she asked nervously. The mention of the Bible brought a host of things into her mind which she wanted to forget. "You'll have an easy time now?"

"No," he answered, "I don't suppose so. Wherever there is sin there is sorrow, and I shall always be looking for both. It's my job, you know."

Saidie plaited the folds of the satin cushion under her head with hot, thin fingers.

"It must be rather fun baptising and marrying people. But—you haven't any deaths—funerals, have you, Father? People don't often—

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often——” She was speaking very rapidly, and the priest had never heard her so American in accent.

“ Yes. People die very often,” he said, clearly and gently.

Mrs. Browne hugged her little dog closely, and in her eyes the priest saw the look of a stag at bay. It cut him to the heart.

“ Little woman,” he said, taking her fevered hand in his cool grasp, “ what are you afraid of? Tell me—your friend and priest. In God’s name, *what is it?* ”

“ You know? ” she whispered, and her small frame shook with a long, long shudder.

“ I know you are dying,” he said. It was characteristic of Father le Touche that he employed no imagery when the plain truth was best.

It was strange that the simple statement, without embroidery or camouflage, brought immediate relief to the poor timid soul of Saidie the Ambassadress. Her eyes filled with tears—the first she had shed since the specialists had insinuated rather than told her what they knew was inevitable. The priest had done just the one thing, and the one thing only, which could have brought consolation. Because Mrs. Browne was a brave woman in reality. It was just because she didn’t know what was expected of her. As soon as she did, she knew no fear. She had never practised any outward form of religion, though she had been baptised a Catholic, more by accident than design. She had never seen anybody die, and

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she had always avoided death or the legends about it. So, when she found that she herself was what she would have called "up against it," she simply didn't know how to behave. Now she knew. You simply looked at it—and faced it. "I know you are dying," this priest had said. Right-oh.

"Then I guess I'm to get on with it?" she said wonderingly.

"Just exactly when the Saviour is ready for you. He's invited you, and you see, little Ambassadors, its a Royal Command."

Saidie's face grew alert, her eyes wide with wonder.

"My! Isn't that great? He *wants* me?"

"He wants you—perhaps to help to receive His guests."

"He holds *some* Receptions—there," she whispered. "But—but—'Puddin'-Fat'?" she faltered.

Father le Touche wouldn't have dreamed of smiling even inwardly.

"He loved little children. He *must* have loved little animals too," he whispered, stroking the small dog lying in her arms. "Puddin'-Fat" licked his hand.

"I guess so. You'll look after—my husband and my little dog, then?" she said. Of course she pronounced it "dawg."

"Indeed, indeed I will. Your husband is troubled because he thinks you are *afraid*. Can I give him a message?"

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“ Will it be very—lonely? The—crossing? ”

“ You will not be alone. It is on *this* side that He has promised to meet you.”

“ Sure? ”

“ Certain. ‘ Though ye walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, *I will be with you.* ’ ”

Saidie smiled very radiantly. Then he left her.

Chapter XIV

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SO, occasionally there was a rift within the Slute. But as regards Mrs. Browne, she lingered on for many months, growing each day more detached from life, more amusing, more devoted to her little dog. It was not till the leaves were off the trees the following winter that the great Adventure came to her, and found her with loins girded, ready and waiting.

Michael and Desdemona decided not to be married until after Easter. They had mutually much to do and think of, and Michael was anxious to completely finish his “ Flying Girl ” before he started on his honeymoon. He did not want to be hampered by any anxieties or “ ought-to-be-back ” kind of feeling. Sometimes he talked of the Canary Isles, of Italy. Desdemona felt that Italy was the place he ought to know more thoroughly than he did, and so

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they made many plans in these the happiest weeks of their engagement. Olivia wanted the wedding to be in London. She was beginning to look at the Marquis Carrouchi from the point of view of an onlooker, and to realise that she would have more prestige in London, where her friendship with him was less known and commented on. That she would never voluntarily cast him off she very well knew, for he had become far too fixed a habit. But she did not want her daughter's world to think he was the only man who had ever laid his heart at her feet. There would be fresh pastures to explore in London, new pursuits, rejuvenescence—she knew not what. So London it should be, in May, during the season when Desdemona, the bride of the rising young sculptor, must make her curtsy to her sovereign.

But they did not mean to leave Nice till March, and during February, the first fortnight, when the weather was balmy and moist, Michael and Desdemona made a swift rush over to England, to put in three days' hunting at Wargrave. They went without the slightest feeling of unconvencionality, as young people do to-day, and thoroughly enjoyed the journey.

Desdemona entered Wargrave with a certain amount of pomp and circumstance, now that she was the affianced bride of the heir to the House of Wargrave. They were exactly as she had left them some weeks before, except that Muriel Sax-Pelham was no longer there. She had made some excuse about a holiday with a school friend,

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for she felt that she could not meet Michael Ruffini. Nobody would have been more astounded than Michael himself had he been told so, for he had scarcely ever noticed the quiet girl who had been left "without a bob. Rough luck, what?" So he had said, and she had blushed right royally, not only because of his remarks about her circumstances, but because he had never meant her to hear what he did say. He did not miss her in the family circle at Wargrave, and that was her bitterest hour. She found it very difficult to go on liking her old schoolfellow Desdemona, for she had a nature which was selfish and loved to have her own way. She had meant to win her cousin Michael, and now her hopes had been scattered to the four quarters of heaven.

"What made old Muriel do a bunk?" the latter asked Desdemona, with more interest than anxiety.

"Police!" laughed Desdemona, who had never said anything to a policeman in her life. She knew Muriel's secret and meant to keep it.

Of course "young-Drake-who-plays-the-banjo" turned up to hunt, and once again the rafters of the old house re-echoed to gay laughter and the tinkling of the negro melodies.

Michael liked Alec Drake, as did Desdemona, and they were enchanted to discover that he was escorting his sister to Monte Carlo on the day fixed for their own return to Nice. He was as

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pink and clean as ever, and just as enamoured of Desdemona and her beauty and grace.

"Some people have all the luck of the game," he said gloomily, on the morning of their first day, as they inspected the horses before breakfast. Desdemona had told him, with one of her swift blushes, that her wedding was fixed for May.

"But surely *you* needn't wait for a wife, with all your broad acres!" she laughed.

"If I waited till the crack of Doom I couldn't get *you*," he said, with a sudden burst of frankness which was embarrassing.

Desdemona replied rather coldly, "I didn't know you wanted to. No, I belong to Michael, and you're not to say a thing like that again, Sir Alec, do you hear?"

He was all contrition, and disappeared into the house, where they found him seated on the lowest step of the broad staircase, playing "Honolulu Moon" with terrific speed and noisy "swipings."

The old M.F.H. was in one of his best moods because Michael was at home. Had you told him so he would have been very angry, for he had no idea that he had any special affection for his heir. But the moment Michael and Desdemona entered the house, a sense of well-being descended upon the old Squire's restless spirit. Desdemona soon noticed it.

"I foresee our having to live here, oh, *mon Michel*," she said, stroking his sleeve with one of her pretty caresses.

"Might do worse," he said.

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“ But what price the coming sculptor ? ” asked Margareta, pausing, duster in hand.

“ That’s one good thing about sculpture—you *can* rig yourself up anywhere,” he answered.

“ And where should *I* come in ? ” queried Margareta.

“ Dear—you’d just do exactly that. You’d come in,” said Desdemona, kissing her.

Ottershaw went with them to Wargrave. Michael had no notion how to clean hunting things, and there were no servants to speak of there. Somebody had to turn him out properly, and that somebody was certainly Ottershaw, for not a man in the field looked smarter. Desdemona rode her little mare rather soberly, for she only wanted to keep Michael in sight or to hear of his whereabouts. He was a magnificent rider, for he not only inherited all the British love of sport, but also the incomparable horsemanship of the Italian. Had he but known it, old Sax-Pelham was bursting with pride. There wasn’t a man out to touch this upstanding young nephew of his. This sculpting ? All tommy-rot. He’d have to be cured of that. Chipping marble forsooth ! And all kinds of loose women sitting about to be carved, with no clothes on. So young Derussy had given him to understand. Desdemona, bless her heart, would send ’em all to the right-about. Still, there wasn’t any hurry. He was good for another twenty years, please God. Margareta had made the coffee too strong at breakfast, and he’d got indigestion

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this morning. Surely to goodness the wench could do *something* correctly. She'd a damned easy time of it.

As a matter of fact, Desdemona thought Margareta looking very pale and tired, and tried hard to persuade her to come back with them to Nice and let the Villa justify its name.

"I can't get away just now, dear," she answered. "I *can't* leave the old man; they'd give him all sorts of things to eat and drink, forget his hunting things, and the house would go to pieces."

"Nonsense, my dear. We're none of us indispensable. Don't think you are, or you'll be desperately unhappy," said Michael.

"But we like to *think* we are. Leave us our illusions," answered Margareta rather sadly, though she smiled.

"Oh, Gretta, think of the blue skies, the sapphire sea, the scent of the flowers!" cried Desdemona. Then she could have bitten her tongue off, for Margareta's sweet eyes filled with tears.

"Yes, yes, dear, do you think I don't know, don't *dream* of them? But the old man's been so *good* to me. I couldn't bear it, if he were ill or needed me in any way."

"Well, have it your own way," Michael said abruptly. Why was it that all people seemed inclined to be a little brutal with this sweet, unselfish woman—this active, untiring little cripple?

It was just that they *resented* her life. It wasn't

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right that she should be exploited as she was. She ought to be surrounded with comforts and luxuries, to have servants to wait on her. She was so often awake all night with the pain in her hip. Hang the old M.F.H. for a selfish old devil.

But Margaretta was of rare clay. She had set a certain goal before her, and she meant to reach it. She didn't classify it, or even know it by sight, and she would very likely have been surprised if a sudden vision had revealed a Cross—with a Figure on it. She just meant to stumble on with her crutch, doing everything she could to do the things which nobody else seemed to be there to do.

"I don't know when I shall see you again, then, if you won't come now," said her brother.

"Oh, I'll come to the wedding, Ruffles, darlin', of course. I shall see you all again then. Demon, what'll I wear? Think hard."

"In May? In London? Sugar and spice and all that's nice—with a hawk on your crutch instead of your wrist," laughed the girl, twining her arm round Margaretta's waist.

But they saw her before the wedding.

Altogether it was what Michael called a "hectic" visit—gone in a flash. On the Monday they had quitted the land of sunshine and roses, hunted for three days in a blinding rain, followed by a thick, white mist, necessitating cheery wood fires all over the house of Wargrave. Saturday found them once more *en route* for the Midi,

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wearied out as much with pleasure as fatigue. Indeed, Véronique insisted upon Desdemona remaining in bed for the whole of Monday until the evening, as she professed to be *choquée* by her pale face and shadowed eyes. So the girl consented, though not till the maid had remarked, as a side comment, that fatigue makes a woman look *sévère*, which Monsieur could hardly be expected to appreciate.

But she came down the grand staircase just before dinner as fresh as paint, calling out to her mother :

“ I feel like the star in a Cinema film. The places I've been to—the sights I've seen ! Michael felt just the same.”

Michael was quite undefeated by his “ hunting raid.” He was in first-rate condition after the hunting, and all anxiety to continue his work in the studio. He did not feel that Desdemona was made of the same clay as himself, however. She could and did walk several miles a day, but a collapse from tired nerves often followed, and he had made up his mind that she needed care and—sympathy. Her mother rarely spoke to her of things below the surface, he knew, and also he was fairly confident that she would be the very last person to whom Desdemona would turn in any perplexity.

“ There's always Margaretta,” he thought, comfortably. “ What a mercy it is that she loves the little Demon,” he thought.

But, had he but known it, a great deal of

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sentiment was woven into a certain yellow cupboard which stood almost in the darkness just outside Desdemona's door. It was a cupboard with shelves. Inside it, one upon the top of another, lay her trousseau, or rather the beginning of it. In the quiet early hours of the dawn she often got up, switched on the electric light, and after enveloping herself in her eider-down, sat down to sew. Very often she arranged herself in bed, and a charming little sight she looked, propped up by pillows, her lovely hair bound in classic waves to her head in the meshes of a pink or blue cap. Sometimes it was very warm, in these early hours of the sun's uprising, and then she would put no wrap around her shoulders, which gleamed through the lace of her nightdress like creamy ivory. She made a lovely picture in the mixed light of the sun and the electricity which fell upon her from the rose-shaded lamp above her head. For Desdemona was very grave over her needlework. These minute tucks and the drawn thread work were to bear the closest scrutiny, and very often she would put on a pair of round horn spectacles, thinking she might be straining the hyacinth eyes which she very well knew she possessed. She had visited an oculist once, for some temporary trouble, and had wheedled a prescription out of him which, had she but known it, was for almost plain glass. The oculist was guilty of thinking that she would look so extraordinarily charming in horn-rimmed spectacles, that she might as

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well put them on occasionally, if she wished it, for tinted lenses did nobody any harm. He was a man young in years, if old in wisdom. And when she stitched at a mass of diaphanous material in some kind of pastel shade, she really looked, with her background of pillows, like some little angel busy amongst the clouds.

Once, Olivia Brenderwood brought Michael into her bedroom, at that time when she had cut her foot climbing the hills with him and been obliged to rest it in bed for two days.

Michael had seemed a little shy, and had said very few words, never taking his eyes off her. When he got up to go, he had fingered the pale primrose muslin which she was "drawing," until it resembled, at one point just where she was intending to work a *motif*, a crumpled bit of tissue-paper.

"I'm *so* sorry, little girl. But—all these 'things' you make rather go to a fellow's head, you know. You're like a little burglar, robbing the spiders of their webs."

Desdemona had laughed her sweet, elfin laugh.

"Mumsie, listen. Wasn't that what Mrs. Browne would have called cute?" she cried. Then a shadow fell over her face, for she had forgotten for one brief moment about Mrs. Browne. Nobody spoke for a second or so.

Then came a day when Olivia announced that she must take Desdemona to Paris, to seriously shop. Michael, of course, could not go, and,

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“besides, you’d be as much in the way as the housemaids are in your bedroom when you want to powder your nose,” the latter had remarked. Then, repentant at the sight of his gloomy face, she flung her arms round his neck and said to his smock-clad chest:

“Dear, *darling* Ruffles! Every bit of it’s to make myself pretty for you.”

He raised her face to the level of his chin.

“*Pretty!* You ugly little thing—with your wig, your false teeth, your sack of a figure!”

Then they laughed like children together, so happy were they, so sure of their future.

In Paris, one day at Cartier’s, Mrs. Brenderwood and Desdemona met the Gravistocks. The old people always opened up their Paris *appartement* for six weeks or so after Christmas, and paid a very stately visit to the French capital.

There were mutual happy greetings.

“I want you to mount these for me, please,” Desdemona said, taking two tiny chips of marble from her bag. She addressed Cartier’s head man, who always served Lord Gravistock when in Paris.

Courteously this very perfect gentleman took the two pear-shaped bits of marble and looked up for further instruction. He would never have asked for enlightenment as to why and wherefore. But Desdemona always took people into her confidence.

“You see,” she said, smiling first at the old Earl and then at the very perfect knight on the

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other side of the counter, "I'm going to be married before long to Mr. Ruffini, the sculptor."

The knight bowed his immense congratulations, and thought what a prize the sculptor had drawn.

"And," went on Desdemona, "these two little bits of marble were chipped off me by Girodin, the *great* sculptor, you know."

The knight gave a violent start, completely mystified. Lord Gravistock came to the rescue.

"Miss Brenderwood means that they were chipped off a very beautiful statue of herself which Mr. Ruffini is executing," he explained, inwardly chuckling.

Mr. Bartlemere looked relieved. "I understand *perfectly*," he said. "And of course these little chips are of great sentimental interest."

"Well—they're jolly *valuable*, in a way, you know, and I'd like my—Mr. Ruffini to keep them always," said Desdemona, suddenly feeling shy and blushing gloriously.

So it was arranged that the two little bits should be quite simply set in a plain gold cigarette case. An inferior artist than Mr. Bartlemere would have tried to embody them in a design. Not so the very perfect knight. The cigarette case which eventually reached Desdemona was a marvel of good taste and beauty, for there was no design at all. The two little white chips merely lay in their gold setting across one corner, and underneath was engraved in Desdemona's best handwriting, "Girodin," and then the date on

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which the little Grey Monkey had paid his visit to the studio. Michael always said he liked it the best of all his wedding presents.

The small incident at Cartier's finished with an unexpected pleasure for Desdemona, for just as she was turning from the counter to collect her mother and Lady Gravistock, the Earl whispered something to Mr. Bartlemere, who promptly gave instructions to a coterie of perfect gentlemen. The result was, that when she left the shop half an hour later, she was the possessor of an emerald pendant which would have turned the operatic Marguerite into a maniac.

"My personal present, my dear," the old man whispered, "and God bless you, God bless you both."

Lady Gravistock smiled benignly.

"He *loves* brides, my child. He'd like to be the world's only Best Man—which he is," she added, patting her husband's arm affectionately.

He looked down into her old face beneath its Victorian bonnet and for a moment they both forgot everything and everybody—just for a second. Then Lord Gravistock settled his high stock, coughed, and said, "Tut, tut, my dear, what nonsense these young people put about." And they parted outside amidst the busy hum of one of the noisiest places in the world.

"Oh dear!" groaned Olivia, "these ancients are very heavy in hand."

Desdemona was indignant.

"Mumsie—they're such dears!"

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“She’s such a tremendous talker, she makes my brain hum. And it’s all too clever for me.”

“You could have been clever enough, Mumsie, if you’d liked,” answered Desdemona shyly. “You’ve never—given yourself a chance.”

Mrs. Brenderwood became a little more stately in her movement to the hired limousine which awaited them. Her colour deepened. She wondered what Desdemona really *thought* about her.

“How do you mean—*chance*?” she asked, as the motor glided away towards the Meurice, where they intended to have *déjeuner*.

The girl hesitated. Then, covered with a hot blush:

“Mumsie,” she stammered, “I wish—I wish——”

“Well, wish what? You’re very odd, child, at times. But you may as well finish.”

“You see, I’ve never been able to *get* to you—because—of him.”

“Of whom?”

“Oh, mother, *you know*. That everlasting Ilo Carrouchi.”

There! it was out now. All the dislike of her subconscious self, which had been accumulating since her childhood’s days. Dislike of what she felt was *unworthy*, even if it were nothing else.

But Olivia was suffering from sloth of the soul. She coloured a deep red, and her voice sounded rather like a bell which has a flaw—the first time Desdemona had ever heard it so.

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“ You are very selfish, child. You object to my having one single sympathetic friend! My life is very lonely. It is not *right* for anyone to live without sympathy. Why do you object to poor Ilo? ” she finished loftily.

“ Oh, Mumsie, you’re so clever and so beautiful! He’s—he’s sapped it all—so that its been—*no good*—to anybody,” the girl cried.

“ You mean—I am clever and beautiful—but *not good*? ”

Olivia’s voice was like drops of ice.

Desdemona had begun to cry a little and looked up in amazement.

“ I don’t understand. You’re my mother,” she said, simply.

“ Then—don’t forget it again,” said Olivia, smiling with sudden sweetness.

Chapter XV

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ONE beautiful evening about this time, towards the end of the working hours, Ottershaw decided that he would read in his little sitting-room, underneath the studio, instead of going out for a stroll, as he usually did for his two hours off duty. It had suddenly become terribly hot in Nice, and he felt limp and apathetic. He so often felt like that now. He had been told at the Club for gentlemen’s gentlemen, which he frequented in the town, that he looked a good

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deal older than he was. Had ladies been admitted to that Club, no doubt good manners would have prevented utterance being given to this pronouncement, which shows what happens under these circumstances. But it was perfectly true. Ottershaw was beginning to shrink and grow very grey about the temples—indeed almost to stoop. He said it was the foreign climate, the enervating heat. But it was really because he wasn't happy. Nobody can defy the advance of years, or hold and capture health, with the springs of happiness dried at their source. Ottershaw had never known real peace of mind since that evening eight years or so ago when Sir Edward Hemingford had been done to death. He had a guilty conscience. For he now most firmly believed that he was what he had so often heard his old master call "an accessory after the fact." That he had not known anything at all about it made no difference. He had known the bald truth—that Sir Edward had been poisoned by some person or persons unknown. Moreover, that person or those persons was or were presumably still at large. The man believed that he had done very wrong and foolishly in concealing his knowledge. He was haunted by the fear that one day the truth would come out, and he would have brought not only suspicion and disaster upon himself, but upon the family of Brenderwood generally, and their friends. That "murder will out," he became absolutely convinced. And yet, the more he

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thought about it, the deeper the mystery grew. For years and years now he had gone to sleep or lain awake trying to solve the problem, until the power to sleep had almost left him, and he felt his strength slowly ebbing away, his mind becoming dull with the burden of the secret. Especially now that his master's marriage with Miss Desdemona was drawing so near. Ought he to allow it to take place with the bride in ignorance of this sinister secret in the family? Over and over again, in the small hours of the morning, or at work brushing and folding clothes, he asked himself the same question, till his face grew grey and lined. His young master had said to him only yesterday, "Liver gone wrong, Ottershaw? You're as yellow as a guinea. Take half a day off and go for a really long walk."

To-night he felt particularly desperate. Possibly it was the great heat coming so suddenly. How like the day they had arrived in Nice off the Blue Train those eight long years ago!

But this was no time to linger in reminiscences. Two hours soon slip away, and if he were really going to read, he must get on with it.

So Ottershaw sat down before an old travelling box, now thick with the stains of time, and set to work to turn over, examine and "skim through" the things which had been and were yet to come. For he was what is called "free" in his opinions. He said he had an open mind about such questions as to the British people being the Lost Tribes, because they had always

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been so very much on the spot. But there was no doubt wonderful things were coming to light about ancient history through these excavations and grubblings about. Suddenly he remembered the fact that he had never read the book his master, Sir Edward Hemingford, had given him that time eight years ago. For a long, long time after his death he had felt that he could not look at anything which had belonged to him, and he had pushed *Excavations in the Near East* right down to the bottom of a kit-bag which his sister had taken charge of for several years, until he had brought it with him to Nice. It was full of things which he valued and had accumulated from time to time. Should he screw up his courage now to read this book which his old master had said was "so good"?

Presently he bent down and opened the old bag. Underneath a pile of miscellaneous odds and ends of books, photographs, clothing and so on, he dived his hand and brought up the blue book which we saw Sir Edward reading in the Blue Train. He knew the exact spot in the corner where he had put it. Many a time he had knelt by the old bag with the intention of fishing it up. And invariably he had changed his mind. He couldn't bear the sight of anything which had been on the table by Sir Edward's bedside that night. But this time he cursed himself for a fool and drew it out. For a moment he looked at it, and then he saw that one corner of the blue cover was a little

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worn and turned up. It was too much for him. It was a trick which Sir Edward had always had when absorbed in a book—wearing away the corner between finger and thumb. He had often laughed at it himself and deplored the habit. It brought his personality so vividly before Ottershaw that he hastily pushed the book back once more to the bottom of the bag, and seized a copy of *Lorna Doone* instead. He had grown quite white.

“Fool I am!” he muttered. “He told me to read it. I might at least do what he told me.” But not this evening, it was too hot for close reading. And so he tried to follow the adventures of Lorna.

It was useless. He couldn't fix his mind on it at all. He bent down and drew another chair up, placing his feet upon it, mopping his forehead. Then he began to think all over and over again about Sir Edward's strange death, his head sunk forward, his eyes fixed and vacant. Just as the clock struck six he came to a swift decision.

Desdemona had been spending one of her afternoons in the studio, for Michael was not quite satisfied with the waves of her hair, flying back from her shaded forehead. Over one ear the minutest thinning down of a curl would improve the statue, he felt sure.

To tell the truth, Desdemona would have been glad if he had not wanted her that afternoon, for she was feeling the heat and the fatigue of her

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busy shopping in Paris. She had planned to rest on her bed and go to sleep when Michael's telephone message had come through as usual. "Do come round, carissima, if you can. That right ear's too much hidden just where you wear that little pearl earring. It worries me."

So she had sat from four till five in a comfortable chair, it is true, for Michael had said standing was no longer necessary. Almost hair by hair the offending tiny curl had been chipped into a fascinating tendril, until the grave, frowning young sculptor was satisfied. Desdemona had been very silent. She was almost asleep, and rejoiced when at length Ottershaw brought her tea and Michael had put down his chisel and hammer.

"How infernally hot it is!" he said, and sent the valet for a whisky-and-soda, iced. When Ottershaw brought it, he said to his master:

"That man Colennio has come about the packing of the statue, sir, and says he must see you very particular about the insurance. He has to telegraph to-night about something, 'e said, sir."

"Ah! I wanted him to call. It's very important that—— All right, I'll come now."

Swallowing the contents of his glass thirstily, Michael divested himself, with Desdemona's help, of his overall. Then he kissed her tenderly.

"You're dog-tired, little girl, sitting so long in this heat. I won't be long. Wait for me,

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and we'll go for a stroll under the orange trees."

He was all eagerness to see this packer about his wonderful "Flying Girl." It was such an almost unbelievable thing that his great work was practically finished and would soon be gone, for weal or woe.

Desdemona went behind the old tapestry screen and settled herself comfortably in the roomy arm-chair to wait for Michael.

There she fell into a deep sleep, lost to all outward happenings.

It was shortly after that, that Ottershaw came to his decision. He would tell Mr. Ruffini the whole story of how Sir Edward met his end, that night more than eight years ago, and ask his advice as to whether or not he must tell the truth as far as he knew it.

When Michael ran up the stairs, after about half an hour's delay, he was full of apologies to Desdemona for having kept her waiting so long. But the studio, he concluded, was empty, for Desdemona had removed her hat and gloves from the table by the statue.

"Poor old girl, she was dead beat. Good thing she didn't wait any longer," he thought. Then he did what he frequently found himself passing odd minutes in doing—sat down on a chair, with the back in front of him, lit a cigarette, and with folded arms gave himself up to happy contemplation of his masterpiece. He knew it was very good. And that he should have reached

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the acme of his art in expressing Desdemona, crowned the labour with the keenest joy he had ever known.

Then, with a light tap, Ottershaw entered, looking greyer and older than ever.

“ May I speak to you, sir, for a few minutes ? ”

“ Of course.”

“ It’s a—story I want to tell you, sir.”

Michael glanced at him in surprise. Then he said, with a smile: “ Well, if you’re going to pitch me a yarn, you’d better sit down,” and half drew a chair forward. He saw that the valet was strangely moved. Somehow he was conscious of a curious cold feeling of apprehension in his own mind. What had this silent, correct man-servant to tell him ?

Ottershaw sat down exactly opposite his master, his hands and arms drooping between his knees.

“ Do you recall Sir Edward Hemingford’s death, sir, about eight years ago ? ”

“ Perfectly. The old man died suddenly one evening, just before dinner.”

“ You recollect the verdict ? ”

Michael thought for a second.

“ Heart failure. The old gentleman’s number was up.”

Ottershaw grew very grey about his mouth, and seemed to shrink, as he leaned a little more forward in his chair. His eyes looked like two live coals. Again Michael felt that curious goose-flesh sensation.

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“It was not heart disease, sir. My master was—*murdered.*”

Michael dropped his cigarette, and for the first time in his life the valet failed in his duty and did not pick it up.

“You—er—what? What d’you mean?” he asked sharply. Had the man gone mad? If so, it might be very unpleasant.

“Listen, sir. I always put my master a certain Tabloid, green in colour, and dissolved in water, by the side of his bed, in case of a threatened heart attack. By doctor’s orders, sir. I’d done so every single night for at least two years.”

Michael nodded.

“That night I put him to bed before dinner because he was tired, and I did as usual, opening a fresh tube containing twelve green Tabloids. The telephone bell rang, sir, and there was nobody to answer. Madame was out of the house with her guests at a party. So I answered it, and was detained for ten minutes. I’d left the tube on the table. After about a quarter of an hour I went to pick up the tube and see if Sir Edward was asleep.” Ottershaw stopped and swallowed hard.

“Go on,” said Michael, a little sternly.

“Mr. Ruffini, sir, *there were only nine Green Tabloids in the tube—and my master was dead.*”

“Good God!”

The valet took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. Then he sat and stared at a large

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tear which had fallen from his eyes on to the carpet. The truth was out, as far as *he* was concerned.

Michael got up and kicked away his chair. He stood above the crouching man, and said sternly:

“Yet the verdict was ‘death from heart failure.’”

“Yes, sir,” came the low answer. “Because I withheld the truth.”

“Why?”

Ottershaw looked up, miserably.

“Fear, sir. Blue funk. I benefited under the will.”

Michael sat down again. Something told him the man was telling the absolute truth.

“Why have you told me this now?”

“Because I can’t carry the secret any longer, sir. For God’s sake, tell me if I ought to tell the police.”

Michael remained perfectly silent for what seemed to them both an immense time. Neither of them moved an inch. They might have been one of the pieces of statuary in the studio.

“No,” came the answer at length from between Michael’s stern lips. “It would only cause unnecessary pain to everybody.”

Ottershaw staggered to his feet.

“You mean that, sir?”

“I do.”

“Then there’s only one thing left for me to ask you. *Do you think I had any hand in it, sir?*”

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Michael looked right down into the depths of the haunted eyes which were gazing hungrily into his.

Then he silently held out his hand, and master and servant stood for a brief moment linked together in a clasp which needed no words. Some of the pain went out of Ottershaw's face, never to return in quite the same way again.

Then, with a swift mental effort, the valet rallied his forces and picked up the still smouldering cigarette. Once again he was the perfectly trained man-servant.

"You'll dine at home, sir?"

"Yes, but I shall be at the Villa afterwards," said Michael, and both the men left the studio together. Not another word passed between them on the subject of the confession. It might never have been made. But Michael was profoundly disturbed. He went into his bedroom to change his clothes, and stood for a long moment deep in thought before his open window, gazing down into the busy street with totally unseeing eyes.

"*But, good God—who did it?*" he asked himself again and again.

He was, however, absolutely convinced that he had done the right thing in telling Ottershaw to continue his long silence. The mystery was so profound that it could never be solved. Let sleeping dogs lie.

He was equally convinced of the man-servant's innocence in the affair. There are some things

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about which absolute conviction comes to us, though we cannot exactly say why. He had done wrong, undoubtedly, in not speaking in the first instance, but it was not the silence of guilt.

"I hate not being able to tell Desdemona," Michael thought, for he had so far hidden none of his thoughts or affairs from her. But this was different. Of course he would have to keep this piece of family history to himself, right up to the last day of his life. Brought to light, it could only cause infinite pain, even if no publicity were involved. The mere knowledge that Sir Edward Hemingford had been murdered would be an unthinkable burden.

Now, when Ottershaw entered the studio that evening to tell his grisly tale, both he and his master believed it to be empty.

But, behind the big tapestry screen which shut off one corner of the large room, curled up in one of the roomy armchairs, Desdemona lay, lightly asleep.

Almost at the first words in Ottershaw's voice she stirred, roused by some subconscious knowledge from the outer world. Another moment and she was awake, startled and alert. She heard the valet say, "It's a story, sir, I want to tell you."

Desdemona leaned back in the armchair, trying to make up her mind to let the two men know of her presence in the room. But it seemed as if someone put a seal upon her lips and commanded her to be silent. A moment

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later she heard enough to keep her spellbound for an eternity. From start to finish she heard all that Ottershaw had to say. Slowly she drew herself up from her crouching position and leaned forward, her little hands clasped in front of her chest so tightly that the white knuckles shone through the flesh. With parted lips and darkening eyes she listened to the dark recital.

Into her mind there flashed, with the rapidity of lightning—a memory. She was a child again of about ten, playing about a twilight house apparently unconcernedly. Her mother and her gay friends had gone out in a motor, and wouldn't get home until it was time to dress for dinner. Nurse had gone downstairs, and stayed a little with the gay foreign servants who had congregated about the cool doorways. Michael was running about with her, playing hide-and-seek. Then he said he must go home, and she had found herself left alone. The house had seemed very quiet and dull. Why didn't Nanny come? She remembered that she had called out several times, "Nanne-e-e! Nanne-e-e!" but nobody came. Then she had walked downstairs and crept about the great hall. She would go and see her grandfather. She liked his mouth, and he had looked so kindly at her. Ah! there was the door. How *funny* to have a bedroom on the same level as the garden! She peeped in. The strange man-servant was standing with his back to her, close by his master's bedside. A deep curiosity had taken possession of her. What

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was he doing? She darted behind a curtain and crossed herself. You always did that if you didn't want to be seen, Nanny said. Ottershaw took a small phial from his pocket and held it up to the light. She remembered how pretty it looked, with the twelve Tabloids inside. She remembered he had extracted one. But that was nothing to the joy which had taken possession of her as she watched him take the glass which stood on the dressing-table and drop the tabloid into it. Instantly the water turned green, and what a clapping and laughing there was amongst the fairies, surely! A sudden snow-white mound of froth on the top of the pale green liquid. It was *délicieux! bien gentil!* Then across her memory struck the sharp tinkle of the telephone bell in the hall. Again and yet again. The strange man-servant had muttered something and gone out, never seeing her, hidden behind the curtain. And then someone had whispered in her ear or in her heart, "Make some more of the bon-bons dance in the green meadow!" No sooner said than done. Why not? Grandad was asleep, lying there with his eyes shut and that funny little smile on his lips. He must be having a happy dream. Quick as thought she had darted across to the table, picked up the phial, extracted two more of the green bon-bons, and dropped them in the glass. How she remembered the "pish" of the effervescing, the glorious deepening of the green water, the huge pile of white froth which had danced right

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over the sides of the glass and fallen on the carpet. She had laughed aloud, she remembered, and glanced, startled, at the sleeping figure of the old man. Then had come the distant voice of the valet, "Yes, Madame. I will see that Madame Brenderwood is told——"

How hurriedly she had replaced the glass full of the green liquid by the side of her grandfather, and fled, terrified, from the room, because she had fancied that his eyelids had fluttered! She had *just* escaped the man-servant, and only just. But it had been well worth it, to have the joy of seeing all that green water, and the sudden bubbling over. . . .

But now—now? What had she heard Ottershaw say? "*My master was—murdered.*"

Yes, he had said that. Her grandfather had swallowed the green water, with the extra Tabloids in it, and it had killed him. *Killed him.* And nobody knew who had done it. Michael had said, "Good God!" That old man, with his sweet smile, his kindly words, his eyes so exactly the same as hers—Desdemona's. He had not died because of his heart at all, but because she, *she* had murdered him. Just because she had wanted to see the water turn green and spit at her. Why had she entirely forgotten it all until Ottershaw had brought it all back to her? People were *hanged* for murder. Oh, but not girls like herself. She would not even be held guilty at all—at ten years of age. But still—it was *her* little fingers that had taken the Tabloids

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and dropped them into the water. Nothing could ever again change that. She was a murderess—for ever and ever and ever. When she knelt down to pray, it would be a murderess who prayed. When she danced at a party with young men, it would be a murderess who danced. Suddenly she gave a shrill little scream and held her head with her hands. Nobody heard her, up there in the studio. She must get her hat and go out of this house—this house of Michael's.

Chapter XVI

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IT was Desdemona indeed who emerged from behind the screen—but how changed a Desdemona! Her radiant, brilliant little face, with all its power of expression and play of feature, had turned into a still, white mask. Deep shadows lay under the purple-blue eyes and about the mouth. But it was the eyes which were the worst. They looked like *dead* things, just able to move by some mechanism over which she had no control. Had Michael wished to model a "Mask of Horror," he had it now to hand in his own studio. She moved very slowly, as if just propelled by this same mechanism which had been attached to her.

To understand how great to Desdemona was the shock of discovery that she had been in actual fact guilty of her grandfather's death, we must

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realise her temperament and character a little. She was a "spoilt child of fortune," if we may employ a term which only partly expresses her, for she was utterly unspoilt in one sense. But it was literally true that she had never known anything but ease both physically, mentally and spiritually. She had been blessed with perfect health and her education and general environment had furnished her with the best of all the world can offer in the way of literature, art and music. She belonged to the Latin Church, which is of necessity all things to all men, and had only been *shown* the best in spiritual matters. She had been in the care of Father le Touche, whose noble nature and fine perceptions had polished her soul, so to speak, until she hardly realised that there are souls which remain uncut and unclean. She was a very lovely character, in spite of a modern education, and had only been utterly redeemed from a kind of precious monotony by the fact that she had a keen sense of humour, which was, perhaps, her greatest charm. Laughter and fun came to her call as easily as did the tender grace of pity and sympathy. She had never even remotely touched pitch, or come in contact with the seamy side of life. Father le Touche had been all along well aware of this, and had often wondered with sadness and apprehension how or in what form the Shadow of the Cross must fall across the girl's flower-decked path, as fall it must.

Such things as crime, police, immorality or

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lawlessness were only known to Desdemona theoretically. We can, then, perhaps understand a little what it meant to her to find that she herself, personally, was guilty of what has always been held to be the greatest of all crimes—murder. She wasn't so foolish as to accept the actual blood-guiltiness. She knew, of course, that she was utterly innocent from that point of view. But what the great shock brought home to her was exactly what is experienced by some of the finer natures amongst those who discover that they have been born out of wedlock—that they are illegitimate. She must for ever go through life *branded*. The position is false through and through, of course, viewed in the fierce light of a Christianity which tells us of a God who is both just, loving and merciful. But nevertheless it is a position which for some inscrutable reason will always be accepted by those who have very keen perceptions of the evil of law-breaking. Some feeling of being *outcast* seems inevitable.

And in one brief moment of realisation this great shock had come to Desdemona with the sudden return of memory. In her subconscious self had lain dormant, all these years of girlhood, the remembrance of this apparently trivial incident of her nursery days. The swift depression which had seized her that sunny evening because her playmate, Michael, had gone home; the empty house, perhaps physical weariness—all had led to the rapid succession of events, the whole not taking more than five minutes, which had cul-

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minated in the fun and adventure of dissolving two more of the Green Tabloids.

The shock was to a great extent physical as well as moral. She felt sick and ill. Slowly she picked up her hat and gloves, and without putting them on, she passed down the stairs, across the hall and out into the now darkened street. Ottershaw was in his pantry at the back of the flat and heard no sound.

At that very moment Michael gazed down into the street, and started at the sight of a graceful figure far down below, which vaguely reminded him of Desdemona. Just flitting underneath a lamp standard. What nonsense! Desdemona out without a hat—in the dark street! A fleeting likeness. Well, God bless her happy, joyous little soul, she should never know this unfortunate story from him. He wished Ottershaw had never told him, for he would never be able to forget it, he knew, nor cease to speculate upon the solution of what appeared to be an absolutely motiveless crime of deepest mystery. Two people benefited under Sir Edward Hemingford's will—Olivia and eventually Desdemona. And to a very minor extent, Ottershaw. Why he felt so certain that the valet had had nothing whatever to do with the crime, Michael could not have said. But he *knew* that he was innocent of all but the stupid blunder of concealing the fact. Of course in one way it was a mighty relief that he *had* held his tongue, for the publicity and misery of all the after effects of undetected murder would have

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been the very devil. And perhaps the real perpetrator of the crime would have been found by mistake. Olivia? Michael shuddered. But no, that was impossible. She was miles away. Not a servant near. Yet all over and done with in ten minutes, and—not a sound, not a clue. An absolutely impenetrable mystery. There was one possibility. Ottershaw might have given the old gentleman three Tabloids in mistake for one—through absent-mindedness. But that was extremely unlikely, because, though a man might, conceivably, have given *two* by mistake, he wouldn't go on to give three. Now, would he? Had he done right to tell him to go on holding his tongue? After all—perhaps in a moment of aberration—no, no, he had seen nothing but a pathetic innocence in the man's eyes just now, an eagerness to know his opinion, but no guilt.

“Yet the evidence is so strong against him, that I believe if I called in the police nothing could save him,” thought Michael. He dressed for dinner that night in a dream, feeling oppressed and almost angry that this confounded thing should have been thrust upon him. Well, Desdemona had promised to show him a new dance step that evening, and her merry laugh would soon thrust the ugly story into the background, thank God.

In the meantime, Desdemona stumbled along the street which took her past the Church of the Sacred Heart. Although she was close to the garden entrance to the Villa “Bon Repos,” she

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turned almost mechanically into the cool, dark Chapel. All was in darkness, except for the soft light, just sufficient to guide her steps, which came from the few lights burning about the Chancel and High Altar. In the side Chapel there were only the lights which glowed in the candle-stands around the figure of the Blessed Virgin. She could just see the sweet face beneath its golden crown, bending over the Infant whom she clasped in her blue-starred robe. Had the Mother of God anything to say to a murderess?

The girl sank in a huddled heap on the broad steps before the figure, and her soft Panama hat slid down them. Down on her arms, thrown out on the cold marble, went her little bronze head in utter self-abasement. Right away, somewhere by the vestry door, two Sisters of the Confraternity were flitting about, busy on various small duties. In the Chapel of St. Ambrose, right across the church, there was some kind of service going on, for the choir was chanting Psalms in low, rapid tones. Or were they just practising? There was a faint smell of incense, and the church was very hot.

Desdemona tried to pray, but her ideas seemed to have got confused. She found herself asking Our Lady not to murder Macbeth. She tried to tell her quite simply all about her grandfather's death and what it meant to her. Always it had been her custom just simply to tell the dear Mother everything, and peace had always come. But—oh, horror! what was she saying?

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“ Out, damned spot ! out, I say ! ”

She raised herself partially from the cold floor, and gazed at her little hands. Then she began to wash them.

“ Lady Macbeth ! ” she cried to the gracious, smiling image towering above her. The two Sisters at the distant Altar started and looked at one another.

“ What was that ? ” cried Sister Clare, her hands suddenly still amongst the white blossoms in one of the Altar vases.

“ Some street cry, ” said Sister Paulina, who wanted her supper.

It came again across the dim, incense-laden space—a strange, heartbroken cry.

“ It’s someone in the Lady Chapel—someone in distress ! ” cried Sister Clare, and she hastened across the Chancel.

“ Always the same—no peace ! ” muttered Sister Paulina, compelled to follow.

Desdemona heard their soft, padding footsteps approaching. The Murderers were coming to kill Our Lady. Something seemed to snap in her brain, and she fell unconscious across the steps.

“ It’s Desdemona Brenderwood ! I know her well ! ” cried Sister Clare, down on her knees beside the prostrate figure. “ She’s fainted. It’s the great heat. We must get her home. ”

But Sister Paulina was busy taking stock of the well-cut gown, the little shoes, appraising the simple pearl necklace.

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Upstairs at the Villa "Bon Repos," Olivia was seated before her dressing-table, attended by Lucie. Her hair had just been "set" with the lotion recommended by Albert, and was confined for a moment in a neat, tight little golden net. Lucie was rubbing a white cream into the plump shoulders and neck. Someone knocked at the door. The maid answered it, and came back looking excited.

"Madame, Mees Deemon *est malade*. *Il y a deux Sœurs de Charité qui*——"

Olivia rose rather hastily, and went to the door, where one of the housemaids stood. She gathered that Desdemona had fainted in the Chapel, and had been escorted back by Sister Clare and another Sister. They were helping Véronique to put her to bed.

"*Desdemona ill!*" thought Olivia, as she hastily removed her golden net, patting the symmetrical waves of her hair. "I can't believe it."

In a few minutes she was slipped by Lucie into her shimmering black gown, which was perfectly straight and short on her now thickening figure. She waited long enough to see her handkerchief scented, her pendant clasped. Then she swept along the corridor to Desdemona's bedroom. Sister Clare had got rid of Sister Paulina, and she turned swiftly to greet this radiant figure in shimmering black, with the fossilised hair. She held up a warning finger. Desdemona appeared to be asleep, lying limp and white beneath the coverlet.

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"We found her unconscious on the floor of the Lady Chapel," said the Sister in a whisper.

"She must have felt the heat very much," said Olivia, "but fortunately it isn't serious."

Sister Clare looked at her. Olivia was even now fingering her jewelled cigarette case, and had merely glanced at the girl in the bed.

"Madame—I fear it *is*," she said, a trifle dryly.

"Nonsense. Desdemona is *never* ill. But thank you all the same, so very much, dear Sister," she said, her voice low and honey-laden. "I was going out this evening, but of course it wouldn't be *right*, would it?"

"Certainly not," answered the Sister, firmly. Would this foolish woman *never* stop thinking of herself? She had often seen her in Chapel, at Mass, but not often with Miss Desdemona. "I think you must call in a medical man," she said, gently.

When Doctor Milleni came, he seemed puzzled. Desdemona lay in a kind of stupor.

"She has had a great shock of some kind," he announced, after watching his patient with folded arms for a few minutes. "What shock?"

Olivia shrugged her plump shoulders. What a bore this all was. The girl had had a touch of sun, no doubt. She suggested that.

"No. There has been no sun at all to-day—to speak of," he said.

Olivia suddenly thought of certain words Camille Derussy had said to her a few days ago.

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“*Nous verrons. Un jour—ce beau Michel—seul avec sa belle petite fiancée en haut là—elle aura un ‘choque’—comprenez ?*”

Was this the explanation? Had anything—happened? She felt rather queer suddenly.

“Desdemona, child?” she said, bending over the girl.

Desdemona turned a little.

“All right—Mumsie.”

With a sigh of relief Olivia turned to the doctor.

“She is conscious. She spoke to me,” she said, rather contemptuously. Were they all making an unnecessary fuss?

Doctor Milleni shrugged his thin shoulders.

“Ah, yes—but—she has had a shock,” he said in a low tone. “Keep her quiet.”

For three days and nights Desdemona lay inert and half conscious in her cool, darkened bedroom, eating little, speaking less.

Sister Clare remained with her, by special permission from her Convent. Doctor Milleni still clung to his original theory of a shock, and was more than a little puzzled. He did not mention his opinion again, because he soon discovered that Madame Brenderwood and all her world had decided that the girl was suffering from a slight *coup de soleil*. It was better that they should think so, perhaps. Nobody would ever know what had caused the sudden collapse. Queer things happened to girls in good society, so he'd been told. Nice girls became even as

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his patient. Girls who were not nice went on their primrose-decked path untroubled. He was only certain of one thing—that the sun had been obscured by clouds all the day, and that therefore Mees Desdemona was *not* suffering from sunstroke. Moreover, she hadn't the necessary symptoms.

During those three days Michael came and went from his studio to the Villa and back again until he knew every stone in the road by heart. He was deeply distressed and puzzled. But he, too, accepted the general verdict, not knowing very much about sunstrokes, slight or severe. He had always gone out in the fiercest sunshine himself, without a hat, but men were different. Of course Desdemona had been reckless, and he called to mind that she had seemed very tired and disinclined to talk that last day on which she had "sat" for him. Why, oh, why had he kept her so long? He ought to have seen that she was really ill. She had uttered no complaint, but when he came to think of it, she hadn't helped him off with his overall very satisfactorily, as she always did after the sitting was over. It was then that he had been in the habit of breaking the silence which usually reigned almost unbroken between them when he was at work, and had wondered a little that she had seemed in no hurry to talk. After that, he had hurried away to see the packer, and had found Desdemona gone on his return. Over and over again he went through all the events of that

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unhappy evening, and fought valiantly with the details of his work. But an absolute change had swept across the broad field of his life. He, too, was suffering in some sense from what they called *choque*, and had a vague fear that things might not right themselves.

He usually appeared at the door of the bedroom where Desdemona lay, and waited a little. Sister Clare, gathering up the threads of the catastrophe, had discovered that these two had been a very devoted couple, both of them completely bewildered by something which had come between them. What it was, she deliberately set herself to find out, because she believed that Desdemona would recover, could her interest be roused in anything. But she utterly failed in her design. Through every phase of her reaction from this great *choque*, Desdemona refused to throw any light on the affair. She ate and drank "such things as they gave," talked in much her old style, except that she was a good deal graver. "I have written to tell him," she whispered one day to her mother—"what was it?"

"What was what?" said Olivia.

"That the doctor said I had?"

"A slight touch of the sun, my child. Nothing to speak of."

"Ah, yes. I've explained it to him—a touch of the sun."

"When will you see him?" asked her mother. Desdemona shivered a little and grew white.

"Soon—perhaps. Not yet. My head aches."

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“Naturally. There’s no hurry. By the way, Camille has just sent these.” She placed a glorious bunch of pink roses on the girl’s pillow, close to her head, and thought how lovely her bronze hair looked beside them. Olivia had always given ungrudging admiration to Desdemona’s beauty. A sudden flush came into her cheeks.

“I never take his presents, you know, Mum-sie,” she said quickly. Then it was as if some recollection came to her, for all the life died out of her face again and she added, “Not that it matters now.”

Olivia pondered over this and wondered greatly.

Then, one day, Desdemona sat up and asked for writing materials once more. Sister Clare gave them to her with a word of caution.

The letter she wrote was to Michael, and this was put into his hands that afternoon as he sat downstairs, drinking tea with Olivia, miserable and silent. Why wouldn’t Desdemona see him, now that she was able to sit up and was getting better, they said? Until now he had only got as far as her door, where he had had news of her from Sister Clare; and one brief pencil note saying, “I will write soon. I have had a touch of the sun.—Desdemona.” Neither more nor less, and the writing as usual, but weak.

He had sent masses of flowers and fruit. Even books, although he knew she might not read. She would do so one day.

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The letter was written in ink, and it was in Desdemona's most clerkly style.

"There is something I cannot tell you, Michael. And the worst part of it is, that I know you will never forget me, because you will always love me just as I love you—and that is for ever and ever and ever. *But I cannot marry you.*—Desdemona. P.S. Oh, Ruffles! how can I bear it!"

Olivia watched him. He had seized the note so eagerly, thinking that at last she was writing to say she could see him. But it was evidently not so, for she saw the blood ebb slowly from his cheeks and lips as he read. His face grew grey and older-looking.

"What does she mean?" he groaned.

Olivia held out her hand for the letter. But Michael folded it up and placed it in his inner pocket. Even at that bitter moment he remembered that it was meant for his eye alone.

"She says she won't marry me," he said in a dull voice, staring in front of him. They were in the small golden salon.

Mrs. Brenderwood started.

"Why?"

"God knows."

"I'll go and see," said Olivia, drawling sweetly. "It wouldn't be *right* for me to leave matters in such an unsatisfactory position." She got up and left the room with her usual dignity.

Then Michael drew the little note again from his pocket—read and re-read it. He was white

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and trembling now that Olivia's eye was no longer upon him.

"She means it. Desdemona always means what she says," he found himself saying. "What has come between us?"

Then he forgot all about Olivia and left the house.

When that lady, however, said she would go up and see Desdemona, she went just as far as the next room, the library. There she waited for about a quarter of an hour, with the door shut. She employed the time in writing to Camille Derussy.

When she re-entered the drawing-room, all sympathy and worry, Michael had remembered and come back.

Olivia held out her hands. Tears stood in her false, sweet eyes.

"Michael, my poor, poor boy. She says she will never, never marry you. She no longer loves you."

"That, at any rate, is a damned lie," he said, drawing himself up to his full height and speaking quite quietly. Then he left the room.

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Chapter XVII

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OF course it was a nine days' wonder. People wondered and talked and even wrote to the papers about it. That is to say, it occasioned a great deal of interest in the Press and Society. Like popular murders, there seemed to be no motive. What *could* have gone wrong between two young people so obviously in love with one another, so well-dowered, so unhampered? There were innumerable conjectures, and of course not one of them in the remotest way fringing on the truth.

When Desdemona got up again, she had faced the situation in her own very capable little brain, and decided once for all that she was right in breaking off her engagement. What possible good could come of allying herself with Michael's life, with this sword of Damocles above her head? At any moment Ottershaw might repent of his decision to be silent. He might tell his tale, and then would follow a *cause célèbre*. Most assuredly the truth would never come to light, for she, Desdemona, alone could tell it, and she knew that would be the wrong thing to do. But it was not only the horrors of publicity which she dreaded. It was that she would be for the rest of her life a branded wife—a woman about whom

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men would whisper, "Ah, yes, you know she was only a child then. But her mother and the valet were mixed up in it. She's the wife of Ruffini the sculptor, poor devil. Very queer affair. *Somebody* did it, of course," and so on. "*Somebody's* kept quiet about it." And all the time it was she, she, Desdemona, who had sent the old man out of this world, and perhaps all the misery of the inquiry would make her lose her head one day and tell Michael the truth. God keep her from that. The only way to make that impossible, as far as he was concerned, was not to enter his life at all. No, no, the more she thought of it, the more certain she grew that she was right. And there was another thing. The evidence against Ottershaw would be so strong that they might conceivably find him guilty. What would be her position then? The very thought of it made her brain reel. There was absolutely no way out of it but silence, complete and absolute. They might even suspect her mother, because they might think she was in league with Ottershaw. Oh, Mary, Mother of God, help her, Desdemona, to keep for ever silent. As a Catholic, what about her confessions? Here she decided also to keep silent. For she need not confess anything which did not involve *guilt*. She was at liberty to hold her tongue about sorrow, perplexity or any complication in life. It was only *sin*—actual guiltiness of mind and body—which she must, at the peril of her soul, confess.

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So she got up from her bed with her mind fully made up, and tried to take up the threads of her life again. But she found that it meant a new weaving altogether, for every part of her life had been so closely bound up with Michael that it involved a tearing up of all she had ever known, done or thought, and starting a fresh pattern. To all who knew her well, and naturally asked what had gone wrong, she gave almost an identical response.

“I found I was making a mistake, and that would have been so unfair to him.” Her friends were bound to accept this statement, but they greatly wondered.

“They seemed so *marvellously* suited,” they said. “Shows you never can tell.”

As to Michael, he was dumfounded. It dried up the well-springs of his happiness at the very source. He was like a lost soul, wandering about all day, and a good part of the night too, trying to fathom the mystery. He found he couldn't work at all. He would don his overall, take up his hammer and chisel, and begin to chip and mould. But in a few minutes he stopped and laid down the tools. He was obliged to put the very, very last touches to “The Flying Girl,” for she, too, was passing out of his life. Never, never, as long as he lived, would he look upon this statue again, unless he were absolutely compelled. He and Desdemona had meant to make a little festival of the first day they would see it on view

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in Paris. For Michael had little doubt of its acceptance by the Committee. A piece of work which had been sealed with the approval of Girodin was hardly likely to be rejected. And indeed we know that it was afterwards exhibited in every capital of Europe, until it was finally bought by the French nation, and placed in front of the beautiful new "Salle des Aviateurs" in Paris. He and she had planned to have a select little champagne luncheon, to which they would ask some of the rarest spirits of the hammer and chisel—perhaps the great Girodin himself. For the little Grey Monkey was very accessible where he had once bestowed his approval and liking. How proud a day it was to have been for him and Desdemona! What pledgings of each other! What congratulations! What a goal achieved—what a triumph! He and the woman by his side, from whom the inspiration had come!

But now he didn't care a tinker's curse if they ground it to powder, or sank it to the bottom of the Atlantic. He never wished to see it again. It was just the song in marble of his unspeakable love and worship of the girl who had been intended, since the beginning of time, for his bride. And now—"I can never marry you.—Desdemona." Just that. It was, it seemed, she who was the sculptor, not he. For she had done what he could never have achieved. She had carved those words upon his heart.

Over and over again, as the wretched days went

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on, he tried to face the thing like a man, to argue with himself that life brings these knock-out blows, and you've just got to stand up to them. It had happened to thousands of other men, to be thrown over by the girls they loved. It happened every day. Sometimes under far more discreditable circumstances. Yet men picked up their lives again, and even got engaged to other girls. Such a reaction as that, however, seemed absolutely incomprehensible to Michael. Two days after the blow fell, he walked up the mountains to see Father le Touche. He found the priest digging up his little garden, ready for the few flowers without which he would have been miserable, so he said, in the summer. He saw, with his usual acumen, that all was not well with Michael, but he was for once completely taken aback when he had heard of Desdemona's strange fainting fit and its outcome. He could not reconcile it with all he knew of the girl's character and life. The last time he had seen her, only a few days ago, she had seemed so happy that he had found himself envying such careless joy, and wishing with all his soul that it might continue. He had always admired Desdemona's free spirit, and used to think at times that she must resemble those celestial beings whom we know as "Guardian Angels," and whom he always pictured as extraordinarily strong and beautiful—incapable of any meanness. He walked with Michael into the Presbytery in silence, and sat for some time

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in deep thought. Then he looked at the stricken man, whose back was turned towards him—waiting.

“Of course you can only accept the position she insists upon, at present, Ruffini. There’s something behind it all, that’s a certainty. My advice to you is the hardest one can give to a man who has had a knock-out blow like this—*wait*. Whatever is the real reason of it all will come out, I’m confident, and then she must find you just waiting.”

Michael answered without turning round, and his voice was broken as if he were in physical pain.

“I shall be waiting, Father, even if I’ve got to stand by till the crack of Doom.”

Father le Touche glanced at the almost life-size carving of the Crucifixion which hung on his unpictured wall. No. This was not the moment in which to appeal to Michael from a spiritual standpoint. He was too ill *physically* as yet. It was small matters like this which had made the priest so successful in dealing with human nature, during his ministry at the Chapel of the Sacred Heart. He seemed to have a strange intuition about psychological moments, and never considered himself in the light of a specialist in theology. There were so many ways to Christ, so many and varied the pilgrims. One man’s meat was another man’s poison, he would say whimsically, at times, in his broken English.

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Therefore he got up and put his hand on the shoulder of the stricken man.

“Michael, come up the hills with me and catch some trout. It’s just that you want, man—distraction. And so do I. It’s been a bit of a wrench, having to leave my dear people down there and——”

“Be side-tracked,” answered Michael, trying to overcome the great wave of desolation which swept across him. After all, he knew that Father le Touche had no home, no ties, hardly any relations, no money, and now no health. Yet he was there, *always*, when he was wanted. To minister spiritually or physically to anybody who wanted help of him.

“Yes. We’re both side-tracked, just now, you and I. You know the brown pool up by the waterfall of Saint Christophe?”

For a moment life leaped in Michael’s blue eyes.

“Rather. The trout simply sit and look at you.”

Father le Touche laughed cheerily.

“I like the idea of a trout *sitting*,” he said. For the first time Michael smiled.

For half an hour they busied themselves with fishing tackle and then set out. The afternoon was gloriously hot, with a total absence of oppression or thunder. Nevertheless, Father le Touche looked at the sky once or twice and shook his head. He had studied the heavens so often that he was seldom wrong in his impressions.

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“ I think we are going to have intense heat again,” he said. During the afternoon they were often separated, but somehow the priest contrived that it should never be for long. He spoke occasionally of Desdemona and all Michael had told him, but made no attempt to suggest any special consolation. They caught several small trout, rather under one pound, and the priest’s kind heart beat fast with joy as he heard Michael’s exclamations of excitement during the “ play ” of the little creatures, as they darted backwards and forwards amongst the brown stones and tried, apparently, to leap up the sides of the lovely little bubbling stream. The fisherman had, at least, moments of complete forgetfulness.

When they parted in the evening light, at the door of the Presbytery, Father le Touche said :

“ Send for that charming sister of yours. The one who—Martha, you know, who fetches and carries at Wargrave.”

“ Margareta, you mean.”

“ That may be her name, but—she’s one of the Marthas of this life. Get *her* to come and talk to Desdemona.”

Michael stood for a moment, lost in thought.

“ I wonder if she’d come,” he said, a little ring of hope in his voice.

“ Yes—but tell her you’ve got to have some special kind of soup.”

Once again Michael smiled.

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“Father, you’re a wonderful man,” he said.

“Nonsense. But I remember your Margaretta.”

He had once stayed at Wargrave, before he became a priest. Was there just a tiny note of pain in his voice?

He watched Michael out of sight, and sighed as he noted a stoop in his shoulders which he had never seen before. He stood till the light of the setting sun had turned from crimson to gold and then to purple, before he remembered that his housekeeper had told him his supper was ready. Usually he prayed at the foot of his Crucifix, but very often when he was standing at his door. After his early meal there would be a service in the little church.

Margaretta dropped her crutch with a clatter upon the floor when she received Michael’s letter—the S.O.S. Her uncle picked it up with considerable difficulty and then swore with much less.

“Oh, Uncle, things have all gone wrong with Desdemona, and she’s thrown Michael over!” she cried in amazement as she read.

“What, what? Gone wrong? Gone wrong? What the devil do you mean? She’s not a wench out of the streets. Choose your words, Madam,” the old man almost shouted. He turned an ominous brick-red all over his head and neck—a sign his huntsmen watched and feared, for they knew it meant a trouncing for someone.

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Margaretta gave him the letter to read, and went away to tell her astounded and very limited establishment that it must look after itself. As for herself, she was going to-morrow to the south of France, to see her brother. What the pleadings of joyous serenity had failed to do was easily accomplished when the cry was one for help. Surely she would be able to get to the bottom of this mystery. Girls didn't do these things unless their troubles were very serious indeed.

"And who's going to make my coffee, and mix my drinks? Women gad about now to such an extent there's no comfort anywhere. Better keep an aeroplane or two, Madam, in the stables, with a pirate or pilot, or whatever they call them."

"Can't say I've noticed Margot's neglect of her duties," murmured Richard Ruffini, who had come for a week-end. He was irritable because of this news from Nice.

The Squire marched out into the garden, grunting angrily. The hunting was over and he missed his sport and his daily "scraps" with everybody. Of course there were the flowers. Funny thing, he loved flowers—for all the world like a sentimental schoolgirl. There was no gardener at Wargrave, and yet the rambling grounds were a mass of blossom for most of the year. The fact of the matter was, everybody gardened at Wargrave, as soon as the hunting was over and the spring had set in. If somebody

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fancied a particular flower, he or she bought the plants or the seed and put them in wherever they wished. The labourer who dug it all over, dug the things up very often, unless warned by a kind of board—labels were no use. But for the most part he let them alone, and the result was a kind of wild garden, riotous with bloom, and the expression of individual fancies. Here, for most of the day, the old M.F.H. weeded and spudded. This afternoon he pulled up a great many flowers and threw them away—roots and all. Richard Ruffini recognised some of them as being favourites of his sister, and remonstrated. He expected a torrent of tropical language and (he told Margareta afterwards) “turned up m’ coat collar!” But the Squire suddenly said, leaning on his spade, gazing down on the ground:

“She was a nice little gal, Dick. I’d have cut off my right hand to prevent this happening to Michael. What’ll become of him?”

Richard threw a stone at the heron who was standing on one leg over there, on the hill leading to the Norman-looking Tower. The bird slowly withdrew its gaze and walked away.

When Margareta arrived in Paris the next evening she was glad to rest. She had forgotten how to travel, and was quite alone. Michael had suggested, manlike, that she should “hire” a maid, but Margareta had ignored the suggestion. She was an independent woman, as so many cripples are, and had long ago faced the

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fact that the easy things of life, comparatively speaking, were not for her. But she wasn't accustomed to the noise of it all, and her head was confused and bewildered by the shouting, the foreign languages which buzzed about her, and the incessant demands for papers from her person! In fact, she felt very much the same as old Sir Edward Hemingford had felt, at the end of his journey to Nice, all those years ago. To find modern conditions of life tolerable, we must plunge in up to our necks, for to pause is to drop behind and never catch up again. Perhaps that is why so many people rush on—because they dare not stop.

Michael was inexpressibly glad to see her. He would have left Nice as soon as Desdemona had broken off the engagement, but he found it impossible to get away. He had accepted an order from a very wealthy South African magnate who was staying at Beaulieu, for a statue of Hermes for his front hall at Capetown. He wanted it very quickly.

“Now, you understand, Mr. Ruffini, it's to be '*Ermes* and nobody else.”

“It's rather difficult to make mistakes amongst the gods, Mr. Rudesheim,” Michael had answered, we fear ironically.

“Well, if all tales be true, there was a good few made amongst the goddesses, Mr. Ruffini.”

“One up for you, sir,” the young sculptor had replied.

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So he was obliged to stick to his work, and perhaps it was a good thing. But Margareta forgot her own weariness as soon as she caught sight of his face. He folded her close in his arms, for he was so very, very glad to see her, but she was instantly aware of the deep tragedy which had struck him down as winter falls over a summer landscape.

“Oh, Desdemona, child, what have you done?” she cried the next day, when, all unannounced, she limped into the entrance hall of “Bon Repos.” Desdemona had not known of her arrival, or even that she had been asked to come. For, of course, as Father le Touche had said, Michael had been obliged to accept the position, and so, where hitherto he and Desdemona had shared every thought and plan, there was now complete severance. It was like a beautiful fruit, cut completely in two by a sharp knife. They had met once or twice, but only in the presence of a third person. To both the separation held a bitterness and pain which made them get out of one another’s sight as quickly as possible.

“*Margot!*” exclaimed the girl, her face alight with pleasure and surprise as she kissed her unexpected guest warmly, once, twice. Then she remembered all that had happened and drew back.

“Sit down, Margot,” she said, and Margareta heard the same note of dull dragging pain which had impressed her in Michael’s voice. “You’ve come to Nice—because of this?”

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“Entirely. Michael wrote. Desdemona, what is the matter?”

Both of them instinctively clasped hands—all four hands—and faced one another.

“I cannot, cannot tell you.”

“You can offer no explanation of what is, on the face of it, a great outrage, an unpardonable slight?”

Never before had Margareta spoken like this. The head of this lady of the house of Sax-Pelham was held very high, and her mouth was very stern. Yet she kept tight hold of Desdemona’s hands.

“I can say *nothing*.” Desdemona’s head, her lovely little bronze head, sank very low, and presently a hot tear fell on Margot’s hand.

“Then—are you rightly named—*Demon*?” went on the Grand Inquisitor.

What a temptation it was then to Desdemona to tell the whole story to Margareta! Could she? And ask her advice? But her brain, her soul, her reason alike shouted in her ears, “No! No! No!” For if she did, could Margareta possibly wish her to marry her brother? With all the possibilities the future might hold?

Of course Desdemona was probably exaggerating the entire position, and had she poured out the whole story to Margareta, it is possible that that matter-of-fact person would have counselled an immediate resumption of the engagement and called it all “a storm in a tea-cup.” It is im-

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possible to say. Murder is a very ugly thing to contract an alliance with, when there are possibilities of disclosure in the future. Sadly she raised her tear-stained face, her hands still in Margaretta's.

"Gretta, don't look at me like that. I think you ought to know one thing. There's nobody in the world for me but Michael. I love him with such a love that—I *couldn't* hurt him."

Margaretta started. Then her pale, grave little face coloured painfully.

"Demon, darlint," she whispered, in her soft Irish voice, "is it—that—some villain has—*hurt*—you?"

Desdemona was silent for a moment. She had another sudden temptation. Would it be best to let them think—that? It would at least be an explanation which would satisfy them—which would make her a legitimate object for *pity* instead of bewilderment.

Then to her, too, came a great wave of pride. Better a thousand times that she should be called callous, mysterious, heartless, than that the world should speak of her with bated breath as—*damaged goods*.

She took Margaretta's now trembling hands in her own and raised them to her lips.

"No, dear. Thank God—it isn't that at all. I can only promise you this—that if circumstances ever make it possible, I will tell you everything."

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Chapter XVIII

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MARGARETTA went sadly back to the studio, where Michael was at work on "Ermes." His statue of "The Flying Girl" had gone, to his great relief. He turned eagerly to her, dragging the chair forward, and pushing her tired, misshapen little frame down into its depths. Ah! how good it was to have her here!

"Well?"

"Michael, dear—it's a mystery. It's just damnable. She says she loves you like nothing on earth—but she won't—or rather she 'can't' marry you."

The light of hope died out of his face. He gazed, as was his wont, in silence upon the floor.

"I wonder——" he said at last, between his teeth.

Margot put her hand on his arm.

"No—it isn't *that*. I asked her."

"Ah!" He blessed her for understanding what had been an unspoken fear.

At this moment Ottershaw came in with a glass of wine on a tray for her.

Margaretta took it and smiled brightly upon him.

"It's good to see you here, Ottershaw. And, do you know, you're looking ten years younger."

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The man-servant glanced round. Michael had gone out of the studio.

"Yes, miss, thank you. But it's not me. It's Mr. Ruffini, miss, and all this trouble. I *wish* I could 'elp 'im, miss."

"I wish we could, Ottershaw. The only thing is to wait—till Miss Desdemona explains."

"Can't understand it nohow, miss," the man muttered, picking up the silver salver. "She's such a—a—real *nice* young lady."

"She's as nice to-day as ever she was, Ottershaw, believe me. There's some mystery." Then she went on: "Do all you can for my brother, won't you? I mean, don't let him get run down. Feed him up. Because, you know, worry and want of sleep play the very——"

"Don't I know it, miss!" cried the man, almost unconsciously. "And it was Mr. Ruffini, miss, who helped *me* in trouble. There's not much I *can* do for 'im." Then he left her. He was perfectly sincere. He most deeply regretted Michael's broken engagement, and perhaps he knew, more than anybody else did, *how* he was suffering in mind and body. As to Desdemona, it was strange that very few people condemned her. Everybody seemed so puzzled about it all. She had carried the stamp of nobility of mind so plainly that all who ran could read. They could believe no evil of her or Michael. Therefore—*why*? As a rule, the world will jump to the worst conclusions with practically no hesita-

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tion or evidence. But in this case they only asked each other, "Do *you* know why the engagement has been so suddenly broken off?"

There was one exception. Camille Derussy was a very hopeful man these days. He seemed to be always dropping in to tea or lunch, with and without invitations. For the fact is, he was Olivia's pet young man. The Marquis Carrouchi was growing a little lazy and fat, and wasn't so inclined as he used to be to run about with small parcels and books, or messages. So Camille often deputised for him. He could, he felt, talk as often as he liked about Desdemona, and Olivia had spoken so openly about the affair that he ventured to think he might call occasionally, and hear the latest developments. Besides, he knew all the gossip of Nice, and all that was being said there about this sudden severance. He very soon found out that Olivia didn't like Michael, and wasn't, in her heart of hearts, sorry that the engagement was broken off almost before it had begun.

"I rather think Ruffini could tell us a good deal more about this so pitiful *affaire* than he does," he was always saying.

Then, when somebody said, "What do you mean?" he muttered of his eternal *choque*—hinted at traps, insidious drugs. Presently nice people turned their shoulders upon him. Even *supposing* that what he hinted at was true, would any decent fellow go about dealing it out like a

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pack of cards? Pooh! true? not it? Let him go somewhere else with his beastly insinuations.

One day Desdemona met him face to face, just where she didn't want to. She was walking home from a Villa just above Cimiez, near the old monastery garden, by the old Roman theatre. The heat had grown suddenly very oppressive again. In a few days the whole establishment would be closed, and she and her mother once more in London. She was counting the hours, for it would at least be more tolerable to be where Michael was not, and where she ran no danger of meeting him. Even the few times that Margaretta came to see her she found painful and strained, though there was still a deep affection between them. Of course it was bound to be so. On the one side, silence, and on the other, bewilderment, and a certain amount of inevitable resentment. Margot would have been a little less than human had she not felt this. But nevertheless they *did* meet, for Desdemona could not help her intense longing for news of Michael, as long as she knew that only a few houses separated them. It would be easier in London, or at least in England, for Lady Gravistock had asked her to go and stop with them at their country house in Essex as soon as she returned to England. Gladly Desdemona had accepted. And now the one man her generous nature loathed stood in her path, lifting his white hat and showing his white teeth.

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“Enfin, Mees Deemon,” he said, softly. “You will walk wis me now, to Nice, is it not so, *hein*?”

“If you’re going back there, and so am I, I can’t very well help it, can I?” she said.

She spoke very coldly, and made no attempt to conceal her dislike of him. Camille stood in front of her, barring her path. They were in what had once been the cypress walk of the Benedictine monastery. The shade thrown across the path by the magnificent, sinister trees was so deep that it was almost dark. The sun, which seemed to be setting in a sea of blood, threw occasional shafts of mottled light wherever it could gain an entrance. The heat was intense—stifling. Yet Desdemona looked like a cool white lily. Her usual colour had deserted her of late, and deep grey shadows under her eyes emphasised the strain and sorrow of her face. Yet to Camille, who stared at her, she seemed the most desirable thing on earth. It was probably her cool detachment from himself and outside circumstances which fired his blood. How *dared* she be so insolent—she, who——?

“Don’t you think the time has come” (he pronounced it “com”) “for you to give up this—this so mighty Princess air?” he asked, his face setting in rather ugly lines.

“Please move out of my way,” she said, and tried to pass him.

But Camille obstructed her path, his gleaming

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white teeth looking whiter than ever because of the darkened background.

“Not until you have kissed me—had my embrace of the arms and the mouth for which I haf live so long,” he said, seizing her two arms, his face close to hers.

Desdemona grew taut and strong with fury, and her hyacinth eyes flashed.

“If you touch me, I’ll scream for help till all Cimiez hears,” she cried, rigid and still in his grasp, her head a little thrown back.

Camille laughed, and she noticed how his pointed ears moved as he did so. His cane and unworn white chamois gloves had fallen to the ground.

“Nobody would ’ear but dead monks! You loffy leetle child! Your Michel taught you what lof is—up in the so useful bedroom of the ‘bonne.’ Now I take *my* turn, *voyez?*”

She was powerless to prevent his kisses. Hot and scorching they fell upon her, wherever he willed. Tired out as she was, she thought she was going to faint. Through a confused weakness she heard his passionate whisper in her ear, as he lifted her from the ground:

“Close here—where the leetle Greek Temple is—zere I will teach you more than your Michel——”

Then surely the Blessed Mother heard her great cry for help, for suddenly an enormous dog, an Alsatian, burst through the trees and bounded

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up to them with a loud, furious barking. Without a moment's hesitation he fastened his teeth in Camille's leg. With a horrible oath the man dropped Desdemona, and she took to her heels and ran, ran, ran, past the silent, crumbling red Monastery, through the flower-garden, tripping over the little box edgings, out on to the high-road, and past the Church with the ever-open door. Ran till she had passed the old ruined Theatre, and found herself on the beaten track above Cimiez. Then only did she pause, and sank down on a wayside bench. Perhaps she fainted, for the heat seemed to be like a conflagration of the universe that evening. She could never afterwards recall how long she sat on the bench. But presently she opened her eyes at the sound of a familiar voice.

"Deemon, darlint, are you ill?"

It was Margaretta, leaning on her crutch, peering anxiously into her face.

"Oh, Margot, *dear*, I'm glad to see you. It's this *awful* heat," she stammered, and got on to her feet.

"You poor little girl, you're feeling rotten altogether. We'll limp back together," said Margaretta, feeling a sudden infinite compassion for the girl, so evidently in the grip of some strange tangle.

Almost in silence they made their way down the hill till they reached the garden entrance to the Villa.

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“Margot, tell me—do people die of dog-bites?” asked Desdemona suddenly, as they paused to say good-night.

The small cripple looked swiftly at her.

“Someone has been attacked, that you know—this afternoon?” she asked shrewdly.

“Yes. I’ll tell you this, Margot.” (Here Desdemona grew painfully scarlet.) “Camille tried to—kiss me, and a great dog attacked him.” Then, anxiously, “Up there, in the cypress walk—do you think it’s *killing* him, Margot?”

“I hope so,” said that lady, firmly.

Desdemona shuddered. “Then—that would be another man I’ve——” she said, checking herself.

Margot looked at her in bewilderment.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Demon,” she said sharply. “A woman may kill a man in self-defence at any old time. You’re getting morbid.”

Desdemona smiled slightly. She wondered if the accusation were true. She kissed Margot affectionately, and stood for a moment watching her limping across the street towards Michael’s house. The house of dreams unfulfilled.

Camille disappeared from Nice after that, and nobody ever knew where he went or what happened. Perhaps nobody cared. But a great Alsatian wolfhound was found dead in the cypress walk the morning after Desdemona’s walk from Bainlieu to Cimiez. The French

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papers suggested the dog had had a fit, owing to the great heat and perhaps want of water, for it seemed he had wandered a long way from his home up in the mountains. For Desdemona he for ever remained in her memory as The Avenger.

As to the weather, it grew hotter and hotter. People began to talk of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. It was too hot to care.

The Brownes went back to London about this time, and left many friends behind them. Nobody spoke very much about Saidie. Everybody talked a great deal about His Excellency, but a silence was wont to fall upon the room when she was mentioned. People became quiet, as we do when we enter Cathedrals and ancient Temples. Sometimes they smiled tenderly to themselves. For she had become very dear to many frivolous people along the Côte d'Azur—people whose frivolity she took as merely high spirits, or peculiarity of circumstances—as indeed it mostly was. She never disapproved or admonished. She had always just taken people as she found them without comparisons. Enjoyed herself, laughed and helped everybody. Now—she was going. She had been very wonderful these few weeks she had spent on the Riviera. Some days just her old “Amurrican” self, full of hard brilliancy and efficiency of thought. She had insisted on going out to Bridge parties and entertaining at her hotel. But there were other

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days when she never appeared, nor did the Ambassador, and it was noticed that he was seen again after each of these days a little sadder, a little greyer.

Desdemona only saw her once, and then she had said: "I'm real sorry, little girl, about you and your sun-god. But, take this from me—if what you're doin's going to pan out for you both all right—in the end—you'll thank Gawd for it. Life isn't meant to be all roses and rapture—*reely* it isn't. We've got to get through the nettles—sure."

She only lived a few weeks after she got back to London. The end came in a couple of hours. She asked the Ambassador to read the Bible to her. When his voice broke under the strain of it, she dressed him down for a moment in quite her old style. So much so that he stammered when he read again. Then she smiled radiantly and nestled in the crook of his arm. "Puddin'-Fat" lay across her body, her ear in Saidie's hand.

"I think I'll go to sleep, dear Benjamin B.," she said. "Very comfy. I shall soon be awake again."

Motionless he watched her draw her last little sighing breath. Then he laid her tenderly back upon her pillows. He knew she was awake again.

The day after the encounter in the monastery garden, Margot let fall a hint which gave Desde-

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mona real pleasure and eased a little of her pain. She said, in course of conversation :

“ I heard from Muriel this morning. She’s mixed up with the Drakes a lot now, you know, and wrote from there.”

“ The Drakes ? ”

“ Yes. Young Drake-who-plays-the-banjo, you know,” laughed Margaretta.

“ Oh, of course. A nice boy. I’m so glad she’s found friends.”

“ He’s teaching her to play the banjo too ! I shouldn’t be at all surprised if we hear of developments in that quarter.”

Desdemona’s face regained some of its old-time brightness.

“ Oh, Margot, I *should* be glad. Imagine, if Muriel became *Lady-Drake-who-plays-the-banjo* ! ”

“ Don’t repeat it, by the way. Of course I don’t *know*. I only guess.”

“ Of course not. Oh, heavens, how hot it is ! ” sighed Desdemona, pushing back her waves of hair.

Whilst Margot was telling her this, Katerine Rameaud was busy baking a small pie in her oven in the intervals of turning out the best bedroom which she kept ready for Michael. For he had sent her a postcard to say he would come and see her that evening, and *might* stay the night.

The old woman worked on without feeling

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the heat in the least. Not a speck of dust must lie on the table or chairs—not a dimness on the two mirrors, the one for shaving, the other for hair-brushing. The coverlet which was spread over the bed was a marvel of colour. It had been worked by Julie's grandmother, and was a kind of African jungle scene. There was an elephant's head peering out amongst the tropical foliage, consisting of palms, ferns and poinsettia flowers. Gorgeous butterflies darted in and out, and birds of Paradise coquetted with iridescent dragonflies. In one corner a snake reared a yellow and brown head ominously. A truly marvellous creation, which time had actually made rather beautiful. Katerine thought it the most wonderful thing in existence. She was rather superstitious about it, however, for a Breton gipsy had told her once that this bed-spread would leave her very suddenly. The old hag had refused to give any other explanation, except that she had said, "Beware of that which moves very quickly." Then there was a wonderful old *armoire*, in which she kept great bags of lavender, hanging from the top. And a jug and basin of almost dolls' house variety!

"Julie!" she kept crying out at intervals. That young lady would appear in time to avoid the whirling crutch, which she would catch deftly.

"*Bien?*"

"The Master Sculptor is coming this afternoon. Of course he will stay the night."

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“What’s he coming for!”

“Can you ask? Repose—silence.”

“Will *she* come, with chocolates?”

Katerine turned upon her.

“*Assez probable. Mais des chocolats? Cela m’étonnerait bien. Petite gourmande!*”

She knew it was useless to try and explain that Monsieur Ruffini would never again come into the little house with Desdemona.

Julie stood plaiting her red check frock sulkily.

“*Temps est très lourd. Je ne puis plus travailler,*” she said, and indeed she looked at the end of her tether. Her back hurt her a good deal, and to her Gallic mind it was impossible to work without a little music and dancing occasionally in this *chaleur accablante*. A little roundabout, with horses, stood in the village street. To-night Mère Katerine would let her go out for an hour. Julie sighed and wiped her forehead.

“*Bien, vas te reposer un peu,*” said Katerine, suddenly grown weary also. Truly this heat was more than human nature could endure.

Nevertheless she picked a few crimson blossoms from her flower-beds, and put them in a tumbler of water on the old gate table under the thorn tree outside, in the tiny orchard. And placed a big, roomy armchair there. All should be ready for *ce cher Michel*. He might come before sunset.

Margaretta revelled in the heat. She had so little in her own body that she hailed it with

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delight. She lay at full length for part of the day on the sofa, reading up the Journals of the world of sculpture with keen enjoyment. Michael tried, after the siesta, to work at his Hermes. Ottershaw came in with something on a tray, and lingered for a moment to gaze at the statue, so far only modelled in clay.

"Beautiful work, sir," he said respectfully. "Beautiful. I don't quite recollect who the gentleman was, sir?"

"Like it, eh? I feel just as if I'd carved a leg of mutton," said Michael, gloomily. "Er—what? who was he? The gentleman, as you call him, is Hermes. He was the Messenger of the Gods."

"Kind of errand-boy, sir. No push-bike nor nothing," mused Ottershaw.

"Wings, Ottershaw—on his feet."

"You don't say, sir. I thought them lumps on his heels was a pity."

Michael burst out laughing for the first time for weeks.

"Ottershaw, you're a priceless disillusionist," he said.

"Thank you, sir. Glad to know it." He thought Michael had paid him a compliment, and he was always modest.

"That man's another mystery," said Margareta, after he had left the room. "For years he was a perambulating misery, getting thinner and greyer. Now, he's *different*, somehow.

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Something's gone out of his life which made him unhappy. I've seen men look like that after their wives have died," she added, seriously.

Michael smiled again. "Well, I don't mind telling you, it isn't that which has rejuvenated him," he said.

"It must be monkey glands. He's younger."

"As a matter of fact, it's only that he told me something which was worrying him," her brother said, "but the worry's still there, I fear."

Margaretta looked interested.

"Can't tell you any more, old girl," he said, and she knew it was no use asking.

For an hour the sculptor moulded his statue. Ottershaw was right, for Michael was incapable of doing bad work. But his heart wasn't in it. "'Ermes" was technically correct, but the soul of the Messenger was missing, and the next day he reduced it all again to a shapeless mass of clay and started all over again.

For the Message which the gods had sent Michael was one of desolation and a growing despair.

He was beginning to get thin, and Margaretta knew he hardly slept during the stifling nights.

They were grey, sad days for him and Desdemona.

But the worst was yet to come—before the Shadow passed and the Day came with a shout of joy, behind the winged feet of Hermes, Messenger of the Gods.

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Chapter XIX

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THAT evening Michael made up his mind that he would make one last appeal to Desdemona. He knew she was going back to England in two days, and he felt that before the curtain of despair rang down for ever upon his spirit, he would at least know that its descent was inevitable. It was almost dark when he crossed the road to the garden door of the Villa "Bon Repos," and the moon had risen amidst a retinue of stormy clouds which threatened to obscure her altogether. Not a breeze relieved the stifling atmosphere—not a leaf stirred. It was almost difficult to draw a full breath. All Nature seemed to be pausing for something. Where would Desdemona be? Out of doors, surely, on such a night? If not, he meant to go up to the house and ask for her. He felt sure she would not refuse to receive him, for in spite of all that had happened, it yet seemed that *nothing* had happened, and that they were still lovers, divided by some evil enchantment.

Just as he passed the marble shelter which broke the long line of the balcony parapet, the moon came out from behind her stormy veil for a moment, and he found himself in the presence of Desdemona. She was seated in one of the

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low wicker chairs which always stood in the summer-house, leaning back, with her arms thrown behind her head, gazing up into the storm-wracked sky—alone. Trying, like all the world, to breathe. She wore a white gown of crêpe de Chine, not so white as her arms and weary face. Her figure, in its abandoned lassitude, stood out in startling relief against the dark background of the summer-house.

“ Desdemona ? ”

“ You—Ruffles ? ”

The tender familiarity of the old childish name fell softly on the still air. In wonderment the girl lowered her arms and stood up. Then she held out her hand.

To shake hands with Desdemona ! He would rather not touch her at all. So he raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them lightly.

“ I’m very fortunate. I came to look for you, and—you’re here,” he whispered.

“ But—why ? ”

He raised his head, and only the darkness prevented her seeing the deep passion in his eyes.

“ Because I cannot, I *will* not let you go to England without one more demand for an explanation—the last hope to be crushed, if needs must.”

She hung her head, and he felt sick with longing to take it on to his shoulder, to feel her heart beat against his.

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“I cannot say anything new—dear,” she said, a little catch in her voice.

He started forward, and his tones sounded vibrant with passion, low though they were.

“If you didn’t care—if you had learnt to hate me—I could understand and bear it. But you love me—you *love me*,” he whispered, and his hurried breath was warm upon her neck.

She put her two little hands against his broad chest.

“Ruffles—don’t make it so terribly difficult for me. It—it—*hurts* so.”

“My heart’s desire,” was his answer, and somehow her arms were round his neck.

The moon went behind her clouds, and there was a long silence, during which they could hear one another’s heart beating. Lip to lip, heart to heart. Thank God, he would have at least this memory.

Then she drew herself away, and he knew he must let her go.

“Dear—I will not say, forget me, for I know you won’t. I would rather say remember me—as a happy friend, a joyous comrade. Perhaps, one day, it will be possible again for us to be friends in more than memory. I cannot say, because—the future is all so dark——” Here her voice broke and he knew her eyes were brimming over.

“Dearest—what *is* it which makes you do this thing? You are under some misapprehension—

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you are imagining something which doesn't exist——”

She raised her hand as if begging him to desist.

“ I don't think,” she said slowly, weighing her words carefully, “ that a woman has ever before been placed in just the—circumstances—that I am in, but I am quite, quite sure that I'm doing right. Dear, dear Ruffles, leave me now.” Her voice faltered, and she stumbled a little against the chair. “ I—don't think—I can bear any more.”

He leaned towards her, and his voice was all broken up.

“ Promise me at least this. If—things change—and you feel there is no barrier—you will send for me ? ”

She placed her trembling hands in his.

“ I—shouldn't send. I shall come,” she answered.

“ You'll wear my ring ? ”

She hesitated a moment.

“ It's round my neck, dear Ruffles—next my heart,” she said, simply.

“ God bless you,” he breathed. “ And have you in His keeping.”

Then he turned and left her.

Late that night Desdemona sat by her open window, and tried to sleep in her chair. It seemed useless to go to bed, the heat was so oppressive. She had only a thin, white silk

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nightdress between herself and the night air—though of air there was none. The strange stillness seemed almost ominous. But she herself was as motionless as all nature. She leaned with her head in her hands upon the window-sill, and the outline of her beautiful little virgin breasts showed beneath the lace yoke of her nightdress as if carved in marble. She was gazing now across to the chimneys of Michael's house. She could just see them, outlined against the deep blackness of the sky. Every few seconds a brilliant sheet of summer lightning swept across the heavens. It was most lovely, but a little awe-inspiring. All the panorama of sea and land exposed to the human eye in one blinding glare. Every window, every door, every living thing down below there, in the town of Nice, one blaze of cold glory—even the big windows of the studio. She saw that they were dark, except when the lightning blazed. Michael was evidently not working to-night. No, he would never work in great heat if he could help it. He said he became "like a little child" in hot weather.

"My brain doesn't work," he often said.

Besides, to-night of all nights. For she felt that when he left her that evening in the summer-house he was a broken and despairing man. She had been obliged to bite her lips to prevent herself calling him back. What was he doing?"

When Michael left her, he was, as she thought,

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at the end of his tether. He tried very hard to pull himself together, but all he could think of was the long stretch of years which in all human probability lay before him—alone.

“ I’ll go up to Roquebillière, as I promised,” he thought. He had long ago finished his early dinner, and it was very little more than half-past ten. Just as he was going to ring the bell for Ottershaw, that gentleman himself appeared. He was radiant, evidently a prey to some great excitement.

“ Oh, sir—I *must* tell you——”

“ Another yarn, Ottershaw ? ” said Michael, smiling grimly. It would be rather a relief than otherwise to hear something fresh.

“ What do you think, sir ? I sat down to read, after I’d finished all I had to do for you, sir, and I chose the book Sir Edward Hemingford gave me on the day before his death ”—here Ottershaw nearly choked, so great was his emotion—“ a book called *Excavations in the Near East*. It was the book I placed on the table beside his bed that night, sir, because he hadn’t quite finished it.”

“ Yes ? ”

“ Would you believe it, sir, when I opened it, I found the blank page at the beginning had some pencil writing on it.”

Michael nodded.

“ It was in my master’s writing—in fact, here it is, sir.”

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Ottershaw handed him the blue book with the dog-eared corner—open.

In tremulous writing, the following words were written :

“ I'm writing this in case you're puzzled. I'm feeling tired now and inclined to sleep, so I won't call you from your bedroom. When you were dissolving my Green Tabloid to-night, little Miss Desdemona slipped in. I saw her. She watched you, and when you'd gone to the telephone, she came up, thinking I was asleep, and dissolved two more. It was just pure fun, and I hadn't the heart to let her know I was awake and watching her, bless her little heart. But—a fatal dose! So I emptied the glass over the roots of the azalea plant. Hope it won't kill it.—E. H.”

“ *By Jove!* ” exclaimed Michael, his troubles forgotten for the moment, and sharing his valet's excitement. “ So it was no murder at all ! ”

“ No, sir.” Here Ottershaw's nerve began to desert him, his mouth to work convulsively. After carrying the burden of what he believed to have been a guilty secret—to find himself free of it—he couldn't realise it.

“ Well, I'm sincerely glad, Ottershaw, really and truly. But what gets over me,” he muttered, “ is—*why* should you have been tortured like this all these years for nothing ? ”

Ottershaw's face steadied itself.

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“ Yes, sir, I’ve said that to myself, natural-like. Then I asked myself this—why should any of us be *happy* for eight years any more than miserable? ”

Michael pondered this for a moment.

“ You’re a bit of a philosopher, then, Ottershaw. That’s more than I can answer—why *should* we be happy? ”

“ There’s some queer ruling about it. For although I’ve suffered *hell*, sir, all these years as I thought my old master had been murdered, I wouldn’t undo ’em, sir.”

“ You wouldn’t? ”

“ No, sir,” said Ottershaw firmly. “ It’s made a man of me, and what’s more, it’s made me so as I can get right into somebody else’s hell, sir.”

“ Man, I believe you *can*.”

“ My old master always said that was the best thing in life, Mr. Ruffini, sir, and as you’ll rec’lect, ’e was a great investigator. ‘ Get inside somebody else’s hell, Ottershaw,’ he often said to me, when he’d a big thing on. But bless my soul, in *them* days, sir, I ’adn’t a thought above creases in trousers, an’ ’ow to announce.”

“ Well, there’s one damned good thing,” said Michael, as he rose from his chair, “ and that is, that Miss Desdemona doesn’t remember anything about putting the Tabloids in the water, I expect. Not that it matters, but she might have had a nasty feeling that it was a pretty near thing—if old Sir Edward *had* been asleep—”

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“And ’ad woke up and taken the water. Yes. My God, sir, it would have killed Miss Desdemona.”

“I believe it would. Look here, Ottershaw, I’m going out. It’s too infernally hot to sleep. I’ll take the little car up to Roquebillière. There ought to be some air up there.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll get the small suit-case ready at once. Miss Margareta——”

“She won’t be down before lunch to-morrow. She never is when she gets these blinding headaches.”

The valet stood at the door, about half an hour later, and watched his master drive away into the night. His face, recently so rejuvenated by the joy of his great discovery, fell into regretful lines. He wished so much that things had not gone wrong about this engagement.

“Life’s a dashed queer business,” he thought, as he proceeded to put away Michael’s general odds and ends in the studio, a few minutes later. “Suppose my master *had* drunk that water. Just the fact that he was awake, although he was asleep a few minutes after. And look ’ow I took that book out of my bag to read it, only a few days ago—an’ put it back. I might ’ave known the truth a bit earlier, and saved a bit of worry. What’s the game—Up There?” he asked himself, as he gazed into the velvety sky for a moment, through a side window. “*Lord*—this suffocating furnace!” and he proceeded to “squish” him-

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self some of the iced soda-water which stood with the whisky on a side table, and took a long, long drink.

And Michael himself was thinking along very much the same lines as he drove his "Baby Austin" very slowly up the gradual ascent to Roquebillière. He never drove a small car to a higher point than that, for afterwards the ascent became very narrow and dangerous. To-night it was entirely owing to his lamps that he could make his way at all, for the moon had finally retired, discomfited, and darkness reigned.

"After I've finished the 'Hermes,' I'll chuck it all for a bit, and go to Africa or somewhere," he thought. "Perhaps there I'll be able to forget some of the pain." Then he mused on the story Ottershaw had told him about the supposed murder of Sir Edward Hemingford—and the subsequent discovery of the truth.

"Why *should* the poor devil have had to carry that burden for nothing?" he asked himself, and came no nearer a solution than anybody else has done—unless we admit the scholastic idea and touch our hats to the great Schoolmaster.

From that he began to think again of his lost love. Very tenderly he smiled as he pictured her, all those years ago, stealing into the bedroom in search of distraction. How well he could imagine her childish joy at the sight of the bubbling green water and the secrecy of what she was doing! Equally he could enter into the

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pleasure it gave the gentle old man to watch her beneath his half-closed eyelids. Well, thank God, she'd been spared any hand in his death—in case she had found it out. But above all, what a good thing it was that Ottershaw *had* held his tongue. Suppose he *had* called in the police! They'd never have discovered that the water had been emptied over the azalea plant. Verdict—murder against some person or persons unknown. Person—Desdemona, if the truth had come out. Good God! He didn't know whether to laugh or cry over it all. Well, it was all over now, and nobody a bit the worse for *that* curious incident.

Ah! how wise we are, in our reading of life's riddles! Had he but known that that very incident was the cause of his own and Desdemona's undoing, his heart would have burst its bounds that very night for sheer joy, for he held the solution of the trouble now, and could have taken her to his arms again with every cloud cleared away. But—this same inscrutable discipline, or whatever it is which directs our destinies, bound them both tightly to the pillory—and the time is not just yet. The thing must go through to the bitter end, and then would come the beginning which has no end.

Old Katerine was standing at her garden gate, an old lantern in her hand, when Michael drove up, a little before midnight.

Only one other incident had diverted the current of his thoughts as he drove, and that was

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merely an impression which was made on his mind by a glimpse of Olivia, which he got as he passed the scroll iron gates of the Villa "Bon Repos." The windows were wide open, as were all the windows in Nice that night. Through the long French doors of the small salon he saw her bending over a table, mixing cocktails. The light fell full upon her. He could see two glasses. Then, just as his car shot past the gates, an arm and hand, stretched out for one of the glasses, came into the silhouette. It was the arm of Ilo Carrouchi. He knew the shape of the hand so well. Michael had frowned angrily.

"What does she want that fellow in there for, at this hour?" he asked himself. He had hoped that he could have removed his little Demon from this man's continual presence—but now?

"*Cela se peut-il?*" cried Katerine, overjoyed to see him. She made an arresting picture in the wavering circle of dim light from her lantern. Her eager, lined old face expressed nothing but simple pleasure under her starched frilled cap, and Michael stroked her cheek affectionately when he had "parked" his car in her little back yard. It was no easy task, so dark was the night now, but Katerine stood on the cobblestones, her lantern held high, guiding him aright.

"And you are going to tell me all has come right again?" she asked presently, when he had done justice to her cold chicken salad. She placed her wrinkled hand on his arm, and there

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was a whole world of loving sympathy in her rosy, weather-beaten face.

Michael's face darkened again.

"Ah, no, Katerine, I've seen her, and she says, never, never, never—but she loves me."

Katerine sighed deeply.

"She is good, that child. *Elle ne mente pas. Il y a quelque chose de—*"

"Margaretta found her half fainting on a bench by the old Roman Theatre the other day. It's undermining her health. She's getting——" He hesitated.

"*Spirituelle*," supplemented Katerine. "*Vous aussi*," she muttered, as she got up to clear away the simple meal.

"Julie—now," she said, abruptly.

"What about her?"

"She's a queer child. She has visions. Once she was an epileptic, but since she's lived with me and had decent food, she—sees things, sometimes."

Michael loved her Breton French and simple beliefs. It was the primitive in Katerine which always did him good and cooled his fevered imaginations.

"Yesterday, she went to her confession—*mais oui, je la chasse*. Père le Touche gave her some small prayer to say to Our Lady. *Il comprends qu'elle n'est pas*"—here Katerine touched her forehead significantly.

"Who? Our Lady?"

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Katerine started. Then her wide, kindly mouth expanded in a broad grin. How she adored *ce cher Michel, si bien affligé*.

“*Méchant! Non, cette pauvre Julie*. And she tells how she saw Our Lady give a box of chocolates to your Desdemona—your *si charmante Mees Deemon*. And Desdemona say, ‘I give them to Julie—*pauvre petite Julie*.’”

“Just what she would say,” said Michael.

“But what you sink the Blessed Lady say—oh! so gladly, and Julie says a lovely smile fell on the little Christ head and all over her too—she said, ‘Julie soon have “chocolats” for ever, and be very beautiful. *Mère Katerine too!* *Imaginez!*’ the old woman chuckled. Then she grew grave. “*Mais oui*—she see visions, *cette enfant là*. Something comes—*il y a quelque chose qui arrive*.”

“An earthquake, I imagine. I verily believe I can smell sulphur to-night,” said Michael, whose head was beginning to ache. A great restlessness possessed him. He felt that he absolutely couldn’t face the confinement within four walls to-night. He was all on edge, and conscious of but one desire—to get higher and higher in the darkness and the stillness. Nearer to the sky and things infinite and remote. He had a curious sense of urging, which told him to pass on his way this night.

“Katerine, I won’t sleep here to-night. I feel restless. I *must* go on. Up to Saint Evreux

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le Mont, perhaps. There's a good hotel up there—near the snow-line. But I shall most likely walk all night."

The old woman's face clouded with disappointment for a moment. She had made his room so clean, put such lovely flowers. But she thought of nobody but himself, and she had a ready, tender understanding of his moods. He was very, very unhappy, she knew, and men found consolation in strange ways.

"As you will—*bien, mon cher,*" she said.

So she lighted the old lantern once more, and opened the gate for him. He left the little car in her back yard, and said he would pick it up again in the morning. His face looked—oh, "*si triste, si triste. Ce beau garçon, qui était si joyeux—qu'est ce qu'elle avait, cette belle Desdemona—*"

"Go to bed, old lady, and have a long, long sleep," he said.

Then something made him bend down and kiss her wrinkled mouth. The brilliant dark eyes filled with tears of joy.

Never, since he was a little, golden-haired boy, playing about with mud and clay whenever he could get it, had he kissed her. It was the happiest night of her life.

She held the lantern above her head till he had disappeared up the mountain.

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Chapter XX

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DESDEMONA heard the sound of a car passing after she had got into bed that night, and wondered who was climbing the heights on this dark, hot night. She lay under a sheet which only covered her knees, and tossed and tossed from one fitful doze into another. Strange buzzing insects and gnats kept coming into the room, and disturbed her still further, for she had drawn back her white mosquito net to the four corners of her bed. It would have been intolerable. Every few seconds the big room was brilliantly illuminated by the white-hot flashes of summer lightning, and she was conscious of the light under her eyelids every time it came. Her skin felt on fire.

Olivia had told her to go to bed and have a warm bath. She declared that there was nothing so cooling in the long run. But Desdemona hadn't the energy to go through with it. Besides, she knew it was only a pretext to get rid of her, because the Marquis was coming to read some wonderful book to her. For although her mother did nothing whatever but receive the accustomed homage of her much-tried attendant, and mix him his favourite cocktail, she liked to have him to herself. Somehow, when Desdemona was

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there, there seemed something rather ridiculous about the whole trio. She felt acutely conscious of her age, and the makeshifts it entailed, and she was quite sure the Marquis felt the same. When he kissed her hand, she couldn't help glancing across at Desdemona, cool and aloof with her embroidery. Yet there was nothing really absurd in a charming gesture to which she had always been accustomed. And if he arrived with a beautiful bunch of flowers, as from force of habit he so often did, it seemed that they ought to have been given to Desdemona herself. Youth and beauty sat enthroned before her, and she felt that the victory was to the strong. Olivia didn't like this at all, though she scarcely acknowledged she was growing old.

And so Desdemona had kissed her quietly, nodded to the Marquis, who immediately rose and opened the door with the courtly bow he never omitted, and she had left them. She always did so with a vague sense of disquiet, but had never ventured again to remonstrate with her mother since that one occasion when she had been so severely put in her place.

Slowly the hours ticked themselves away, and she wondered if the movement in her small clock on the bedside table was the only movement in the world, so still was everything. Except for the insects. They managed to buzz about. And the lightning—but no—that was so instantaneous a flash that it must be motionless.

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Suddenly the sound of a "plop! plop!" fell on her ear from outside. Another—and yet another, and another. Like tennis balls being thrown down from above on the marble floor of the balcony. Quicker and still quicker. Then, with a hiss and a roar, the rain began. Sheets of white, thick rain, rattling down like the discharge of musketry.

Then a terrible forked flash of blue lightning, followed almost simultaneously by an ear-splitting crack of thunder.

Desdemona gave a little cry and buried her head in her pillow.

"It's only a bad storm. Only a bad storm. They're often like this, here," she kept telling herself. Then she switched on the electric light by the hanging cord at her side. For a moment she watched the streaming curtain of rain till another flash tore the sky in half and the thunder pealed. No, she couldn't leave the windows open. She slipped out of bed and hastened across the room without putting on her bedroom slippers. Already a small pool of water was flowing in, on to the parquet floor. She stood in it with her little bare feet for a second, whilst she struggled with the heavy French windows. Then rushed back to bed, to escape the flash and crash which she knew were due. Ah! there it was. Mary, Mother of God, was there ever such a storm!

Suddenly the electric light failed and the room was plunged in darkness which could be felt.

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Something or other had fused in the storm for the moment. Desdemona gave a little scream and drew her rosary from her bosom. There she lay, her fingers clutching the crucifix which was suspended at the end of the beads—the crucifix and Michael's ring. Flash after flash. Peal following peal—what we call “right overhead.”

Presently she grew more controlled and began to think. What a mercy she knew nobody out in the storm! It was nearly four o'clock. Ought she to go to her mother? She knew Olivia was terrified of storms. The Marquis would have got home long before it began, luckily for him.

Desdemona got out of bed and fumbled in the dark for her flashlight. At all events that was all right. Then she put on her blue, fur-trimmed dressing-gown and her slippers. Cautiously she opened her door, and then paused, for the very landing, doors and skylight were alight from a flash of the sinister lightning. The Villa seemed to shake for a moment in the thunderous roll of the celestial drums which followed.

“*Some* storm, as Mrs. Browne would have said,” she thought, trying to inspire herself with courage. Her mother must not be left to lie frightened and alone. Then she became conscious of a dim, dim light down below, in the region of the reception-rooms. She leaned over the railing which ran in a square round the

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landing. There, through the open door of the small salon, she could see her mother, still in her golden evening gown, standing with whitened face, her hands pressed to her heart. And the Marquis still there—smoking his eternal cigarette, twisting his eternal little moustache, trying to reassure her. They had lighted two tall wax candles.

A wave of anger which dominated all other sensations swept across Desdemona's soul.

"At this hour!" (even as she thought it, a distant clock struck four). "The *coward*! Why didn't he go out in the storm? What right has he to compromise mother like this?"

Suddenly the Marquis looked up, right through the door and up into the darkness of the landing and the roof. Something made Desdemona flash on her little lamp, and he saw her in the illumination of its pale light—her small white face of anger and scorn, gazing down upon him and her mother. Did he read condemnation of more than really existed? At all events he got up, and in the utter silence she heard him say rather loudly, "The storm is nearly over. I'm going now. You can go to bed without fear, *Carissima*." Olivia gave a cry and clung to his arm, but he put her aside and came out into the hall. There, across a chair, neatly folded, was his light coat and his hat. He picked them up.

Desdemona switched off her battery, and suddenly the electric light again flooded the

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house. She turned and went swiftly back to her bedroom. A moment afterwards she heard the click of the side door as it was opened and closed again. Evidently the Marquis had gone.

“Would he have been still there when the servants went downstairs?” she asked herself.

The storm was abating. The musketry of rain was slowing down rapidly. The flashes of lightning were growing anæmic, the thunder dwindling to a growl.

Desdemona opened the long windows once again, and stood inhaling the cooled and freshened air in long draughts. Then she went to bed once more and fell into a deep sleep.

Suddenly she awoke with a start. It was still absolutely dark—and very hot again.

What was that noise? A distant, awful rolling, increasing in volume till it was like the crashing to earth of every building and forest in the world. It seemed to go on for all eternity. Like countless millions of muffled drums—sliding, rolling. Right away somewhere in the mountains. Then, complete silence.

Desdemona sat up with beating heart and listened. Silence. Yet she seemed in imagination to hear a great, great cry ascending to the utmost limits of the universe.

“A landslide!” she whispered to herself.

For an hour longer, or so it seemed, she lay with wide-opened eyes, wondering if this awful night would never pass. Then she fancied she

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heard a deep bell tolling somewhere down in Nice. The alarm bell, which she had once before heard when there had been a great fire.

Something must have happened.

At about half-past seven Véronique came in with the early coffee. She was visibly excited.

“*Ah, Mam’selle, quelle tragédie affligeante ! Un éboulement de terre !*”

“A landslide, Véronique? I thought so. Where?”

The maid hesitated, glancing at Desdemona’s white, strained face.

“Roquebillière,” she said, breaking into a sob.

Desdemona grew white to the lips.

“Oh, Véronique — Katerine Rameaud — Julie——”

Véronique burst into tears. There was worse to come.

“*On dit—on dit—they say, Mam’selle——*”

“Say what?” demanded Desdemona, a band of ice round her heart.

“Oh, they say that M. Ruffini went there last night—to stay——”

But Desdemona was out of bed.

“Go down and tell Borlais to get my car out instantly,” she cried.

Suddenly she found herself alert, vigorous, full of fight. Surely God had tortured her enough. This thing *couldn’t* be true—it shouldn’t be. “Michael—*killed in a landslide?* Oh no, God

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couldn't do that. He isn't a monster," she thought, as she rushed into her clothes. "The Blessed Lady is there. She wouldn't permit it. Oh, Katerine, Katerine! Julie!"

She never afterwards remembered what happened. She couldn't recollect getting out her car, for Borlais had gone into the town to hear all about it. Who would want the motors out at eight o'clock in the morning? She supposed somebody helped her, for she found herself driving along the steep road to Roquebillière somehow. Driving very well too, taking every care. She didn't know that it is often like that with us when we are suddenly faced with some great crisis. We put coal carefully on the fire, we give orders to the cook, we write to our tailor.

People were all round the car, hurrying up from Nice and the surrounding villages to visit the scene of the tragedy. Some had relations there, and were weeping as they ran. She remembered giving a young woman a lift for the last hundred yards, because she fell and was obviously not far from motherhood.

"My husband—*mon mari*, madame! *Il est ouvrier là*—a workman there, and I had but gone to see my mother for two days. Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Jésus!"

There was a big crowd at Roquebillière, and Desdemona got out of her car and pushed to the front. She could not have told you what she

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sought—what she expected to find. But she felt she *must* see it all.

“Was nobody saved?” she found herself asking a young English clerk whom she had seen somewhere in Nice.

He half raised his cap. This was luck, for he was a reporter on the *Le Niçois*.

“Not a soul,” he answered, “except the people in the houses across the stream down there, by the Presbytery.” Then, noticing her white, strange look, he said, taking out a notebook and pencil from his breast pocket, “Can you give me your impressions of the affair, Madame?”

Desdemona did not even hear him, but passed on around the crowd, trying to find a weak place where she could push through. She soon found it, for a woman with loose grey hair gave a great cry and fainted. She was taken away and the girl closed in.

What a spectacle! * A great, broad sea of liquid mud, slowly cooling and settling down. One had to raise one's eyes almost to the heavens to see where it had begun, at the very top edge. Then it had descended in a boiling torrent till it came to the edge of the stream, where it stopped abruptly. It looked like great, giant skeins of brown wool, thrown carelessly down the hillside, and the pathos was greatly intensified by the fact

* This incident really occurred at Roquebillière, in the Alpes Maritimes, a few years ago. The village was completely buried.

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that a good deal of the furniture of the village was seen sticking out of the mud. On all sides Desdemona heard exclamations of grief and horror as some table or chair, or the corner of a mattress, was recognised. Just a few inches of things, many of them some distance away from the cottage to which they had belonged. Desdemona was just standing staring like a graven image, when her eyes suddenly fell upon a stick—a black stick with a crook. It was positively within her reach, and she pulled it out. It was Katerine Rameaud's stick—the one she always threw at the cat.

“Ah, yes—*la canne de Katerine*,” someone wailed close to her. “*Mais le chat, le voici.*”

It was true. The little brindled cat who had so often been the recipient of Katerine's aim was wandering about, twisting and rubbing herself against people's ankles, meowing miserably.

Desdemona picked the little creature up and mechanically caressed it against her cheek, holding it with one hand, the stick with the other. Was it all over then? Was this the end of everything? Had the little flower-covered cottage gone for ever beneath this cataract of mud, burying the souls and bodies of Katerine—of Julie—of Michael? Was this what God had been meaning all along, then? That *she* should be a murderess, and that *he* should be killed like this? When neither of them had meant any harm, or wanted anything but each other?

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Then, of course, it was all untrue about Our Lady and Christ—and Camille Derussy had been right all those years ago when he had laughed at it.

Slowly Desdemona turned away, for the crowd was increasing and pressing upon her, and she could not bear the sobs and cries any longer. Besides, the sun had come out again, and was shining on the great bubbling sea of mud, shining quite placidly and making the things which stuck out shine like diamonds. There was a bird, several birds hopping about on the great mud-bank. Yes, that was a corner of a gramophone sticking out there, and—was that a hand? The police had come in crowds, and there was a whole heap of uniformed officials who had driven up in motors. Over there they had begun to dig. But somebody said it was quite useless. The stream of mud was feet, *yards* deep. It would take a century of work to find anything—anybody. Find Michael—out of the mud? Oh, God! not that!

Suddenly she remembered Father le Touche. Of course—how stupid of her! This was his parish now—this great river of mud. All his people—no, there were six cottages left untouched on the other side of the little trout stream down there in the valley. And of course the Church and the Presbytery. Slowly she detached herself from the crowd and walked round the outskirts of it, looking for the priest. She knew well he would be where he was most needed. She

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didn't see him, but quite without warning she ran into Margaretta. The small cripple was limping along, leading a little boy by one hand, her crutch supporting her on the other side. Desdemona stopped short, her one sentiment of astonishment overwhelming everything else.

"*Margot!* I thought you were ill—that you were asleep and didn't know. Yesterday you said you were going to bed with a headache when I saw you last——"

Margaretta was no less astonished to see Desdemona.

"*Desdemona!* You here? You—you—have you heard?"

Margot's face was a curious study. All trace of headache and weariness seemed to have been wiped out of it. Her eyes shone with some inward light, some glow of energy. Her usually pale lips were quite red, her cheeks pink. She looked strong—happy. What had possessed her? Desdemona seized her arm.

"Margot, you don't understand—you can't have heard. You look *busy* and happy. Changed, somehow."

"I know they say Michael is dead too. Under—all that," she answered very gravely, and her eyes glowed still more strangely.

The little boy she held began to whimper. Nobody took any notice of him.

"And you can be *happy*?"

"No—but I can be *useful*—doing what he

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would wish me to do," she said, and her disengaged hand drew the little weeping boy close to her side.

"Now—so soon?"

"It's now—or never. Always, isn't it? Come down to the Presbytery with me, Desdemona. There are one or two little children who were saved. They want some breakfast. They must be fed and comforted."

Suddenly a great pressure loosened itself from Desdemona's mind. Of course this was the right way to take it. Margaretta was just being herself. She was just *carrying on*. What's the use of moulding oneself into a certain kind of person and then, when a great thing happens, going back on it all? Of course! What a fool she'd been to let that great wave of despair roll over her.

"How did you get here?" she found herself asking Margot.

"I came up with the Chief of Police, in their car. I telephoned. You see, Michael—took—the small car last night," she added hurriedly.

Almost in silence (ah! dear God, wouldn't there be the whole of a lifetime to talk afterwards?) they descended the short, rather steep hill to the little stream. There was a rustic bridge across it, and then they came almost at once upon the church. The door was open, and somebody was inside, moving about the Altar. Two or three people were there, praying. It was

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a pretty little church, covered with creepers. There was a slender steeple, with a gilt Cross on the top.

But the two women didn't stop. They went on into the Presbytery, where the door stood ever open. Margot spoke entirely to the little boy, cheering him with promises of breakfast. He was about ten years old. It seemed the outside edges of the awful mudslide had swept them out of the room in which he slept with his two little sisters and the baby, and had thrown them on to the meadow on the other side. Their cries had soon guided the hurrying, terror-struck survivors from over the stream to the rescue.

The priest's housekeeper had gathered them into her kitchen, but this poor little fellow had run away again—" *chercher maman*," he kept saying, as fast as his sobs would let him. Alas! alas!

Then Margot had limped upon the scene, and the priest, thunderstruck by the calamity, knew that all would be well with them in the end.

"Take the baby," she said, briefly, to Desdemona, "whilst I make some bread-and-milk. There was, at least, abundance of milk, and the police car had brought bread and coffee beans in abundance in case of survivors.

"I can see a bowl of eggs," said Desdemona, peering through the door of the little larder, as she gathered a tiny baby of about a year old into her strong young arms. The sturdy, practical housekeeper was up there with Father le Touche,

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assisting him, for women were weeping and wailing and even strong men quailed at the sight.

Desdemona sat down on a bench before the stove, her burden in her arms. Margot had removed the tiny frock, stiff with mud, cleansed the little face, and the rest of the simple peasant clothes were fairly clean.

She had never held a baby before, and as she did so, the wholesome floodgates of her dormant mother love opened, and she wept as she clasped the poor little orphaned mite to her young breast.

How right, how right Margot had been!

Had Desdemona known it, what Margot said was right was just what Father le Touche had told Saidie the Ambassadors—carry simply and quietly *on*. “Let the dead bury their dead.”

A moment later, Margot knelt down with some difficulty on the hearthstone before her, her hands holding a basin of warm bread-and-milk. Very gravely and earnestly she and Desdemona fed the little child with a spoon, until her cries ceased and she sank to sleep, rosy and contented, on Desdemona's knees. The little boy swallowed an egg and some coffee, into which his tears fell freely. Then Margot showed him the priest's canary. The two other little girls were being cared for in one of the remaining cottages. Presently the Chief of Police looked in to say that the children's grandmother was on the way, and would take them all. They had telephoned from Nice.

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Presently Father le Touche stumbled in, grey and haggard, but very quiet. He promised to drink a tumbler of milk which Margot would warm for him, as soon as the Requiem Mass should be over.

Chapter XXI

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FOR the first time in his life Father le Touche was staggered. He had attended so many death-beds, disentangled so many of life's problems for people. But this wholesale sweeping away of several hundred people, to whom he had talked and with whom he had so recently prayed—it was horrible in the extreme. His tender heart ached over the grief of the onlooking crowds of friends and relations, and here and there he encountered an old parishioner from Nice, seeking some lost friend in amazed silence. But the priest struggled manfully with his grief, and had ministered to all whom he could with his usual quiet strength and confidence. There were people who depended on his help for consolation and steadiness, and so, with slow steps and careful solicitude, he passed in and out of the people, dropping words not exactly of sympathy, for he was never stereotyped, but of common sense and fortitude. Consolation would come later. This was the time to be up and doing whatever was

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needed, and the searchers had borne a few quiet dead out of the grim avalanche and laid them side by side on the flower-starred grass. There was plenty to do. He knew that all would be well with the little children, for he had seen Margot bending over the stove, stirring something. That was enough.

“Martha,” he thought. He would never have done for the contemplative life, for he was a great humanitarian and believed that work is prayer. Even as he ministered to his people on that never-to-be-forgotten day, he caught himself thanking God for having installed him at Roquebillière before this awful disaster came about. This morning he was a priest with about a dozen parishioners; yesterday he had had six hundred. But he had been given the opportunity to preach the Gospel message to those over whom, all unknown to them all, hung this impending fate, and he remembered many signs of the grace of God at work amongst them—simple peasants for the most part. But he was shaken to the depths of his soul by what he could only conclude was the death of Michael Ruffini. He had known nothing of the probability until he had met Ottershaw, distracted with grief and looking for Desdemona.

Olivia had driven up in her Rolls Royce, and he had asked for a lift. “Of course, Ottershaw. Come inside with me, for I don’t think it would be right to leave Francis at home. He is *so*

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concerned." Francis was one of the Villa footmen, and Olivia was accustomed to driving out in some state with Francis next the chauffeur. She always said she felt a little undressed unless the entourage were complete—"as if I'd forgotten my hat and gloves."

She had forgotten neither. Her small black hat with a diamond design pinned on the side of it looked wonderfully thought out, and she had even paused before her long mirror before starting, to decide what age she *really* did look. Of course this was an awful thing at Roquebillière. She must wear entire black to drive up there. It wouldn't be right to go in colours, in case anybody was there who mattered. Ottershaw was most terribly distressed, poor man, and of course it was a ghastly thing to be cut off like that, but then, why on earth did Michael elect to go up to Katerine Rameaud's last night? It was certainly not a night to be hung up in by storms and—things like *this*. She turned very pale when she caught sight of the people, kneeling or wringing their hands. Some just where the chauffeur finally parked her car. It was all very unpleasant. She must just ask a man if he'd seen Miss Brenderwood. Apparently he had, for his grief-stricken features softened somewhat.

"*Elle soigne les pauvres enfants, là-bas,*" he replied somewhat vaguely.

What children could she be taking care of? The man was a bit of a Communist, and he

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shrugged his shoulders contemptuously after Olivia had swept daintily past him in her expensive black gown.

Close to the Presbytery door, in front of the open Church, the crowd had grown thickest. The bell was tolling for the Requiem Mass. Inside the tiny Church the people were absolutely packed together till there wasn't an inch of standing room. Outside, most of them were kneeling down in the roadway or amongst the shrubs and flowers which grew right up to the walls. The sun was shining gloriously. Further up the hill, the men in uniform were digging, shovelling at the rapidly hardening, cooling mass of liquid mud.

"What were those strange, still forms lying side by side under sheets, on the grass, over there?" Olivia wondered.

A sudden feeling that she couldn't remain in this Valley of the Shadow of Death came over her. It was all strange country to her, she, who had never known even physical discomfort, who had never lifted a finger to help anyone in a difficulty—unless it suited her.

In the porch of the Presbytery she paused, for she could see Desdemona and Margaretta through the open door of the priest's parlour. They had their backs to her. Desdemona's face, however, was quite visible in a mirror which hung over the simple mantelshelf. She was holding a little child, a baby, in her arms, and her face was as it

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were the face of an angel. Softly she was crooning some childish lullaby :

“ Hush-a-bye, Baby, on the tree-top,”

and Olivia could see how the little dimpled hand grew slack and sank against Desdemona's shoulder as sleep crept over the golden-haired child. Was this the girl whose fiancé had been killed, they said, *killed* in that awful mud up there? Her daughter, whom she had expected to find half mad with grief? Singing a baby to sleep! Whilst a bell tolled outside and all the people knelt and waited—*what for?* And Margaretta Ruffini, the cripple, sitting on the floor, playing with a common little boy and impossible cat!

Were they mad, all these people?

Olivia turned and fled up the hill to her waiting car.

“ Home—quickly!” she cried to the chauffeur, and she sat with her hands over her ears till she could no longer hear the bell tolling.

Half an hour later the children were all taken away by the voluble relatives who poured in from some village near by in the hills. Margaretta and Desdemona found themselves standing in the porch, watching the retreating cart, drawn by two oxen, ploughing its way up the hill, carrying the children and an ancient grandmother, who had never dared to hope for such excitement as this in the evening of her life.

They were dazed by the noise, the grief, the ejaculations all around the Presbytery. Their

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occupation had ceased. But suddenly Margareta caught sight of a group of diggers up there, at the edge of the great landslide. Someone had been found alive, or injured, or half dead. Swiftly she put her crutch under her arm and started to limp to the rescue.

"Get your car and go home now, child," she said to Desdemona. "You've done all you can." She saw that the colour was ebbing from Desdemona's cheek, the stunned look coming back to her eyes. The Chief of Police came up. Someone was alive—a man. Would one of the ladies go down with him in the ambulance to the Hospital? The Red Cross nurses who had come with him couldn't leave. Of course Margareta would go. She was a V.A.D.

"Go home—and rest now, do you hear, darlint?" called Margareta.

But Desdemona turned back into the Presbytery—into the parlour.

The house had suddenly become perfectly quiet and empty. The Church was full, and Father le Touche was saying Mass in there. He would surely collapse, she thought. The bell had stopped tolling. She would have liked to go to the service, but she felt too weak suddenly. She wished the baby had not gone.

She sank down on the footstool which stood at the foot of the great Crucifix on the wall. It was a beautifully carved Figure, almost life-size, and had been given to Father le Touche by the Society of Jesus.

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And then her strength gave way and she abandoned herself to her grief, for she had been tried beyond her endurance. Like a crushed lily she lay literally at the foot of the Cross, and the waves of grief went over her. "What have I done, O Mary, Mother of Jesus, what have I done?" was all she could find to say. Round the sacred Feet she clasped her hands, and her tears fell thick and fast upon them. Through the open window she could hear the soft chanting of the people, choirless because there was no longer a choir.

"Oh! Ruffles! Ruffles! where are you now?"

There was a slight sound which she did not hear. She seemed to have lost consciousness there, clasping the Cross.

In the doorway stood Michael.

His face was full of amazement as his glance fell upon her.

Only in the late hours of the morning had he heard of the terrible disaster at Roquebillière, for he had climbed the heights up to St. Evreux le Mont, as he had told Katerine he would do, and had slept late in the hotel there, worn out. Then the news had spread, and, full of grief and horror, he had hastened down the mountain again to learn the full truth and, if need be, help Father le Touche.

The last thing in the world he expected to see was Desdemona at the foot of the Cross, here in the priest's parlour.

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Had she heard that he had been up at Roquebillière last night? It had occurred to him, as he descended the hill, that Ottershaw would be terribly alarmed, perhaps, though he remembered he had said that his movements were uncertain. But it had never occurred to him that Desdemona would have heard so soon. It was not yet midday. How he hoped Margareta had slept on, and not been frightened. He must get back and reassure them as quickly as possible. But—it was all so terrible. It had been the merest “toss-up” whether he had stayed the night or not. He grew pale as he realised more and more how he had been urged by some mysterious instinct last night to go on his way. Poor, poor old Katerine. He, Catholic that he was, crossed himself at the thought of the peril escaped. God rest their souls—Katerine and poor Julie.

And yet, he had thought bitterly, to what had he escaped? Wouldn't it have been far better to have just quietly slipped out of life as all the poor souls had done? A moment's terror, a second's suffocation—perhaps not even that—and he would have done with this life without Desdemona. For it wasn't much use to him now—empty, loveless, frustrated.

“Upon my soul I envy them,” he had thought.

And now, suddenly, he had found Desdemona.

Fascinated he watched her. She raised her head to look up into the face of the Figure. What was she saying? What was her prayer?

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“ Oh, Jesus, tell him now all about it. Tell him I couldn't marry him because I killed Grandfather. It might all have been found out— You understand . . . ”

Michael stood turned to stone. He had heard every word. So *this* was the thing which had come between them! She had remembered, or she had overheard something—what did it matter? She believed she was *branded*. In a flash the whole truth was revealed to him.

He held out his arms with a great cry of joy.

“ Desdemona ! ”

Slowly she turned her eyes to the open, vine-hung doorway. The sun was flooding that side of the house and threw a golden radiance around Michael, silhouetted against the distant blue sky. He stood bare-headed, his fair hair glinting in the sunlight, his arms outstretched.

“ *Desdemona !* ”

She thought she saw a vision. The Blessed Mother had sent him to her, to comfort her. Yes, it was Michael, stretching out his arms to her. It was his voice, the voice she loved as she loved nothing else on earth, calling her name with a great joy in it. At least he still loved her, or he would not have come to her. It was good, good of the Blessed Mother. She stretched out her own small hands towards the vision, misty in the golden light behind it.

“ My Michael ! my Michael ! ” she called.

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The next moment she found herself dragged to her feet, clasped to his heart, which was beating, beating—oh! this was no celestial vision. This was Michael himself—*alive*, breathing, not dead. He was raining warm kisses on her cheeks, her hair, her hands.

“*Ruffles!*” she whispered, her voice full of a great awe. Then she put up her hands and felt his hair, his face, his throat, to see if her senses were not deceiving her.

“Is it you? Back from the dead?”

He smiled with infinite tenderness.

“Is this death?” he muttered, and she thought she would have died on his heart, so closely did he clasp her.

“How did you escape?” she gasped.

“I didn’t stay the night. I went on, up into the mountains,” he answered, his lips on her eyelids.

She lifted her face and drank in the great joy of it. Then, suddenly, the old shadow fell again. Her colour ebbed, leaving her white as death. Slowly she tried to withdraw herself from his arms.

“To gain you only to lose you once more—oh, God!” She shuddered.

“What do you mean, little girl?” he asked. But his voice was strong with joy, for this time he knew that the gift of healing had been given into his hands. He knew the burden of her secret.

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"It's all come back again, dear Ruffles. I can't belong to you."

He drew her back into his arms again.

"Can't you, can't you, little girl?"

She wondered at the lightness of his tone—almost as if there were laughter in it.

"Why not?" he went on, placing his fingers under her chin and raising her face.

Desdemona's eyes grew dark with distress again.

"It is all the same as it was before—this awful thing. Nothing can alter it. I'm glad, oh! I *am* glad to know you've come back from the dead, dear heart," she whispered, "but that's all it can be."

He held her at arm's length and gazed at her in wonderment.

"Is your love for me really as strong as all that?" he asked. "You can send me away again?" Surely no man had ever before been so loved. For he felt that every fibre of her soul and body belonged to him. How could such a little slender child be so like tempered steel?

Never had Desdemona's eyes so reminded him of hyacinths out of a spring wood, so tender and so blue. She tried to draw herself out of his arms for the last time, but—oh! it was good to look once more at the three golden freckles, to push back the lock of hair which *would* come forward on his forehead—surely God would not be angry

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if she put off the parting for just a few minutes. What were three minutes in eternity? Death would really come one day, and after that there would be no need to trouble, for all difficulties would be swept away, and she could belong to him, soul to soul.

But in this world she was a thing apart—a murderess. Somebody who had been the cause of somebody's heart stopping. Yes, *stopping*. Someone going out of this world altogether, ceasing to be. Because of what *she* had done. Suppose she *did* marry Michael, and then, one day, he heard the story. He would perhaps be kissing one of her little hands as he was doing now, and suddenly he would remember. It was that little hand, he would think, which had actually sent a human soul upon its last long journey. And he would shudder and drop her hand. Better death or separation a thousand times than to live to see, to feel him *shrink* from her. The service was over now, and she could hear people shuffling about and coming out again. The bell was tolling again—very badly, because the sexton was dead, and Ottershaw was doing it. Father le Touche would be coming in, perhaps, for the milk Margot had promised him.

"I must make an end of this," Desdemona thought, "or I shall never be able to do it." Yet she remained motionless in Michael's arms, for he was kissing her again, on her hair, stroking it back as he had always done.

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Another thought came to her. Suppose she did marry him and children came. Like that little soft baby she had comforted and nursed an hour or so ago. And then, if the story came out, they would grow up to know, perhaps, that their mother had not only given them life, but had taken it away from someone else—an old man. Their own mother. That was another reason for being strong about it.

And Olivia might find out. She had always been to her mother a being apart, she knew. Someone who disapproved of her, and had once told her so. Whatever her mother had done with her life, she hadn't *killed* anybody. No, she was branded, whichever way she turned, however she looked at it. Nobody who had killed anybody, accidentally or otherwise, could ever be quite the same as anyone who hadn't done so.

Plainly Desdemona had schooled herself into one habit of thought, one gigantic resolution. Outside, tolling the bell so badly, was the man who held her secret without knowing it—the man who believed himself to be under a curse, just like herself, because he hadn't shouted aloud from the housetops.

That was another thing. By her very silence she was condemning him to carry a lifelong burden which she could remove. This horror of what he had been forced to believe a dastardly murder. Would the day come when she would

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feel it to be her duty to tell Ottershaw? All her pride cried out against it. To link herself with him in a guilty secret.

It is well known that the drowning see their past lives in every detail in a few minutes of time. In a sense this happened to Desdemona as she lay supine in Michael's arms, sinking into a kind of euthanasia from which she knew she must rouse herself or be lost. All these thoughts had lived in her mind ever since she had overheard the story Ottershaw had told Michael that evening in the studio. They were familiar points in a lesson she had taught herself to know by heart. So it only took a few seconds for them to pass once more through her brain—as she felt herself drowning. Drowning in her love, her passion for this man who had come back, it seemed, from the very grave to claim her.

And why did Michael delay the telling of the truth? Because he was a man and wanted to get the utmost out of the great joy of telling it. For men are epicures where love is concerned, and the hunter will always play a little with his capture. There is a tiny, tiny element of cruelty which underlies the nature of men, and the strange part of it is, that women know it and love to feel the lash. Or is this passing away because there is no longer any chase? Because romance is dead? Are Desdemona and Michael amongst the last of the lovers?

At long last he felt the moment had come.

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Desdemona sank down once more at the foot of the Cross. This time Michael does not raise her up, but he drops on one knee beside her and draws her close to his heart.

"Listen, little girl," he whispers. "I overheard your pitiful little prayer as I stood in the doorway. You think you killed your grandfather."

Desdemona's heart stood still. What was he going to say?

"And that you aren't fit to be my wife. *Fit*—my little white soul, my Desdemona—*good God!* Listen! Ottershaw found some writing in a book which was on the table by your grandfather's bedside—that night he died. It is Sir Edward's writing. He said he had watched you mix the Tabloids, and he emptied the glass over the roots of the azalea plant. Nobody killed him. *He died in his sleep.*"

Slowly Desdemona raised her hyacinth eyes to his face. A great light was dawning in them.

"Ruffles, is it *true?*"

"You shall see the book, my darling."

Then he drew her once again to her feet and thanked God for the joy which was struggling with the lovelight in her radiant face.

"Do you think Katerine knows?" she whispered.

"Yes, surely. But my brave little Margareta—we must hasten to her."

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“And I’m really, really Desdemona again—not the strange girl I’ve been—not branded?”

“My heart’s desire—my wife!” he cried, gazing down into her lovely, happy face.

Father le Touche stood in the doorway, unknown to either of them.

He was grey and lined, staggering with fatigue and sorrow. But as his gaze fell upon the two figures so closely entwined under the Saviour on the Cross, the lines of his face fell into softness and peace. He had seen the joy on their lips and in their eyes.

Slowly he raised the two fingers of his right hand.

“*Pax vobiscum,*” he murmured. “Peace be unto you.”

Then he turned away, a little comforted.

THE END

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A Selection from Hodder & Stoughton's New and Forthcoming Novels



THE PRISONER IN THE OPAL

By A. E. W. MASON

Author of "No Other Tiger," etc.

A TALK in a London drawing-room with a charming American girl, Joyce Whipple, led Mr. Julius Ricardo, a prosperous and dignified man of business, into an amazing romance of excitement and terror, that, as he said, "gave me a new vision of the world. I saw it as a vast opal inside which I stood. An opal luminously opaque, so that I was dimly aware of another world outside mine, terrible and alarming to the prisoner in the opal." Some strange peril menaces Joyce's friend Diana Tasborough—she is sure of this, though she is uncertain of the precise nature of the peril, and implores Mr. Ricardo, who is going out on his annual business visit to a French wine district, to see as much as he can of Diana, since he knows her and will be staying in her neighbourhood, and may be able to help her. Mr. Ricardo is drawn into this undertaking and plunges into a thrilling and sensational mystery, in the solution of which the astute, quaint French detective, Hanaud, already familiar to Mr. Mason's readers, plays a leading part. It is all "as black a business as Hanaud can remember," and as ingenious and absorbing a story as Mr. Mason has written.

THE INDIA-RUBBER MEN

By EDGAR WALLACE

Author of "The Flying Squad," etc.

INSPECTOR JOHN WADE of the River Police had the toughest job of his life when he had to run to earth the India-Rubber Men—a gang of gunmen in rubber gas-masks, rubber gloves and crêpe rubber shoes, who robbed banks and jewellers, and even committed murder under the very eyes of the police, and got away with it. Had "Mum" Oaks—a spitfire of a woman who ran a lodging-house on the riverside—and her henpecked husband Golly any connection with the Gang? What was the mystery surrounding "Mum's" charming helper, Lila Smith, who was apparently trying to assist Wade, although frightened of disclosing too much to him? It is impossible not to be thrilled with this powerful story of love, crime and adventure amidst the gloom of the Pool of London.

THE GALAXY

By SUSAN ERTZ

Author of "Now East, Now West," "Madame Claire," etc.

THE life story of Laura Deverell, born in 1862, and passing through all the wars, tribulations, fashions, fads, ways of living and thinking from that time to this. The daughter of parents who understood none of their children, Laura grows up into a lovely, intelligent and sensitive girl, far from happy at home, but seeing no career for herself but marriage. Against her father's wishes—for "trade" is still barely within the social pale—she marries an armaments manufacturer with whom she is wildly in love. Her marriage estranges her from her brother, an idealist and a rebel against the materialism of his time; her husband brings her disappointment and infidelity; and it is not until her children are settled and of age that she consents to follow her own heart and leave England with Sandler, a German with an English mother. The War breaks in upon the happy married life that her divorce has at last made possible, and she lives four years of internment. Her son is killed, but she finds in her young grandson her son and her brother all over again. Standing on an island at Hyde Park Corner one day in October 1928, she looks up at the Milky Way (or Galaxy) which she has always loved. Half-blinded by the stars, she steps off the island and is struck by a car. Under the ether during the operation that is necessary she sees the thousand joys of her life, streaming across her vision like the stars of the Milky Way . . . so many that she cannot possibly count them . . . all the faces she has loved, all the things that have brought her happiness, and as they pass before her eyes, she dies.

MATORNI'S VINEYARD

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "The Fortunate Wayfarer," etc.

A CHEERFUL, healthy young man, six tennis rackets and a seat in the Blue Train would to most people mean that all's well with the world. But when Mr. Oppenheim is guiding the young man's destiny, dangers are almost sure to intervene, although romance also is not long absent. Mr. Oppenheim is as expert in pulling political strings as he is in playing with heart-strings. In "Matorni's Vineyard" this prince of story-tellers is once again busy with both.

QUEEN DICK: An Historical Novel

By ALFRED TRESIDDER SHEPPARD

Author of "Here Comes an Old Sailor," etc.

AN exceptionally warm welcome was given to Mr. Alfred Tresidder Sheppard's last novel, "Here Comes an Old Sailor," which Sir Philip Gibbs described as the most startling, extraordinary, and distinguished historical novel he had read since Maurice Hewlett's "Richard Yea and Nay." In his new novel "Queen Dick," Mr. Sheppard lays his scenes in East Anglia. Mr. Sheppard first had the idea of "Queen Dick," as Richard Cromwell was dubbed, as the hero of an historical romance while searching, some years back, among old Stewart and Commonwealth tracts, books and diaries in Saffron Walden, once the head-quarters of the Commonwealth Army. He came to the conclusion that Richard Cromwell had been much maligned, and by no means deserved the contemptuous judgment of Carlyle and others. Later research has confirmed this view. Although imagination has to fill in gaps, "Queen Dick" keeps as closely as possible to actual history. This novel shows a pageant of English history from Richard's birth in 1626, when men were still speaking of the death of James the First and Shakespeare had only been dead ten years, to his death in 1712, only two years before that of Queen Anne.

THE SECRET OF THE CREEK

By VICTOR BRIDGES

Author of "The Man from Nowhere," etc.

"THE SECRET OF THE CREEK," undoubtedly the finest story that Mr. Bridges has yet written, is another of those joyous tales of modern adventure which have endeared him to all lovers of a first-class thriller. The scene, as in "Green Sea Island," is laid on the East Coast, amongst the creeks and marshes of which the author is so happily at home. It is a rattling good yarn, gripping you from the very first page, and holding you enthralled and breathless, till, with a reluctant sigh, you close the book. We need hardly add that it is salted throughout with Mr. Bridges' characteristic humour—that rare gift with which so few writers of sensational fiction seem able to endow their plots. It is this quality that has helped to make his books as popular all over the Continent and America as they are here.

THE GUARDED HALO

By MARGARET PEDLER

Author of "Yesterday's Harvest," "Red Ashes," etc.

SHIRLEY WILSON and her brother Bob found themselves suddenly left penniless and compelled to shift for themselves. It altered the course of their lives, tested their resourcefulness and brought Shirley into contact with Neil Kenwyn. They fell in love, but there was something in the way, some cloud that rested over Neil's past life and would not lift. Then Nicolette Arden, the dancer, came upon the scene, and Shirley's romance looked like fading into nothing. The truth, or what the adoring parents of the dead Ronny Somerville held to be the truth, came out, and after heart-breaks and regrets Shirley rose pluckily above her prejudices and decided to marry Neil in spite of the past. Only it wasn't the truth after all, but a fiction invented, a blame shouldered, by one man in a loyal determination to guard the halo with which another had been invested.

ENTER SIR JOHN

By CLEMENCE DANE AND HELEN SIMPSON

HERE is a wonderful feat of collaboration. It is, if you like, a detective story of the theatre. It opens, in the grey, small hours of the morning, in an out-of-the-way provincial town: knocking, hurrying footsteps, dishevelled, bewildered apparitions at lodging-house windows, and the discovery that the head of a member of the visiting theatrical company has been bashed in with a poker. The notebooks of the local police bulged with evidence that got them nowhere; the local jury, a mixed assembly of mentalities, arrived laboriously and in some bewilderment at a recommendation to mercy. And then Sir John, elegant, imperturbable, aloof, with a famous smile that satisfied the stalls and sent the gallery into ecstasy, took the stage. Sir John, so elusively withdrawn into the innermost recesses of his theatre, emerged, most surprisingly, and journeyed to Peridu. It was someone whose personality had impressed Sir John two years ago who looked like swinging for the crime, someone who interested him—he would not commit himself further for the moment—too much for him to leave her to the mercies of the provincial police. Sir John it was who saw where the case was being bungled and the obvious overlooked, who added a strange assortment of people to his admirers, placed Martella Baring beyond the clutches of the law, and staged for Martella and himself the "entrance" of a lifetime.

CROUCHBACK

By CAROLA OMAN (E. LELANTON)

THE heroine of this vividly dramatic romance is Anne of Warwick—daughter of the “King-maker,” widow of young Edward Prince of Wales and wife of Richard III, the sinister “Crouchback.” Under the magical handling of Miss Oman, the centuries roll back—the men and women who were but names to us become living, breathing, thrilling personalities. The “human touch” transforms every detail of the past into a stirring scene of the present: and beneath it all, like throbbing drums along the night, is audible the tramp of men-at-arms—the scarlet marching men. It is hard to describe this magnificent novel except in terms of exuberant enthusiasm. Its splendid vigour is only equalled by its picturesqueness and its pathos.

WILD HORSE MESA

By ZANE GREY

Author of “Nevada,” etc.

PANGUITCH was more than a horse; to a man he was the symbol of all adventure, and to a girl the symbol of her romance. The pursuit of Panguitch, then, was fraught with meaning for both. Zane Grey has never created so attractive a heroine as this girl, who, with her father and a resolute party, sets forth to conquer Wild Horse Mesa. The intrigues of an outlaw who found his way into the camp; the fine devotion of two brothers; the stirring account of the capture of a herd; and then, finally, the last stand of Panguitch and the smashing events which bring the story to a conclusion—make this perhaps the best romance Zane Grey has written.

SENTINEL OF THE DESERT

By JACKSON GREGORY

Author of “Redwood and Gold,” etc.

JULIAN HAWK rode into Nacional, a stranger, with a message from a dead man that El Topo was a fool and Blondino a liar. And in the Hacienda Escondida, of evil and sinister repute, he found—El Topo and Blondino. There was shooting, and murder done before Hawk's eyes, and hue and cry for Hawk, who slipped away, that sent Blondino and his men galloping for the Blue Smokes after him. There was gold in the Blue Smoke mountains, and a claim all ready to be staked. A smoke signal went up from the Sentinel of the Desert, the tall shaft of rock that stood like a landmark for miles around. And the clash that was bound to come with Blondino and Julian Hawk in the same prospecting camp drew nearer all the time. A shot-gun went off before the original prospectors' stake was claimed, and led to a general stampede; a bullet intended for Hawk found someone else; and Hawk rode South and found Blondino.

PRETTY SINISTER

By FRANCIS BEEDING

Author of "The Six Proud Walkers," etc.

It is impossible to predict where next this author will discover a nest of villains, but that they will be thoroughgoing in their villainy and that their unmasking will call for brains and ingenuity goes without saying. Richard Merrill, a budding young diplomatist, finds that the company of blue-eyed Colonel Granby generally means trouble for someone, and that someone is generally the other person! A gagged train attendant, a dead taxi-driver, kidnapping in the heart of London, all this is, as Colonel Granby would say, "pretty sinister" and Richard Merrill determines to track the mystery to its source, especially when he discovers that somehow or other Joyce Elliott is involved. A cryptic message—a packet of Three Castle cigarettes with one castle blacked out—and at the same time the reappearance of the trio of ruffians, nicknamed by the Foreign Office, Pip, Squeak and Wilfred, certainly means trouble. The trails lead from Geneva to London, from London to York, from York to *one* of the Three Castles!

FOOL ERRANT

By PATRICIA WENTWORTH

Author of "Grey Mask," etc.

HUGO ROSS, who is out of a job, accepts a situation as secretary to Ambrose Minstrel, an eminent though erratic inventive genius. Hugo finds that he has to choose between safety for himself and the risk of being branded as a thief and a traitor to his country. As the Fool Errant, he takes the path of duty and danger in the hope of saving Minstrel's latest invention from falling into the hands of the enemies of civilisation. How Loveday Leigh came to be mixed up in the affair, and how Hugo saved her from a horrible fate, must be read in some of the most thrilling chapters that even Patricia Wentworth has ever written.

THE SCARLET SIN

By MRS. VICTOR RICKARD

Author of "A Perilous Elopement," etc.

"THE SCARLET SIN" is the story of a man's passionate struggle with his own past. Wherever he turns, however high the motive which inspires him, dead hands draw him back, requiring him to face the results of deeds done in a heedless hour. Maynard, the hero of the story, begins with Home and Peace. His surroundings, his outlook—all is calm. And then comes the first faint whisper of change, leading the story through agony and test up to its vast crescendo of triumph and reward.

THE TWO BRIDES

By F. E. PENNY

Author of "A Question of Colour," etc.

HERE are two pictures—a white bride, radiant, willing, strong to face the future with the man of her choice, and a little Indian child-wife, desperately frightened, waiting for the unknown husband chosen for her by her family. The complications of Indian family life, the respect due to parents, the hoards of shiftless, ignorant relatives, are just a few of the problems to be tackled by enlightened Indians, and Mrs. Penny does not shirk the discussion of such problems. Interwoven with her vivid descriptions of Indian life is the story of the transformation of the forlorn little Seeta into a lovely and loving woman, and when, after many years, the two Brides meet, the Indian girl is as able as the white girl to help her husband in his work as well as in his home.

THE SINGING GOLD

By DOROTHY COTTRELL

IF you looked back through the years of your life and set down your story on paper, how would it look? You would remember, how you dreamt in your idle hours of the man who would be your husband. Did he fulfil these expectations? Had your dream come true? Supposing your fondest hopes had been realised—and after a few months the hand of death had stretched out and turned your Paradise into black despair? All suppositions these. You may have experienced none of them; you may have experienced them all. But such was the story of Joan Jerington Whatmore's life as told in the pages of "The Singing Gold." Tears and laughter, hope and despair, mingle throughout her story. Against the brilliant background of Australian farmlands and Tropic Isles this human story, in its atmosphere, its philosophy, its tragedy, and in its naïve whimsicality, shines with the brilliance of genius.

THE WEB OF DESTINY

By SEAMARK

Author of "The Silent Six," etc.

FORREST ORD, just back from strange and adventurous parts of the earth, finds himself involved in such a tangle of strange happenings that he almost despairs of extricating himself. A cry in the night; a fair girl stealing from a house of mystery; the grim contents of a small attaché case; what is the connecting link between them and a strange, secret force that rends a man in pieces in an empty room behind a locked door?

SHIPMATES

By COMMANDER DORLING ("TAFFRAIL")

Author of "The First Command," "Michael Bray," etc.

Two boys from a Cornish fishing village, friends from childhood, join the Royal Navy. One, the son of the squire, himself a naval officer with a long line of naval ancestors, joins as an officer. The other, the son of a fisherman, enters as a bluejacket. The Great War deprives the squire of his heir, and, for reasons which appear in the book, he adopts the sailor's orphan son and puts him into the Navy as an officer to carry on the sea traditions of both families. Into this new book the author brings his usual intimate knowledge of naval life, a keen sense of pathos and an ably-handled love interest.

THE FOUR GRACES

By RICHMAL CROMPTON

Author of "The Wildings," etc.

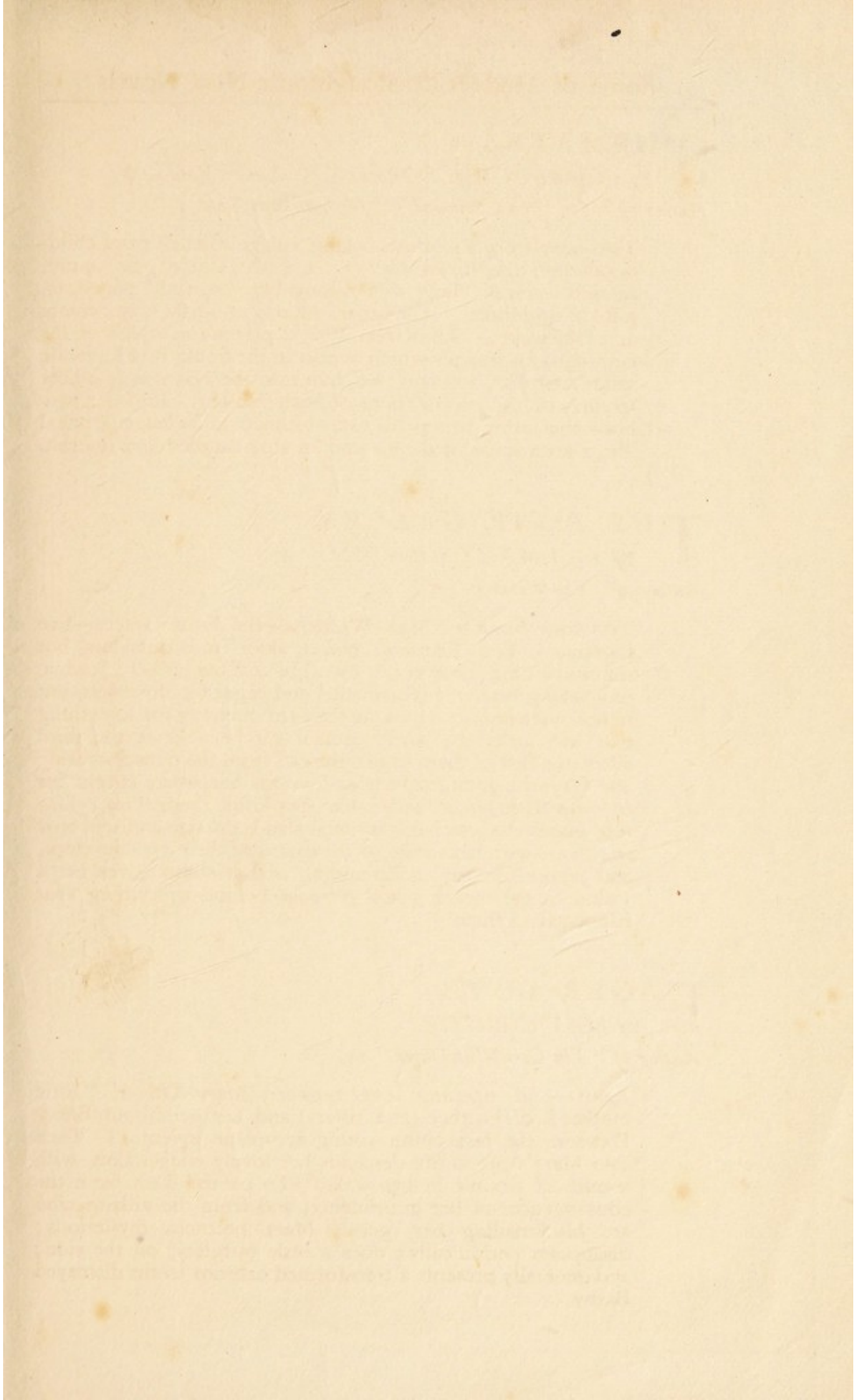
THE four beautiful Miss Wardens—the Four Graces—live together at Four Corners: Helen, aloof from outsiders, but the controlling force in her own life and her sisters; Joanna, of amazing beauty, high spirited and eager for diversion, but in her innermost soul looking forward intensely for something that will make the world radiant for her; Peter, the third sister, the first of them to feel the call from the outside world; and Gay, the youngest, whose love for her sisters taught her to know them almost better than they know themselves. Gay it is who is the watcher, Gay who stands outside and sees how things are with her sisters, as the drama of their lives develops, and whose intense understanding of her sisters gives her a vision of the meaning and purpose behind everything that happened to them.

EAGER LOVE

By MAY CHRISTIE

Author of "The Girl Who Dared," etc.

APRIL—and ripening love between Mary Oliver, "little mother" of brothers and sisters, and her neighbour Barny Dawson, the fascinating young aeroplane inventor! Then into Mary's placid life descends her lovely cousin Lois, with a train of trouble in her wake. To protect Lois from the consequences of her imprudence, and from the villains who are blackmailing her, gentle Mary becomes mysterious; disappears periodically; does a little burglary, on the side; and generally presents a transformed exterior to the dismayed Barny.



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~~H.B.~~

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