
MRS. LATHAM'S EXTRAVAGANCE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ANDREW AND HIS WIFE
LADY SYLVIA'S IMPOSTOR
ENTER BRIDGET
THE ANGER OF OLIVIA
MRS. ERRICKER'S REPUTATION
THE FUTURE MRS. DERING
A CHANGE OF FACE
THE COMPOSITE LADY
THE AMATEUR EMIGRANTS
SCRUPLES
SOPHY BUNCE
MR. PASSINGHAM
CARPET COURTSHIP
THE BISHOP'S GAMBIT
A MAN OF SENTIMENT
THE DISSEMBLERS
SEVERANCE
A MARRIAGE OF INCONVENIENCE
ETC., ETC., ETC.

MRS. LATHAM'S EXTRAVAGANCE

BY
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MRS. LATHAM'S EXTRAVAGANCE

CHAPTER I

MISS ELLISTON—the Honourable Lavinia Elliston—noticed that Mrs. Sheffield never wearied of dragging in Meriel Latham's name. It did not matter what was being talked about, she was certain to be mentioned before the conversation ended. Mrs. Sheffield would refer either to the colour of Meriel's hair, the expression of her eyes, to her figure or her complexion, and yet the two women had never met.

It was true, however, that Meriel had been introduced to Mr. Sheffield by Wilfred Osterby. If it had not been for Osterby, indeed, a busy-body who interfered with other persons' affairs as much as possible, the Sheffields would never have come to Standerton-on-Sea.

When Christopher took Miss Elliston's furnished bungalow, the last house to the east

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of Marine Terrace, and went away a few days later leaving his wife to grow paler and more wistful week by week, when the good folk of the town began to gossip, declaring that Katherine had no right to his name, Miss Elliston stood up for her simply because she felt confident that her old friend Osterby would not have introduced anybody who was not all she ought to be.

Nevertheless, Miss Elliston warned herself to walk more cautiously. She had not lived so many years in a wicked world without becoming aware of her own weaknesses—more than fifty-five years! Her hair was already gray, and there were a good many wrinkles on her long, thin face, though it was useless to fret over the inevitable.

Still, one had a position to maintain, and Lavinia realised that she was apt to be carried away by her feelings. Passing the bungalow on the afternoon of April the First, when Katherine Sheffield was reclining under the shade of the bright green veranda without a hat, Miss Elliston hesitated to accept an invitation to sit down and rest for a few minutes.

It was not without its temptations, for

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Mrs. Sheffield was an admirable listener, and one of the few people in Standerton who had not heard everything about Lavinia's family and friends. Moreover, she looked uncommonly winsome this fine afternoon, her small white hands busily employed with some elaborate "fancy work" in which Miss Elliston always took a deep interest.

Katherine did not look a day older than twenty-four or twenty-five, with her low stature, her girlish figure, her small face and eyes which had grown more pathetic every week since her husband's departure; but then the disturbing question arose whether Christopher Sheffield really was her husband, and hence Miss Elliston's hesitation. She certainly did not look like "that sort of person," but appearances are often deceptive, and Lavinia was the last person in the world to countenance anything of the kind; while yet she always felt so sympathetic to the poor little lonely woman, that it was difficult to maintain an attitude of judicious detachment pending further evidence.

"Yes, it is lovely weather," she said, yielding at last, entering the gate and going up the three wooden steps to Katherine's side.

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"I sincerely hope," she added, taking a chair, "it will last over Sunday."

"I see that Mrs. Latham was at Lady Wrexam's party last night," remarked Katherine, bending over her work.

"It seems to me," was the answer, "that you take the most extraordinary interest in Mrs. Latham's movements."

"Oh well," murmured Katherine, "there is so very little going on in Standerton, and, besides, she must be an interesting person."

"I have always been very, very fond of Meriel," Miss Elliston admitted, "although I suppose she has made me more angry in her time than any other human being. I was fond of her when she was Meriel Fitzgerald, and that was quite seven years ago, more than seven years. Of course she looks ridiculously young still; it is difficult to imagine her growing old. 'Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney-sweepers, come to dust!' I know all about that," Lavinia continued, "but Meriel Latham still looks a golden girl—that precisely describes her. Her father was Colonel Fitzgerald, one of the handsomest men in England, and her mother—but there! I mustn't speak ill of the dead. One of my

nephews was over head and ears in love with Meriel before she was twenty, and no wonder ! ”

Katherine had left off sewing and her eyes were fixed on Lavinia's face, but suddenly Miss Elliston became tantalizingly silent, reminding herself, indeed, that it would prove extremely embarrassing to cut Mrs. Sheffield in case of necessity, if she now admitted her to an intimacy.

“ Why weren't they married ? ” asked Katherine, and Lavinia could not resist the temptation—

“ Meriel had not a shilling,” she explained, “ and Ronald was the youngest of four sons. . . . Lord Ronald Eckington, you know. My only sister married the Marquis of Amberset. When Ronald came down from Trinity, he had the run of his father's houses, no profession, and just enough pocket money not to pay for his clothes and cigars. Of course Mrs. Fitzgerald put her foot down, but Ronald implored Meriel to wait a year——”

“ Then was there another Richmond in the field ? ” suggested Katherine.

“ There were half a dozen. Colonel Fitzgerald was dead,” said Lavinia, “ and Mrs. Fitzgerald hawked that poor child about as if

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she were a dog for sale. Archibald Latham was old enough to be her grandfather ; as a matter of fact, he had several grandchildren. A quite pleasant old gentleman ; very rich indeed. He offered to settle fifty thousand pounds on Meriel."

"She declined to wait ?"

"I honestly believe she would have married Ronald if she had been left to herself," answered Lavinia. "But she was not quite twenty, and her mother wouldn't allow her to call her soul her own—a dreadful woman ! One must do her the justice to admit that no one who knew Ronald believed he would ever make such a success. You see," Miss Elliston continued, reckless now, "even as a small boy he was always wonderfully keen on photography. He was constantly bothering people to let him take their portraits ; really beautiful portraits. He seemed somehow to have the knack of making you look your best. Still I was never more astonished in my life than when he came one day and coolly asked me to lend him five hundred pounds. When he told me he was going to set up in business as a photographer I laughed in his face."

"Still you lent him the money!" cried Katherine.

"Now how do you know that?" demanded Lavinia.

"It is just the good-natured thing you would do."

"My dear!" said Miss Elliston, resting a hand on Mrs. Sheffield's arm, "there are not many people in Standerton who would say I am a good-natured woman."

"That is only because they cannot see beneath the surface," returned Katherine, whereupon Lavinia eyed her askant as if doubtful whether she had received a compliment or otherwise.

"It is true I let Ronald have the money," she admitted, "although I assure you I never expected to see a penny of it again. He was always my favourite nephew. Well," Lavinia continued, "he lost no time in taking the lease of a house in Brandenburg Street—he gave my name as his reference. He built a glass studio on the roof and put a brass plate on the street door with the name of Lestocq."

"Oh!" exclaimed Katherine, "of course everybody knows Lestocq's photographs, but

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who would have imagined that Mr. Lestocq could be Lord Ronald Eckington !”

“ His full name,” was the answer, “ is Ronald, Francis, William, Lestocq Eckington, and in seven years he has managed to build up the best business of the kind in England. Not the largest, perhaps, but certainly the best. What is more, he has practically made up his mind to turn it into a company. Fortune favoured him from the first,” said Lavinia. “ He let the ground floor to a dressmaker who paid a considerable portion of the rent until he got rid of her some time ago. Of late years, Ronald is never seen anywhere, but at the age of twenty-three he was extraordinarily popular—not what you would call a remarkably handsome man, but people liked him ; some of the loveliest women in London sat for him, and their portraits were published in the weekly papers with the name of Lestocq underneath. A splendid advertisement ! He lived like a hermit in two rooms in Brandenburg Street which were not required for the business, and to my astonishment he brought a cheque for my five hundred pounds within nine months.”

"But—but Mrs. Latham didn't wait," suggested Katherine, and Lavinia dolefully shook her head.

"I saw a great deal of them both during the first six months," she said, "although Mrs. Fitzgerald took care they should see nothing of each other. I did my utmost. Those two young people were very, very much attached, and there was Ronald, giving up all his friends and his usual occupations, working hard from morning till night, but Mrs. Fitzgerald was strong, and in those days I suppose Meriel was rather weak; she was intensely unhappy at home, it seemed madness to believe that Ronald would succeed in earning a living, and old Mr. Latham dangled his money bags. Meriel was married within seven months—I held her sobbing in my arms the day before the wedding. She never had a child," Miss Elliston explained, "and her husband only lived four years. He left all his money to his sons, with the exception of the fifty thousand pounds which was Meriel's to do what she liked with. She still lives on at the house in Grandison Street, Mayfair, and in my opinion she is more beautiful than ever."

"Does Lord Ronald ever see her?" asked Katherine.

"Oh dear, yes," was the answer. "But while Mr. Latham was alive they never exchanged a word. Ronald had turned his back on society, and really Meriel was more like the poor old man's nurse than his wife. If you saw her to-day it would be difficult to believe she was ever the girl to be brow-beaten by her mother. To tell you the truth," said Lavinia, "it was I who brought them together again two years ago—a year after Mr. Latham's death. If I succeed in letting my house for the season, I generally spend a month or so at Manning's Hotel in Dover Street, Piccadilly. I have made up little parties for the play, and invited them both. Oh, they have become quite good friends again."

"Perhaps," suggested Katherine, "Mrs. Latham will marry your nephew after all."

"'She that will not when she may, When she would she shall have nay!'"

"You really think she—she would?" cried Katherine, quite excitedly.

"My dear, she would give her eyes for him."

"Then it must be Lord Ronald who has grown cold," said Katherine.

"Although it was seven years ago," answered Lavinia, "I really believe he feels as sore as he did on her wedding day. I do, indeed. If he were not a level-headed man I suppose he would never have succeeded as he has done, but they say we are all mad on one subject, and Ronald insists that Meriel deliberately sold herself for fifty thousand pounds."

"I suppose that is perfectly true," said Katherine, promptly.

"At all events, he would do anything in the world sooner than handle a penny of what he persists in calling Meriel's price."

"It *was* her price," said Katherine, "and I can quite understand Lord Ronald's objection."

"Well, I confess it seems rather ridiculous to me," was the answer. "We have to take the world as we find it, and Meriel was not the first girl to marry for money."

"Apart from the money," asked Katherine, "do you think Lord Ronald is still fond of Mrs. Latham?"

“How can he consider her without it?” said Lavinia. “If he married her he would be bound to derive some benefit from it, and he would sooner throw himself into the sea. I really scarcely know how to explain his sentiments. Meriel will always be a woman apart to him. No one else will ever occupy her place, yet I am not at all certain he would ever bring himself to marry her—money or no money. I knew a woman once,” continued Lavinia, “who had the most magnificent pearl necklace. One evening when she was wearing it, she was unexpectedly summoned to the nursery. One of the children had been suddenly taken ill, and as a matter of fact he died an hour later in his mother’s arms. It happened that a tiny drop of blood had got on one of the pearls and she would never look at the necklace again. The stain had been entirely removed, there was not the slightest sign of it left, but she couldn’t endure to have it in the same room with her. Now, there’s a parable for you!” cried Miss Elliston, rising from her chair. “I don’t know whether it conveys any idea to your mind. I am expecting my nephew on Saturday.”

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“Is he going to stay long?” asked Katherine.

“Only one night,” said Lavinia. “He always goes back to London early on Sunday evening.”

CHAPTER II

MISS ELLISTON could not refrain from smiling as she drew up her blind on Saturday morning, although she did not often feel inclined to smile so early in the day. It was really delightful, with the sun shining brilliantly and the sea looking so peaceful that it seemed impossible it could ever grow angry enough to take men's lives.

"A lovely morning, Martha!" she exclaimed, on reaching the dining-room, and Martha, who had lived in the family for years and years, said it was indeed, and how nice for Lord Ronald's visit.

Lavinia smiled again as she looked forward to his arrival, and although it could not have been in the least necessary to inspect his room, because she knew that Martha could be trusted, Miss Elliston took the precaution to go upstairs and see that there was soap in the bowl, and that there were plenty of towels

on the horse, before she set forth to walk to the railway station to meet his train.

Having arrived ten minutes before it was due at a quarter to one, Lavinia felt hot and uncomfortable, but she could always amuse herself by looking at the contents of the book-stall or talking to the station master, and presently the signal fell, and the train could be seen steaming along the straight stretch of line.

As soon as it stopped, she began to wave her sunshade to a tall, fair-haired, clean-shaven man who was alone in a smoking compartment. When he stepped out she ran towards him, shaking his hand and kissing his cheek before the small group on the platform. She often wished she durst tell him to put his shoulders back as she used very often to do when he was a small boy, and to smoothe the stubborn hair which had always been a source of trouble. There was a faint suggestion of boyishness about him still, although he had passed his thirtieth birthday, probably because of a certain lankiness of figure.

After hearing the account of him which Lavinia had given to Mrs. Sheffield, Ronald was perhaps scarcely the type of man one

would expect to see. There was nothing brisk, determined or business-like in his appearance; his movements were leisurely, and his rather long face had an unsophisticated expression. Nor was he particularly well dressed. His loose tweed suit was dark in colour and quiet in pattern, and over one arm he carried a rough overcoat. Miss Elliston knew that it would be useless to suggest that his leather suit case should be brought to her house in the middle of Marine Terrace, and twelve doors from Mrs. Sheffield's, by one of the porters. He always seemed to like doing things for himself: in Aunt Lavinia's opinion, he was not quite particular enough to act as if he were a member of her own class. On entering the house her three black pugs greeted him in the friendliest manner, and, of course, he shook hands with Martha.

"I suppose it's the same old room, Aunt Lavinia," he exclaimed, but before she could answer, he was halfway upstairs, instead of letting the servant carry his suit case. But when he came down to the drawing-room, ten minutes later, and heard that luncheon was served, he took Miss Elliston's arm and pressed it with a laugh which made amends

for a great deal. As a matter of fact, she quite understood that he would never forget that loan, which, although it had not enabled him to gain his heart's desire, had yet been the foundation stone of his fortunes. Seated at the table, Lavinia enjoyed giving him a variety of information about the other members of his family, concerning whose movements he appeared curiously ignorant.

"Ronald," she exclaimed, as soon as they were alone, and she had given him permission to light his pipe, "I wonder whether you have ever met Christopher Sheffield?"

"Oh well, you know, I don't meet a great many people nowadays," he answered, "but every one has heard a good deal about him lately. He has a show on at the Newbury Gallery—post-impressionist, cubist, futurist, or something of the kind."

"I understood that his pictures were rather eccentric," said Lavinia.

"I fancy there may be method in his madness," Ronald continued. "I was talking to Osterby about him the other day. They used to know one another rather well some time ago, when Sheffield was struggling to pick up a living at black and white work at

Hampstead. Then, according to Osterby, who knows everybody's business, an uncle died and left the fellow a pot of money."

"How long ago was that?" asked Lavinia, and Ronald, attributing her interest to the fact that Christopher's name had been prominent in the newspapers during the last few weeks, rejoiced to have something to talk about.

"I should say about seven years: about the time I was starting at Brandenburg Street. On the strength of his fortune Sheffield played the fool and married one of his models. She was some years older than himself, and not unnaturally it turned out badly."

"Is Mrs. Sheffield still alive?" asked Miss Elliston, gravely.

"Oh yes, I believe so, but according to Osterby, again, they separated—within eighteen months, I think he said. I fancy there was another woman in the case; there generally is, you know, though," he added with a smile, "I'm sorry I can't gratify you with the details, Aunt Lavinia."

"Mr. Sheffield did not obtain a divorce?" she suggested.

"You see, the woman drank like a fish," said Ronald. "Unfortunately for Sheffield, there was nothing else against her."

While Ronald was still sitting at the foot of the luncheon table, Miss Elliston had taken a chair by the open window. She could not pretend that she liked the smell of tobacco, although she made an exception in her nephew's favour and tolerated it. Now she drew in a deep breath and turned away her face lest it should betray the sadness of her heart. Lavinia had seen Christopher Sheffield when he came to inquire about the bungalow and considered him really one of the handsomest men she had ever met, and this notwithstanding a slight tendency to swagger. He must be two or three years older than Ronald, and if, seven years ago, he had married a woman older than himself who was still alive, it inevitably followed that Katherine could not be his wife.

"Now you are here," exclaimed Lavinia, "it will never do to waste this glorious afternoon indoors. It will be warm out on the cliff, and I shall not be long getting ready."

A few minutes later, followed by the three black pugs, they were crossing the road

opposite the house, and after passing between two iron posts, they came upon the cliff, which formed the fashionable promenade where the band played in the season. Although it was too early for many visitors, some of the residents (a superior race) had been tempted out of doors by the exceptionally fine weather. A good many children were playing about the grass, and as Ronald drew near the eastern end of the Terrace, he saw a pretty little dark-haired woman come forth from the bungalow with the bright green veranda, carrying two or three weekly reviews, a novel and a sunshade in one hand, and a folded deck chair in the other.

Crossing the road in the glare of the sunshine, she reached the grass, upon which she laid her other impedimenta, while devoting all her energies to unfolding the chair, and finding some difficulty, she glanced at Miss Elliston with a deprecatory smile. Seeing that she knew his aunt, Ronald no longer hesitated to go to her aid, blissfully ignorant of Lavinia's frown. If he had told a different tale about Christopher Sheffield, she would have had no objection to introduce her nephew, but in the unfortunate circumstances

she should certainly do nothing of the kind. Not that a formal introduction appeared to be in the least necessary :

“ Oh, thank you so much, Lord Ronald ! ” cried Katherine, charmingly flushed after her struggle with the chair. “ Miss Elliston, ” she added, as he stooped to pick up the newspapers, the novel and the sunshade from the ground, “ told me you were coming. ”

Turning to look for Aunt Lavinia, Ronald saw that she had walked away, followed by her dogs. Her back was very straight and expressive.

“ Anyhow, ” he answered, “ she didn't tell me whom I was to have the pleasure of meeting. ”

“ I am Mrs. Christopher Sheffield, ” said Katherine, wondering at his sudden embarrassment. After a few casual remarks, he said, “ Good-bye, ” and hastened to overtake Miss Elliston, who had by this time passed her own house.

“ I say, Aunt Lavinia, ” he blurted out, “ I do think it was a bit too bad to let me give the little woman away. ”

“ My dear Ronald, ” she retorted, “ I suppose you told simply the truth. ”

"Yes; but I would far sooner have told a dozen lies if I had guessed why you were pumping me. Have you known her long?" he added.

"About six weeks," said Lavinia. "She and Mr. Sheffield were staying at the Saint Cuthbert's Hotel, and Wilfred Osterby had been good enough to tell them about my bungalow. As I can never keep a tenant in the ordinary way, I was persuaded to put in some furniture and let it by the month. Of course I saw that Mrs. Sheffield, as she calls herself, did not wish to take the house, but he is one of those exuberant, overwhelming persons who always manage to get their own way."

"Then where is Sheffield?" asked Ronald.

"He went off the third day after they moved in, and he has not shown his face since. When people began to insinuate that she was not his wife, I refused to believe them. I will not say I was not suspicious, but I liked the poor woman, and I took her part; but now that you have put the matter beyond a doubt, I shall lose no time in getting rid of her. What I cannot understand is the surprising interest she seems to take in Meriel."

“Does—does Mrs. Sheffield know her?” suggested Ronald, raising his eyebrows.

“Is it likely?” cried Lavinia. “Though I believe that Mr. Osterby introduced Meriel to Mr. Sheffield—that was before he came to Standerton. I have sometimes wondered whether Mrs. Sheffield could possibly be jealous——”

“Jealous of Meriel?”

“Whether,” Miss Elliston continued, “she could blame Meriel for keeping Mr. Sheffield in London.”

CHAPTER III

AFTER luncheon on Sunday, Miss Elliston looked very sleepy, and Ronald was beginning to feel bored. He had exhausted every topic of conversation with Aunt Lavinia, and thought that Mrs. Sheffield would make an agreeable change. Already he had looked about for her while Miss Elliston was at church that morning, but as the afternoon was brighter, she might perhaps come out with her book as she had done yesterday.

Leaving the house as soon as Lavinia rose from the table, he lighted his pipe, and turning to his left along the cliff, walked slowly towards the bungalow, though it was not until three o'clock that he saw Katherine come forth with her folded deck chair. Having waited until she was seated, he strolled to her side, whereupon as if to meet him quite halfway, she suggested that if he liked to go to her

house he would find another chair under the veranda. A few minutes later he was comfortably settled, his long legs stretched out, his soft felt hat tilted slightly over his eyes.

"I happen to know a man who used to see a good deal of Sheffield once upon a time," he remarked presently, and Katherine turned hastily, looking into his face from under her sunshade.

"I—I suppose that must be Mr. Osterby," she answered. "I have never seen him. We have lived abroad the last four years. Christopher had a studio in Paris, and we knew ever so many interesting people there. It was the most delightful time. I wish we were back again! But then he wanted to convert London to his own opinions. Miss Elliston," Katherine added, "told me you were a friend of Mrs. Latham's."

"Oh yes," said Ronald, wondering how many tales Lavinia had been telling out of school.

"Christopher sent her a ticket for his private view at the Newbury Gallery," cried Katherine, with more excitement than the statement seemed to warrant.

"Did she go?" he inquired.

"I don't know. I have not seen Christopher since the opening of the show. He hasn't mentioned Mrs. Latham's name in his letters, but then he is such a wretched letter-writer. I suppose she—she really is a very beautiful woman!" said Katherine, with a sigh.

"Very," answered Ronald.

"What is she like?"

"Oh well," said Ronald, with a laugh. "she is divinely tall and most divinely fair."

"Miss Elliston called her a golden girl."

"Not a bad description," returned Ronald.

"She must be a sort of goddess," said Katherine, rather petulantly.

"Oh dear no. At least she's by no means too bright or good for human nature's daily food."

Katherine sighed again, more deeply, and Ronald was left with the impression that she would have liked to say something else about Meriel Latham if she dared. Although he stayed talking half an hour longer, however, her name was not mentioned again, nor did

Ronald tell Lavinia how he had passed the afternoon.

“I say, I hope you're not going to drop down too heavily on that poor little woman,” he said, just before setting forth to the station, but Miss Elliston was obviously disinclined to discuss the subject, although she looked significantly severe. She could not help feeling that she had been grossly deceived by Katherine, and hardening her heart she set out at eleven o'clock on Monday morning, with her back very straight indeed, walked to the bungalow, rang the bell, and was taken to the tiny drawing-room, which was furnished with all manner of odds and ends of upholstery.

Katherine, seated with her hands idly in her lap, looked so wan and pitiful that Lavinia almost wished she had stayed away ; she had a good mind to make some trivial excuse for the visit and bring it to an end without giving Mrs. Sheffield notice to leave the house in a month's time.

Rising abruptly, Katherine jerked back her head as if to banish some disagreeable thought ; she had many charming, half-caressing, little ways which appealed pathetically to Miss

Elliston, whose stunted life was in truth one intense craving for love, ridiculous as the suggestion would have appeared to her friends at Standerton-on-Sea.

"How nice of you to come!" said Katherine. "I know exactly how you feel. A kind of anti-climax, isn't it, after a visitor has gone? Did Lord Ronald tell you we had quite a long conversation on the cliff yesterday afternoon?"

"No, he did not," answered Lavinia, with a frown. "But if my nephew kept his own counsel, I am sorry to say that other people have been making remarks——"

"About me?" cried Katherine.

"They have been saying really the most unpleasant things."

"Let them say!" murmured Katherine.

"That is all very well. I perfectly understand your attitude. One naturally enjoys treating it in that way," said Miss Elliston. "I have always taken your part, and I shall do so still if you can contradict——"

"Contradict what?" demanded Katherine.

"They insist that Mr. Sheffield is—is not your husband!"

"Surely that doesn't concern anybody

but myself and him," she retorted; but although her words sounded brave enough, Lavinia heard the quaver in her voice, and knew that Katherine was almost on the point of a collapse.

"It certainly concerns me," said Lavinia. "To be quite candid, and I always prefer candour, I should not care to let my house to anybody——"

"That difficulty is easily got over," exclaimed Katherine, catching her breath. "I suppose all we have to do is to give one another four weeks' notice."

"Precisely," said Miss Elliston, with her head in the air. With a gesture which suggested that she was drawing her expensive but curiously old-fashioned, garments more closely about her spare figure, she turned towards the door. Katherine's contumacy made her feel very indignant, and with her fingers on the handle, Lavinia looked round to dart a parting, overwhelming glance at the sinner, who was standing in the middle of the room, one hand resting on the back of a chair, her neck bent, her expression so utterly forlorn, and Miss Elliston was entirely undone. Reclosing the partly open door, she ran across

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the room, and placed a hand on Mrs. Sheffield's shoulder.

“ Oh, my dear ! ” she cried, “ how in the world could you ever bring yourself to do such a thing ? ”

CHAPTER IV

PRECISELY how it came to pass Miss Elliston never knew, but the next instant she was holding Katherine sobbing in her arms. It was long since she had shed a tear, but now that the floodgates were opened, it became difficult to pacify her.

"I suppose it is true," suggested Lavinia, presently, "that Mr. Sheffield's wife is still alive?"

"Oh, don't you see," was the reproachful answer, "that if she were not we should be married!"

"It seems incomprehensible that such a girl as you could make such a terribly false step," said Lavinia.

"I—I loved Christopher," murmured Katherine.

"Ah, my dear child, that may be an explanation. It is not an excuse," said Lavinia.

"After all it was simply a question of self-restraint. It just amounts to that," she added, and Katherine's face grew crimson to the roots of her hair. Disengaging herself, she dabbed her eyes with the tiniest of pocket-handkerchiefs, and Lavinia took a chair by the open window.

"You don't understand," urged Katherine, "what utter misery Christopher was in. His wife was a—a horrid woman. I had met him before his marriage when I was a girl of seventeen, and afterwards I used to see them about together. She was not really very nice looking, though she had the most magnificent figure. But she was years older than Christopher—I have never said a word about it to any one before," she murmured.

Lavinia's mood had entirely changed since she entered the house, and by and bye she would probably reproach herself for a weakness which had landed her in embarrassments before to-day. At the moment, however, she was borne away with sympathy for this square peg in a round hole, and drawing Katherine down to a chair by her side, she continued to hold her hand.

"Ah well, my dear," she said, "there's

nothing much better than a good talk now and then."

"It seems so long ago though it's really only four years," cried Katherine, "that I might be living in a different world. I am afraid I was a rather interfering person. I always wanted to help people and improve them—imagine my improving anybody! I must have made myself a dreadful nuisance. I was very young, you know. No one would have anything to do with Christopher's wife—they said she drank, and I wondered whether the reason might not be that she was left so much to herself. I went to see her—my mother was dead," Katherine explained. "My sister was younger than myself; my father and brother were away from home all day, so I could do exactly as I liked. Mrs. Sheffield was sitting in the studio—it was only a box of a house. She was quite intoxicated and said the most extraordinary things. In the midst of it, Christopher came in, looking terribly upset to see a visitor. When his wife got up from her chair, she staggered about the room, and at last fell flat on the floor, striking her forehead against the sharp edge of the fender. She lay there while I

bathed the wound and bandaged it, and I shall never forget Christopher's face as he showed me to the door. He didn't say a word, and I had never felt so sorry for any one in the world before. She left him a month later."

"How long was that before—before the change in your own life?" asked Lavinia.

"Two years," said Katherine. "Christopher met me really by chance the first time—on the Heath, you know. What I had seen that awful afternoon at his studio seemed to enable him to open his heart. It must have been nearly breaking. I put myself in his way after that, thinking only of lending him a helping hand—no other idea entered my mind. But I saw that he was going gradually downhill. He made no attempt to work; he would not be persuaded to go away. I was afraid he might become as bad as his wife. As the weeks and months passed I longed to do something for him, and one evening—oh! I remember it so distinctly—he vowed there was only one thing I could do, and in the end, but not till after many months more, I did it."

"And now," cried Miss Elliston, "you would give the world if it could be undone?"

"No," said Katherine. "No, I wouldn't. Christopher declared that I should be his wife in the sight of Heaven."

"Poor Heaven! What a scapegoat! But, my dear, Mr. Sheffield has not treated you as his wife since you have been here. To go away and leave you——"

"He has become so deeply interested about his work again," answered Katherine. "Miss Elliston, I know that I have made him a better man. He can't help being impulsive and changeable, that is his nature. Not that he has ever changed towards me—not actually changed, only," she added with a dreary smile, "you can't expect a—a honeymoon to last for ever. For the first three years we were scarcely ever apart. Then Christopher fell in with a group of artists—younger men, who looked up to him, and after that I didn't see quite so much of him, though he was always dear and sweet. He couldn't be anything else, but you know how it is. One grows used to things and treats them as matters of course, and doesn't take so much trouble about them, but if one goes away then they may be missed and—and one lives happily ever after."

"So that is how you console yourself, little philosopher!" murmured Miss Elliston.

"Christopher wanted to come to London for his show at the Newbury Gallery," Katherine continued. "He was enthusiastic enough to think of founding a new school. Articles had been already written about him and his work; he used to laugh and say he could scarcely get his hat on. We reached England ten weeks ago," said Katherine, "and went to an hotel while we looked about for a house with a studio."

"Surely," suggested Lavinia, "you know enough of the world we live in to understand that your position would be ever so much more difficult in London."

"That was what first made Christopher think of coming to Standerton," answered Katherine, hastily. "I did not wish to come, but he said we could run up to town as often as we pleased, and Mr. Osterby told him about this little house."

"It appears to me," said Lavinia, "that Mr. Sheffield deliberately brought you here to get you out of the way."

"N—no," faltered Katherine, "I don't

believe he did. He never does anything deliberately. He is not that sort of man; he would not be capable of it. It is the same with his work; he never attempts anything that would take a long time; it must be dashed off at fever heat—people say it is inspiration. As soon as an idea enters his head he takes it up so enthusiastically that you would imagine he had been thinking it over for years and years. He found that he could not introduce me to the friends he was making in London, but he meant us to be together here—I feel certain he did. I should have gone to the private view, only there was the bother with the servants, and he suggested I should stay to get things in order. He promised to come back on the Sunday evening, but sent a telegram instead.”

“He doesn’t often write to you, I’ll be bound,” Miss Elliston exclaimed.

“Not very often,” Katherine confessed. “But Christopher is a man who sends telegrams, you know.”

“How do you manage about money?”

“There is an account in my name at the bank here,” Katherine explained. “It was to save him the trouble of drawing cheques.

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He detests details of that kind. I shall write to-day," she added, "and implore him to come to me."

"My dear, you can't deceive me if you try to deceive yourself," said Miss Elliston. "The fact of the matter is, you are afraid Mr. Sheffield has seen some one else."

Katherine, however, did not answer. She durst not put her fear into words. Although she could not forget his fervid admiration of Mrs. Latham on the day he was introduced to her by Wilfred Osterby, Katherine still endeavoured to believe that in all probability Christopher had not seen her again. There was nothing even to show that Mrs. Latham had used the ticket which he had sent for the private view at the Newbury Gallery.

Christopher could never dream of separating himself from the woman who so distinctly remembered his protestations. More solemn vows, surely, had never been plighted! He had wished her to go away with him four years ago without a word to those at home, but she would have none of that. With a courage which surprised herself, having once made up her mind, she insisted on telling her father face to face. How distinctly she could

remember that dreadful evening : his remonstrances, his appeal to her dead mother's memory ; then her brother's invective, her sister's tearful entreaties, and finally the arguments of the elderly vicar who was called in as a forlorn hope.

She used to be happy enough at home ; a little bored now and then, perhaps, but happy enough in a quiet, monotonous way : nothing, however, compared with the delight of the subsequent years with Christopher. There could be no question that he had grown a little colder or he would never have stayed away all these weeks ; but even married men had been known to have variable moods, and Katherine could not believe that she should ever be called upon to pay the price with which those at home had threatened her.

CHAPTER V

RONALD was a busy man. He usually had as many appointments as it was possible to keep between ten in the morning and six in the evening, and frequently could not spare time to leave the glass studio on the roof of Number 11, Brandenburg Street, and go to his sitting-room on the second floor for luncheon. On the Monday after his return from Standerton-on-Sea, however, he went to the telephone at half-past one, and rang up Mrs. Latham of Grandison Street, Mayfair, inquiring whether she had any engagement for the same evening.

Her answering voice betrayed her astonishment :

“ I can put it off, anyhow,” she said.
“ Suppose you dine with me at eight.”

“ If I may come after dinner—say nine,” suggested Ronald.

“ Oh, very well, if I am alive by that

time," she replied. "At the present moment I am simply dying of curiosity."

During the three years of her widowhood, Meriel Latham had led on the whole a remarkably quiet life, spending a little less than her income which amounted to something like two thousand pounds a year. This evening she had, however, been going to dine at Mrs. Somerset's, where, amongst other persons, she expected to meet that extremely handsome but somewhat ebullient Mr. Sheffield, whose pictures were being so much talked about just now. In Meriel's opinion they were, frankly, ugly, and although he talked a great deal about "significant forms" and "primitives" and "æsthetic ecstasy," she really did not pretend to understand what he meant.

The first thing after hanging up the telephone receiver was to invent a satisfactory excuse for Mrs. Somerset, but in the end Meriel fell back on the familiar and convenient "headache." If she had been arraying herself for an important party she could scarcely have discussed the frock she should wear at greater length with her maid, finally selecting a quite dark one, knowing it would enhance the brilliancy of her glorious hair and clear skin.

Ronald, entering her drawing-room at a few minutes past nine, had never seen her looking more radiant. From the age of nineteen when he used to meet her day by day until her present twenty-seventh year she had wonderfully developed, while yet she seemed to retain more than the beauty of the budding rose. She stood a few inches above the average height of her sex, making with Ronald a tall pair. Her slender figure was bewitchingly rounded, and she looked him straight and confidently in the face.

"Wonder of wonders!" she exclaimed. "But why couldn't you come to dinner? After all a man must eat."

"You see, I had some papers to look through," he explained. "The fact is, I have allowed Osterby to persuade me to take a rather important step. You know what the fellow is! Always sticking a finger into some one's pie. He introduced me to a man named Van Notten——"

"The American millionaire?" suggested Meriel.

"The long and the short of it is that my business is going to be turned into a limited liability company," said Ronald. "Branches

are to be started in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, New York, goodness knows where. I receive a good lump sum down for my goodwill, and a rattling salary as managing director for the next ten years."

"Won't that give you ever so much more to do?" she asked.

"Not a bit—more responsibility, perhaps. At present I take pretty well every photograph myself. In future that will be out of the question. We are to move to much larger premises with three studios instead of one. Still," he added, "I'm not sure I wouldn't sooner stick as I am."

"Ronnie," cried Meriel, abruptly, "how long is it since you came to see me of your own free will?"

"Seven years," he answered.

"How one mourns one's lost youth!" she murmured.

"Don't you recollect?" said Ronald.

"Oh, I have the most dreadful memory!"

"It was at Manning's Hotel in Dover Street," he explained. "Aunt Lavinia was staying there. Mrs. Fitzgerald had forbidden our meeting."

"Poor mother! She had such a habit of forbidding things," cried Meriel.

"But Aunt Lavinia," he continued with a sort of bitter-sweet satisfaction, "arranged to bring us together—for the last time, you know."

"Now you remind me," she said, "I do seem to have a faint recollection."

"I shall never forget," was the answer. "It was that afternoon I asked you to wait for me, and I—I held you in my arms while you promised."

"And then," said Meriel, "I committed the unpardonable sin, didn't I, Ronnie?"

"Anyhow, you don't appear to have suffered," he exclaimed with a laugh.

"Ah, but you mustn't be superficial," she returned, with her steady eyes on his face, so that he took a step towards her.

"Meriel, upon my soul I hope you haven't had a bad time!"

"Oh dear, no, you don't," she insisted. "You really don't hope anything of the kind. Not that it would make an atom of difference at this time of day, but you prefer that I should at least have suffered enough to make me repent; but what in the world would be the use?"

"It might prevent you from acting in the same way again," he suggested.

"How could I?" she demanded. "Similar circumstances could never arise. How big my mother loomed, and besides there would be no temptation. You forget that I am quite rich."

"Yes—quite rich!" said Ronald, with a contempt of which, perhaps, he was scarcely conscious. He had certainly not come to Grandison Street this evening with the intention of making the slightest reference to the past, which appeared the more deplorable the more irresistibly she reawakened his admiration. And he might have married her if only she had kept her word!

"You seem to resent that," she retorted.

"Do you feel surprised?" he asked, perceiving the wisdom of changing the subject lest he should blurt out something which could not easily be condoned.

"No," she admitted, "I suppose I don't. By the bye," she added, "you might let me have a few shares in this company of yours."

"Oh, I don't think I would alter my investments if I were you," he answered.

"But I have a few hundreds lying idle

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at the bank," she persisted. "I have been very economical lately. I shall be thankful to find something safe."

"No, no, better not," he said, and Meriel began to laugh.

"What you mean is," she returned, "that you would rather be without my money. How foolish! How unreasonable!"

"So are a good many things one feels the most strongly about!" exclaimed Ronald.

"I should like to know what you really think of me," she said, sitting on the settee in the middle of the room, one hand resting on the arm, while the fingers of the other were fidgeting a loose button by her side.

"The most delectable woman in the world," he answered.

"Ah, but blemished, Ronnie; sadly blemished!"

Well, there was truth in that. While he looked at her it seemed impudently incongruous to venture upon any criticism, but yet he could not enter her presence without feeling sore.

"Would to God you had waited," he muttered, but changed his tone the next

instant. "I am afraid I'm by way of making a fool of myself," he added.

"Oh, pray don't stand for that," she cried. "Let yourself go just for once. Now what's at the back of your mind, Ronnie?"

He hesitated for a few moments, but the temptation ultimately proved too strong for him.

"If I were starving," he said, "and I were offered a penny of Latham's money to buy a loaf I would sooner die than take it."

She rose from the settee and they stood confronting one another until Meriel broke the silence.

"Well, fortunately you're not starving," she answered. "And now you will be more prosperous than ever, though you must remember I wasn't the only one who couldn't believe in you. In those days you didn't seem to care for a single thing."

Thrusting his hands in his pockets, he sat down on the arm of the settee, swinging a leg.

"Oh yes, you were not married," he said.

"You know," she exclaimed, "you really haven't altered very much. You look still like a great boy, and I often long to put your

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hair straight. But I suppose," she continued, "you didn't turn up this evening merely to indulge in reminiscences?"

"Why, no," he admitted.

"Then what," she demanded, "could have been your astonishing motive?"

CHAPTER VI

"SOMETHING," said Ronald, by no means without embarrassment now it came to the point, "happened to put me in mind of you."

"Was a reminder really necessary?" asked Meriel.

"Not a bit," he returned. "But Osterby was talking about the show at the Newbury Gallery, and that naturally led to Christopher Sheffield."

"I rather like Mr. Sheffield!" cried Meriel. "If only because he is so extraordinarily nice to look at . . . far nicer than his pictures. But then, fortunately, people do now and then rise superior to their works."

"Osterby used to know the fellow pretty well some years ago——"

"Will you tell me of some one whom Mr. Osterby doesn't know," said Meriel.

"Anyhow, he knew Sheffield before his marriage," answered Ronald, with his eyes

on her face, which certainly showed her astonishment.

"I had no idea that Mr. Sheffield was a widower," she murmured.

"He isn't," said Ronald, "although it is true he has been separated from his wife a good many years."

"I don't quite understand," remarked Meriel, after a short silence, "why you took the trouble to come here expressly to tell me this. You surely cannot have been afraid lest I should cherish a vain hope——"

"Oh dear, no," answered Ronald. "I was not in the least afraid on your own account."

"Perhaps," she suggested, gazing at him reflectively, "you thought that poor Mr. Sheffield might come to grief."

"Any man might—quite easily."

"Seriously, Ronnie, and you do really look rather solemn; you perplex me frightfully. It is no use to deny that you were anxious I should know Mr. Sheffield has a wife somewhere in the background. Very well! It must either have been for my sake, for his—or, of course, you may have been thinking of Mrs. Sheffield."

"Not of the real Simon pure," said Ronald. "Of a—a little woman who goes by his name."

"Oh, but we surely need not talk about that kind of person!"

"You see," Ronald explained, "Osterby told Sheffield that Aunt Lavinia had a bungalow to let furnished at Standerton. He took the place, and a few days later went away leaving this—this little woman in solitary possession. The good people soon began to talk scandal——"

"It is plain they had reason," answered Meriel. "But even now," she added, "I haven't the remotest notion why you wished me to know of the existence of Mr. Sheffield's wife."

"As far as I can make out," Ronald explained, "he joined fortunes with the little——"

"Oh, please don't go on calling her that!" cried Meriel. "She must have a name of some sort."

"Her name is Katherine. Sheffield chummed up with her four years ago—about two years after his wife left him. Katherine comes of decent people, you understand.

She seems to have given up everything for the fellow ; she's fond of him still, but he is by way of chucking her."

"But what in the name of goodness," demanded Meriel, "has all this to do with me?"

Ronald hesitated for a second or two.

"I fancy," he said at last, "that she thinks Sheffield has grown rather—rather keen on some one else."

"Now I understand!" exclaimed Meriel. "Impossible to pretend any longer that I don't. But aren't you going rather far? I don't wish to stand on my dignity, but still to be classed with a person of that stamp!"

"Meriel," he answered, "you know perfectly well I should never dream of classing you with anybody. You stand apart. But I don't want you to think of yourself. Try to imagine what it would mean for her to be left."

"Surely it would be very desirable——"

"Desirable—good Lord!" said Ronald.

"To bring such an—an irregular relationship to an end. Or," she asked, as he came to her side, "are you trying to justify it?"

"I don't pretend to be anything but an

opportunist," he returned. "I am not defending the original act, but she has put all her eggs in one basket. If Sheffield chucks her she might easily go to the worst of the bad, and she's a decent little woman, you know."

"So you really believe that I have some control over her fate, Ronnie?" suggested Meriel.

"I feel pretty certain Katherine considers that he is staying away from her on your account," said Ronald.

"I happened to be at the *Times* library one morning," Meriel explained, "when Wilfred Osterby came in with a very good-looking man whom he introduced as Christopher Sheffield. I stood chattering to him while Mr. Osterby was choosing some books for one of his nieces. Mr. Sheffield couldn't resist telling me about his forthcoming exhibition at the Newbury Gallery. Well," Meriel continued, "I had been reading an article about his work, and naturally I wanted to appear interested and sympathetic. Perhaps I overdid it a little, and led the poor man to think I was more enthusiastic than the truth warranted. Anyhow he offered to send me a ticket for his private view, and I

forgot all about him till it came some weeks later. On the spur of the moment I went, and he asked whether he might pay me a visit. You know, Ronnie, we all like to receive people who are being written about and talked about, and I suppose Mr. Sheffield may have been here half a dozen times—besides, I have met him at other houses. I should have seen him at Mrs. Somerset's this evening if I hadn't shamefully put her off on your account. What is more, I have no doubt Mr. Sheffield will come to-morrow to inquire after my general health and wellbeing. Now, you have made me wish I had never seen the man!"

"Well," said Ronald, "I suppose the simplest plan would be not to see him again."

"Do you seriously believe he would go back to your Katherine?" she asked.

"Anyhow, you would be giving her a chance," urged Ronald, and with that he held out his hand. She asked him, since he had broken the ice, to ring her up again before long, and after he had gone away without committing himself, she sat down leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and her fingers buried in her hair. It

was late before she went upstairs that Monday night, and the following afternoon Meriel took care to stay at home on the chance of a visit from Christopher Sheffield.

As usual, his presence seemed to dominate the room, and, as usual, she wished that he had not that faint suggestion of a swagger, of a rather too thorough self-confidence. He had told her quite frankly the half-truth that he had no experience of what she would call "society" until his return from Paris a few months ago. He seemed to enjoy talking about his earlier struggle for existence at Hampstead, as if to throw into greater prominence his present notoriety.

Meriel thought that his somewhat too exuberant manner might be due to a desire to prove how completely at home he felt in this fresh environment, but then exaggeration seemed to be his "note": a fact which led her, perhaps, to underestimate the admiration which after all he was by no means the only man to express. Christopher Sheffield stood above the average height without being so conspicuously tall and lean as Ronald. He had square shoulders and noticeably small hips; his hair was black, his skin curiously

white, and he wore a very carefully tended moustache. Holding Meriel's hand an unnecessary moment, he bowed over it in a way which might have been described as "old-fashioned" in any man who wished to be less aggressively modern.

"Oh yes, I am quite all right again," said Meriel, in answer to his anxious inquiry. "To be perfectly frank, there was not very much the matter with me, only I had a visit from an old friend whom I had not seen for some time, and naturally there were ever so many things to talk about."

"I hope they were interesting things," answered Christopher.

"Oh yes, more or less," she said with a reminiscent smile. "Interesting people too. You happened to be amongst them."

He had a habit of standing with his arms akimbo, and of swaying very slightly from side to side. His restlessness fidgeted Meriel to-day, and she asked him to sit down. Placing his top hat on a small table, he began to draw off his gloves, talking meanwhile about an article in one of the current weekly reviews. At last his gloves were off, and to her relief he took a chair.

"By the bye," said Meriel, "I hear that Miss Ellison has let you one of her houses at Standerton. It must be delightful by the sea this glorious weather."

Fingering his moustache, Christopher looked sharply into her face, and she fancied that his own was less white than usual—a rudimentary blush, no doubt. Meriel guessed that he was wondering how much she knew.

"It is some time since I was there," he answered.

"I suppose," she continued, "you didn't know that Miss Elliston was a friend of mine."

"Oh well," said Christopher, crossing and uncrossing his legs, and attracting attention to his immaculate white spats, "naturally I was aware that you had a common friend in Osterby."

"Mr. Osterby is everybody's friend," answered Meriel. "The greatest gossip in London. He knows ever so much more about us all than we shall ever know about ourselves."

"I sincerely trust," said Christopher, rising suddenly from his chair, "that he could not tell you anything about myself which I

should have the slightest objection to your hearing."

"Why should you have the slightest objection?" she demanded.

"Only there are things," cried Christopher, "which seem too painful to refer to. "His face had become more serious now, and his manner simpler and more direct, so that Meriel was inclined to like him better than she had ever done before. "I made a fatal mistake when I was little more than a boy," he explained. "I married a woman—but upon my soul, I can't talk about her."

"Did you have a child?" asked Meriel, more sympathetically than she had meant to speak.

"Poor little beggar! She only lived a week, and after her death things grew worse than ever. I have not seen my wife for six years or more. My solicitor pays her a certain sum every month on the condition that she leaves me alone. You may imagine how my life has been ruined," said Christopher, but according to Ronald, he must have succeeded in finding consolation.

"I suppose you will be going back to Standerton," Meriel forced herself to suggest,

and he quite understood that she was trying to throw as much significance as possible into her words.

"I can't say I had thought of it," said Christopher. "As a matter of fact, I have not been near the place since I had the honour of seeing you at the Newbury Gallery."

This enabled her to harden her heart.

"Anyhow," she exclaimed, "my own movements are extremely uncertain. In any case I shall be leaving here."

"You don't mean," he answered, "that I—that I shan't be allowed to see you again?"

"It will be sheer waste of time to come," she said, and to give force to her statement, she walked towards the bell. He showed his chagrin so openly that she really began to fear that Ronald's warning had been justified, whereas she had certainly no desire to enter into that sort of competition. She felt glad now that she had made Mr. Sheffield understand that he was dismissed, though her satisfaction might have been less if she had imagined the construction which he had put upon her conduct.

CHAPTER VII

THERE could be only one explanation of Mrs. Latham's behaviour. Some "damned good-natured friend" must have told her of the existence of Katherine as well as of Christopher's wife. Her allusions to Standerton-on-Sea could not be merely accidental, she had wished in a veiled way to let him know the full extent of her information. Still, it was characteristic of Christopher Sheffield to believe that Meriel had dismissed him rather in sorrow than in anger, and while she no doubt regarded his relationship to Katherine as regrettable, it was his wife who turned the scale.

Meriel's line of conduct, properly considered, was flattering. She perceived that in the unfortunate circumstances, it was impossible that he could "mean business." Having one wife already, he could not take another; discretion was the better part of valour, and so she had sent him away.

In any moment of dejection, Christopher Sheffield's natural tendency was to "go on the spree," and in his breast-pocket reposed the letter which Katherine had written the previous day, entreating him to come to her. It is to be feared that she might have waited in vain for an answer, if it had not been for Christopher's rebuff in Grandison Street, May-fair, but now he thought of Katherine as he might have thought of a worse woman, rather cruelly, as a means of distraction after his recent douche of cold water.

It was too late to travel comfortably that Tuesday evening, but he despatched a telegram, announcing his arrival at a quarter to one on Wednesday, and, on receiving it, it appeared almost as if Katherine were taking a leaf out of his own book. For the first time in her life she set herself deliberately to captivate him.

Hitherto nothing of the kind had been necessary, but at all events he was coming in the morning, and it was up to her to hold him. If he were once on the spot, indeed, she felt confidence in her ability to make certain that he did not go away again alone. Refraining from meeting him at the railway station, she

waited at home to welcome him, knowing she was looking her very best, and prepared to fling herself into his arms the moment he arrived. Above everything there must be no reproaches, and, however deeply she might resent his prolonged absence, she intended to receive him as if there were something quite meritorious in his visit.

With his usual inconsistency, he had always insisted that in her case loveliness was "when unadorned, adorned the most." Inclined to dress rather showily for his own part, he preferred to see Katherine in a simple white frock, without any description of jewellery, except, perhaps, the pearls which he had bought the first week they were together. Presents of jewellery had never been lacking, but these were to please herself, and desiring above everything to please him to-day, she came downstairs without a scrap of colour, apart from the faint flush on her face.

The sun shone brightly, and she ordered luncheon to be served soon after his arrival, so that they might have a long afternoon out of doors. When he left Standerton she had not found time to set the little house in order, and, indeed, it was difficult to do much

with Miss Elliston's odd collection of second-hand furniture. Christopher had suffered inconvenience from temporary servants, but now he was admitted by the neatest of parlour-maids. On drawing near to the bungalow, he had begun to wonder whether he was after all acting judiciously; some preliminary reproaches appeared inevitable, but on the contrary he met with the most delightful of welcomes.

Standing with Katherine's arms clasped round his neck, her cheek against his own, he could not resist the conclusion that in default of Mrs. Latham, many circumstances might be worse.

Katherine had taken the precaution to provide an excellent meal, and she had consulted the local wine merchant about the brand of champagne. Above all, it was an agreeable surprise to find that she could actually talk about his work; at least, she had succeeded in picking up the catch words, and quite astonished him by her remarks about Cézanne. Had she not tried to beguile the dreary time by reading again and again innumerable magazine articles, and was she not for once playing the part of a gross

flatterer, as she was prepared, indeed, to go any lengths in order to ingratiate herself?

After luncheon, she brought a light for his cigar and, making him sit in the only comfortable chair, drew a stool to his feet, and rested her head against his knee.

"Chris," she exclaimed, while he passed a hand over her hair, "I want to get away from Standerton. I am utterly sick of the place."

"My dear little girl, you can do as you like," he replied. "You've only to please yourself. Surely you don't suppose I want you to stay; only you may as well hang on till the notice expires."

"I don't want to hang on, Chris. I have had far too much of it already. Why can't you take me with you whenever you are obliged to go? Let us be together again as we were before. Here, I haven't a soul to speak to but Miss Elliston, and she—she has found out all about me."

"Ah, that's the devil of it, Kitty," said Christopher. "I'm afraid it'll be pretty much the same wherever you go."

"Not if we're together," she urged. "If you had been here, people would never have

suspected ; it was just your being away that set them gossiping."

"Oh well, perhaps," cried Christopher, "I haven't given you the best of times lately. You wouldn't believe how that confounded show has taxed one. And then, you see, almost in spite of myself I've had to go into society a bit, and things being as cussed as they always are, I couldn't possibly take you with me. Immensely unpleasant for you, of course."

She longed to ask whether "society" included Mrs. Latham, but feared lest her voice should betray her suspicions. It might be wiser to wait until Christopher had been at Standerton a few hours longer, before she ventured on such dangerous ground.

"It wasn't unpleasant in Paris," said Katherine, but pulled herself up abruptly, remembering her determination to avoid anything even remotely resembling a reproach. The way to attain her object was assuredly not to annoy Christopher at the outset. Rising from the footstool, she held out her hands laughingly, drawing him from his chair, and clinging to his arm she stood looking out at the window.

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“ A ripping afternoon ! ” he exclaimed.
“ Do you think we could get a decent car and have a spin till dinner-time ? ”

“ Oh, I should love it, ” answered Katherine ; but as she spoke Fate, in the person of a pleasant-looking young man passed the window, looking out for the numbers of the houses.

“ Who the devil is that ? ” said Christopher, as he approached the street door and rang the bell.

CHAPTER VIII

THE events of the next half-hour were very hurried, very astonishing, very disappointing for Katherine, while yet they awakened hopes such as she had never in her most ardent moods, dared to cherish before.

She heard the street door opened, heard the visitor enter the small hall, and then the parlour-maid came to the drawing-room, where Katherine still stood clinging to Christopher's arm, to say that a gentleman wanted to see Mr. Sheffield.

"Who in the world can want me in this place?" demanded Christopher. "Did he give his name?"

The girl explained that the gentleman came from Messrs. Montagu and Pearce, who had acted as Christopher's solicitors since he inherited his uncle's money about seven years ago.

"But what the deuce can they want?" he exclaimed. "Something uncommonly

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important to induce them to send a clerk down here. I suppose they got the address from Craven Street. Take him somewhere," Christopher added, turning to the parlour-maid, whom he followed a few moments later, leaving Katherine in a state of intense curiosity. She hoped that he would not be compelled to return to London forthwith, and curiously enough the actual reason for the visitation did not for a moment occur to her, until she was rejoined by Christopher Sheffield.

"Kitty—Kitty!" he exclaimed, re-entering the drawing-room, "she's dying—my wife is dying. The woman she lodges with—Mrs. Latimer—went to Montagu's office this morning, and his clerk got to Craven Street half an hour after I left. Kitty, my wife wants to see me, and I—upon my soul, I don't see how I can get out of it."

"I suppose you can't," murmured Katherine, "if she is really——"

"Oh, do the poor soul justice!" he said, quite reproachfully. "She hasn't troubled me all these years. She would never have sent now if she were not doomed. I don't see how I can shirk it."

"Chris, take me with you!" urged Katherine. "There's a train in half an hour. I can easily get ready. Take me with you, Chris!"

"No, no," he answered, with the impatience to which he was prone in moments of excitement. "I shall have to go straight to the house—Willingdon Street, Tottenham Court Road."

"I promise not to hinder you," she persisted. "I would leave you at the station——"

"My dear little girl," he said, raising his eyebrows, and flinging out his hands, "I can't stay to talk about it now. If I am to see her alive there's not a moment to spare."

Realising the futility of persistence, Katherine ran upstairs to replace the brush and comb, and one or two things which he had taken out of his kit bag. He went to the hall to put on his light overcoat, and she found him waiting impatiently there when she came downstairs again with the bag in her hand. She would have made a great sacrifice to be by his side at what she could not help regarding as the second crisis of her

life, the result of which might, to some extent at least, be held to extenuate the first.

"Chris," she cried, hanging on his arm just before he opened the door, "promise to send me a telegram."

"Yes, yes," he answered, with his hand on the latch.

"The moment you—you know anything for certain!"

"Good-bye, Kitty," he exclaimed, as she kissed him, and the next minute she was standing on the step, watching while he hailed a fly a few doors from the house. Before he had time to reach Standerton station, she seemed to be longing for the telegram, and presently she put on her hat and coat, setting forth to the General Post Office to inquire the latest hour at which it would be possible to receive a message.

On her way home, passing Miss Elliston's house, she was beckoned to the door, which Lavinia opened in person.

"I saw Mr. Sheffield pass in a fly," she explained, "and wondered why he was going away again so soon. I understood that you didn't expect him until a quarter to one."

"His wife is very, very ill," answered

Katherine. "Oh, Miss Elliston," she added, "I am trying so hard not to hope she won't recover."

Lavinia, however, after Katherine had walked on to the bungalow, made no pretence to wish for Mrs. Sheffield's restoration to health. According to Katherine, the wonder was that the wretched woman had not drunk herself to death long ago, and what a difference her death might make! Of course everything must depend on the kind of man Christopher was, and for that matter Miss Elliston had no means to form an opinion. She was unblushingly a partisan, and unable to control her curiosity she went to the bungalow before eleven o'clock on Thursday morning.

"There's no news—not a word," cried Katherine, looking as if she had slept very little, but while she was speaking, a boy rode up to the door on his bicycle, and Katherine was out of the house in an instant. She re-entered it with her eyes on the telegram: "Christopher's wife died at three o'clock this morning," she murmured.

"Does he say anything about coming down again?" demanded Lavinia.

"You—you see, one can't say much in a

telegram," answered Katherine. "Besides, there will be things to attend to, and Christopher is certain to feel terribly upset."

"My dear, what is the use of pretending any man could feel a scrap of regret?" said Miss Elliston.

"No, not exactly regret," cried Katherine, "but Christopher is peculiarly sensitive—soft-hearted, very emotional for a man. He has the artistic temperament, you know. I shall be sure to have a letter this evening."

"I hope you may," Lavinia snapped out, but Katherine went to bed bitterly disappointed. She tried to feel confident that she should hear from Christopher by the morning delivery, and rising unusually early, because the postman generally came before she finished dressing, took her stand at the dining-room window.

Thinking that she heard his knock farther along the Terrace, she opened the street door, and went out on to the asphalted pavement. The delivery must be late this morning, but Katherine knew the postman could not have passed without being seen. She was gazing eagerly in the direction of Miss Elliston's. Yes, she was right this time! There was the

man with his bag slung across his shoulder and a packet of letters in his hand—one for herself no doubt.

He was only three doors off when he provokingly stopped to speak to the milkman, and Katherine wondered whether he would ever move on again. He had to wait next door for some excess postage, and then at last there was nothing between him and the bungalow.

She longed for a few words from Christopher, as it seemed she had never desired anything in her life. She hoped for just the slightest hint that he assumed as a matter of course she would now become his wife. Of course he might not say anything about it so soon after his wife's death; there would be no real cause for alarm if he passed the matter over. He might, indeed, think it too inevitable to call for remark. Still, Katherine tried to hope he would say something—something to transform her days; to enable her to face her own people again; to make her the happiest of women.

She could scarcely believe her eyes. The postman could never be going to pass the house.

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She thought she had never seen such an idiotic smile on a human face.

“Nothing for you this morning,” he said.

• “Nothing for me?” faltered Katherine.

“Not this morning,” answered the postman, and she went disconsolately indoors.

CHAPTER IX

RONALD always had his letters placed on the breakfast-table, opening them during the meal, and subsequently handing them over to Miss Biddle, who presided over that department. On Friday morning, amongst the usual budget addressed to "Mr. Lestocq," was one which bore the inscription: "Lord Ronald Eckington." He had not seen that handwriting for some years, and at once his thoughts were carried back to the days when Meriel often wrote to him—without Mrs. Fitzgerald's knowledge.

Meriel asked him to come to Grandison Street on Saturday afternoon, his only spare time, indeed, save Sunday. She did not say why she wished to see him, and his first impulse was to decline the invitation. It occurred to him, however, that she might possibly have something to say in connection with Christopher Sheffield, and in the end he

reached Grandison Street shortly after four o'clock.

"I had a good mind," she exclaimed, "to take you by surprise. I could scarcely resist the temptation to call at Brandenburg Street and ask you to come for a drive. You know, Ronnie, I feel rather like a child with a new toy."

"What is it?" he asked.

"The most scrumptious motor car."

"So you have managed to get rid of your spare cash after all?" he suggested.

"There's never much difficulty about that," she answered. "Yes, I went to Jupp and Alderley's the day before yesterday—I had no notion a car could cost quite so much. You really must let me take you out one day," Meriel added. "I will tell you a secret, Ronnie. I am coming out of my shell. I realise that I have been hiding my light under a bushel the last few years. You can't imagine how domesticated I have grown—an excellent thing in woman, isn't it? But now I am bursting my bonds——"

"You are mixing your metaphors, anyhow," he said with a laugh.

"I am leaving here, you know," she continued.

"You don't mean that you're giving up the house?" he demanded.

"Oh dear, yes. I am going to the Hotel d'Albert—the new hotel in Piccadilly. I have taken the loveliest suite of rooms, but unfortunately it won't be disengaged for a week or so."

"But what in the world are you going to do with this place?" suggested Ronald.

"I dare say it will find a tenant sooner or later," she answered casually. "Anyhow I shall have to stand the chance. The furniture is to be removed to a sale room and put up to auction at once."

"You must have taken the idea into your head rather suddenly?" said Ronald.

"Oh, I don't know!" murmured Meriel.

"You hadn't thought of clearing out when I was here on Monday?"

"Hadn't I? But that was nearly a week ago, and everything must have a beginning."

"Still," he urged, "you don't seem to be looking very far ahead. An hotel may be all right for a time, but surely you will want a habitation of some sort——"

"Why, you goose, of course I shall," she answered.

"Then you will have to find a fresh house, to buy new furniture. Upon my word, it's a mad kind of scheme," said Ronald.

"I suppose it does appear a little—a little mad," she admitted. "But so do most grand actions. Things are really so tiresome."

"What things?" asked Ronald.

"Servants and all that, you know," she explained. "You can't imagine what a trouble they are. So I made a vow. I would have nothing more to do with them. Infinitely better to live at an hotel. Besides," Meriel continued, "I must pay my debts. I have been going here, there and everywhere the last two years and scarcely invited anybody in return."

"Entertaining at the Hotel d'Albert," said Ronald, "will prove a rather costly enterprise. Van Notten insists that it's the most expensive hotel in London, and he's supposed to be a millionaire."

"To tell you the truth," returned Meriel, "that's why I chose it, and I am promised their best suite. Naturally I shall have to

do my utmost to live up to it. I intend to have the most delightful time."

"A short life and a merry one!"

"Till the end of the season," said Meriel. "But what I really wanted was to tell you I had a visit from Christopher Sheffield on Tuesday—the day after you were here. I don't fancy he will come again very soon."

"That is a step in the right direction, anyhow," cried Ronald, with an expression of satisfaction, but he had not heard from Aunt Lavinia since he bade her good-bye the previous Sunday afternoon. He had no knowledge of Christopher's visit to Standerton-on-Sea, nor of his summons to his wife's death-bed.

Christopher had been affected more deeply than any one who understood him less thoroughly than Katherine would have suspected. He found it impossible not to look back to the earlier days of his married life, although it proved difficult to realise that he had ever been passionately in love with the woman from whom he had been so long separated.

He had been driven direct from the railway station to Willingdon Street, Tottenham Court

Road, but Mrs. Latimer, the landlady, received him with the information that his wife had lain for some hours unconscious. Upstairs in the clean, but shabby room he stood by the bedside, without pain, indeed, but still with solemn, chastened feelings.

His chief desire was to make certain that everything was being done for her welfare, but an interview with the doctor convinced Christopher that it was now too late even to send in a nurse. A woman of abstemious habits might easily have pulled through, but Mrs. Sheffield's case had been hopeless from the outset.

It was extremely unlikely she would recover consciousness, and nothing was to be gained by staying at her side. During the melancholy evening at the hotel in Craven Street, Strand, where Christopher had stayed since he first left Katherine at Standerton-on-Sea, he tried not to consider the advantages which would result from his wife's death. The following morning, however, he awoke with an unusual feeling of exhilaration, although the arrival of Mrs. Latimer's telegram plunged him once more into melancholy.

He set forth directly after breakfast to

Willingdon Street, and on the way to the undertaker's, subsequently, despatched the message to Katherine according to his promise. He ordered some flowers, and after a little hesitation went to be measured for mourning.

While Christopher could not be deficient in respect for the dead, when once the funeral was over it became impossible not to rejoice in his new freedom. He might have gone back to Standerton, but as a matter of fact, he did not even write to Katherine. His thoughts seemed to fix themselves on Meriel Latham. Now that it was at least conceivable she might some day become his wife, he could not leave London.

Not that he flattered himself that he was going to have a walk-over. He could not even feel confident of success, but, by Jove! the effort was worth making! Poor little Kitty! That was how he thought of her just now, and of himself as a sort of creature of circumstances, controlled by emotions too powerful to be subdued. Still it was devilish hard on Kitty—the way of the world, of course! Women seemed destined to bear the brunt, but she should be let down as gently as possible, and for that matter he had

no intention to break with her formally until, it appeared, his hand was forced.

Having waited for a fortnight after his wife's funeral, Christopher was overcome by impatience to see Meriel, and surely the new development would justify a visit to Grandison Street. On reaching the house one afternoon he was surprised to see a board announcing that the lease was to be disposed of. Before the door stood two box vans which aproned men were loading with furniture. Behind the vans, a few doors off, Christopher saw a large motor car, with a chauffeur on the box and another man, in similar uniform, waiting on the kerb.

Christopher was still gazing in bewilderment at the house, in which the late Mr. Latham had lived for many years, when Meriel came out.

"I am afraid," cried Christopher, flourishing off his hat, "that I have chosen a rather unfortunate moment."

"You should have remembered my warning," answered Meriel. "I told you it would be waste of time to come." Then noticing his black clothes, she added in a more sympathetic voice, "You are in mourning!"

"For my wife," said Christopher.

Scarcely knowing how to reply, since it would be ridiculous to attempt to condole with him, Meriel walked towards the car.

"I hope," he persisted, as the servant opened the door, "you're not leaving London?"

Without answering she took her seat, Christopher perceiving that the ban was not removed. Although she had been told his wife was dead, he realised that she must still imagine that his relationship to Katherine continued. As the man stepped away from the car to take his place by the chauffeur, Christopher leaned eagerly forward towards Meriel.

"I am beginning a fresh epoch," he exclaimed with considerable feeling. "I am making an absolutely clear start. Everything connected with my old life is over and done with—everything. I have wiped the slate."

She stared straight before her, and he stepped backwards as the chauffeur released the lever. Even now he could not feel certain that he had made his meaning plain, although at the moment he could think of no

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other way of letting her know that his connection with Katherine was severed. Devoutly he wished that it were, because Mrs. Latham's means of learning what took place at Standerton, made it impossible to practise any successful deception.

His first impulse was either to write to Katherine or to ask Montagu and Pearce to deal with her ; but after all she deserved better treatment, poor little woman ! On his way to Craven Street, Christopher stopped at a post office, and hastily wrote out a telegram—

“ Arrive to-morrow after lunch.”

CHAPTER X

WHEN Katherine received the message on Friday afternoon, her spirits rose with a bound. During the last few weeks they had steadily sunk lower and lower, and often she had been tempted to follow Christopher to London. When the time came, however, she was always prevented by the fear of annoying him at a moment when, above all things, it seemed desirable not to cause the slightest displeasure.

Now her more dismal apprehensions were thrust aside. She assumed that he would at least stay until Monday, and on her way to the shops on Saturday morning she met Miss Elliston, who said how much more cheerful she was looking to-day!

"Christopher is coming," was the answer. "I had a telegram yesterday afternoon. He will be here after lunch."

"I wonder," said Lavinia, "whether

he will travel by the same train as my nephew?"

"Is Lord Ronald coming to-day?" asked Katherine.

"Yes, but he could not get away so early as usual," was the answer. "He has so much business to attend to in connection with this company. I am going to meet the quarter to three train."

"I expect Christopher by that one," said Katherine; but although Miss Elliston suggested they should go to the station together, she regretted her proposal a few minutes later.

Lavinia had grown quite fond of Katherine and certainly wished her well, hoping that, in spite of appearances, Mr. Sheffield would do her justice; but still it seemed wiser to keep Ronald out of her way. She walked with Katherine to the railway station, however, but left her side as soon as the train came into sight. Katherine saw Ronald jump on to the platform, take Miss Elliston's hand, and submit to be kissed in the presence of the station-master, the porters and the half-dozen passengers. Christopher was not amongst them! Having waited until it seemed impossible that any one else would get out of

the train, Katherine turned disconsolately towards the gate, just as Ronald was giving up his ticket.

"Hasn't Mr. Sheffield come after all?" demanded Lavinia, as her nephew offered his hand to Katherine, who shook her head in the most doleful manner.

"Did he say he was coming by this train?" asked Ronald.

"N—no," said Katherine, "he only said 'after lunch.'"

"Well, there's another in an hour—Saturdays only," suggested Ronald. "Or perhaps he is motoring down."

"I don't think he has a car," she answered, as they walked away from the station.

"Easy to hire, you know," cried Ronald; and brightening at the possibility, she nodded to Miss Elliston and hastened on alone towards the cliff.

"Poor woman!" said Lavinia, with a sigh. "You can't imagine her terrible suspense. Ah!" she exclaimed, a few minutes later, as they turned the corner of Marine Terrace, "you were quite right. There's a motor car at her door. Now we shall see what happens. It is bound to pass

my window, and if Mr. Sheffield is in it I shall conclude that he is going back to London at once. We know what that would mean. But if the chauffeur is alone he will be taking the car to the garage; Mr. Sheffield will be staying and—well, there will certainly be one happy woman in Standerton to-day.”

Katherine was, for that matter, happy already. Christopher, she had told herself again and again, could have only one object in coming. Half running towards her own door, she hastily rang the bell.

“How long has Mr. Sheffield been here?” she asked, when the parlour-maid admitted her.

“Not much more than five minutes,” was the answer, and Katherine flung open the drawing-room door. It was a shock to see Christopher in mourning. She had scarcely imagined in the circumstances that he would put it on. He was standing with his back to the ferns which she had bought yesterday for the fireplace, and on his face was a curious, disheartening expression of embarrassment. She had never seen him look so pale, and he held out his hand stiffly, almost as if he deprecated an embrace.

“Chris, I am so sorry I wasn't at home,”

she cried. "Why didn't you say you were going to motor down? I made certain you would come by rail. Do, please, forgive me, darling!"

Placing her hands on his shoulders she went on tiptoes to kiss his lips, but she might as well have embraced a statue for all his response. Her hopes sank to zero, and drawing away she began nervously to unbutton her gloves.

"The fact is," he muttered, "I—I haven't very long to stay. I—I am afraid I must be off again in an—in less than an hour."

He took his watch from his waistcoat pocket, but put it back again without looking at the time.

"In less than an hour!" she exclaimed.

"Afraid I must," he replied. "I really ought to have come before. You see, Kitty, it's about time we arrived at some definite arrangement concerning the—the future, you know."

Scarcely knowing what she did, she sank into a chair, drawing the pins out of her hat, taking it off and flinging it towards the table but it fell short, and he stepped forward picking it up from the carpet.

"I quite understand you're sick of this hole of a place," he continued, fidgeting from one leg to the other. "No wonder you want to get out of it as soon as you can."

"If—if you won't stay," she urged, "what is there to prevent me from going with you this afternoon?"

"That would never do," he answered, moistening his lips.

"Why wouldn't it?" she demanded.

"No, no," he said with obvious embarrassment, "I've tried to think the thing out, Kitty, upon my soul I have. You see, I believe in every one having complete liberty. You ought to be able to go just wherever you like."

Katherine leaned forward in her chair gazing fixedly up into his face, which looked intensely white in contrast with his black hair and moustache, while Christopher averted his eyes, like a dog with a guilty conscience. Her hands were tightly clasped together:

"Oh, can't you see, dearest," she murmured, "that I don't care to go anywhere on the face of the earth if you are not there too? I don't care even to go on living without you."

"Look here, Kitty, that's all infernal rot,"

he answered. There was an apologetic note in his voice, and she knew that there was one part of him which must hate what the other was doing. "Of course," he continued, "I know you really do feel like that at the moment, but just wait till you've been your own mistress a day or so."

"It isn't infernal rot," she persisted, rising from her chair. "It is the simple truth."

"Anyhow," he said, growing a little impatient, "you appear to have rubbed along pretty well without me all this time."

"Ah yes, because I was always hoping and hoping for better days, Chris. Besides, how could I help myself? You don't imagine I have liked being here alone! But you went away and left me, and often as I felt inclined to go after you I always changed my mind at the last moment. I didn't want to make myself a nuisance. I tried to believe you would like to come back to me again and that this horrid phase would pass."

"That's just what I'm saying," he cried. "It has been a rough time for you—a devilish rough time, and I am anxious to make it better in future. I've thought it all out, Kitty. You shall have an income of your

own to do just as you please with ; live where you like, stay as long as you like, and I promise never to interfere with you in any way."

"Have I ever complained?" she murmured.

"No, no, you've been a good little soul," he answered.

"Why, Chris, that is what I love," she said. "I love your interference. It is only when you leave me that I mind."

Half turning, Christopher rested a hand on the mantelshelf.

"I thought you might be able to jog along comfortably on five hundred a year," he suggested, "though I'm not particular to a few pounds for that matter. Make it five fifty if you like. I want you to have a real good time. I shall get Montagu to put it in black and white so that whatever—whatever may happen you will always feel safe. Don't you see that I want to do the decent thing by you, Kitty?"

"Chris," she demanded, "do you mean that you're not going to marry me?"

"Don't you see," he answered, "that it would be the most frightful blunder?"

“ Ah, my dear, but it would be too shameful not to commit it,” said Katherine. “ Have you forgotten the night you asked me to come to you four years ago? You can't have forgotten. It was the sort of thing no man forgets in a lifetime. Do you remember how we stood together under the stars—only it was you who pleaded to me then, Chris! Your wife was dead to you. In the sight of Heaven, so you declared, I should be your wife. I believed you. I gave up everything. You swore that if ever it should be in your power to marry me, you would not lose a day. Now, I am asking you to keep your word!”

He could no more listen to Katherine unmoved than to an actress in a pathetic *rôle*. Heaven knew she was not acting, and she made him see himself again on that critical night of her life, his arms clasping her for the first time. Although the spectacle of her sorrow moved him, it seemed beyond his power to prevent his thoughts from turning to Meriel Latham.

“ I'm immensely sorry, Kitty,” he muttered. “ I can only say I mean to make everything as comfortable for you as I can. You may trust me for that.”

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His words broke down her courage. She was being deliberately cast off as if she were some immoral woman. He was offering money in return for the love which she had lavished upon him. Yet at the moment when she longed to maintain her self-possession weakness suddenly prostrated her, and Christopher, only eager now to bring the distressing interview to an end, took advantage of her collapse to get out of the room.

CHAPTER XI

KATHERINE uncovered her face, and sat upright again, listening while he put on his motoring coat in the hall, while he opened the street door and let himself out of the house. She heard the hooter as the car started on the journey back to London, and now that Christopher had gone she experienced a desolation compared with which the anxiety of the last two or three weeks appeared joyous. After all, she had never in her darkest moments entirely ceased to hope ; there had always been Christopher in the background ; now there was nobody.

Conscious of a sense of overwhelming fatigue, she went drearily upstairs, flinging herself at full length on her bed ; closing her eyes and reopening them some time later, feeling intensely surprised inasmuch as she had fallen asleep. By dinner-time—a more elaborate meal than usual because she had

thought that Christopher would share it—she had grown strangely calm, and the recent interview seemed to have taken place a long time ago. During her pretence of eating she tried to survey the situation, and going to the window presently, drew aside the blind, staring out at the clear, moonless sky with its innumerable stars.

It put her in mind of that other night when she had after long hesitation consented to throw in her lot with Christopher. How utterly impossible it would have been to forecast the future ; to imagine that the man who was capable of those passionate protestations could callously throw her over with an offer of money !

A few weeks hence the season at Stander-ton-on-Sea would begin ; a band would be playing in the covered stand on the cliff ; people would be strolling to and fro to some lively tune. But this evening no sound was to be heard above the murmur of the sea ; nobody was to be seen out there in the darkness. On the impulse of the moment Katherine went into the hall, threw on a cloak, and bareheaded let herself out of the house.

Having crossed the road she reached the dewy grass, and made her way to the railing at the edge of the cliff, standing there looking out to sea, watching the mast-head lights of hull-down vessels, and with difficulty distinguishing them from the stars. Some time she stood there, until, hearing footsteps, she turned to recognise Ronald by her side.

"Were you," he said, "looking at the ships that pass in the night and wondering where they were going, who was on board, and all the rest of it?"

"I don't think I was wondering about anything," she answered, turning her back to the sea.

"You are not going in just yet," he suggested, as she took a few steps towards the road.

"Don't you think it is almost time?"

"Just one turn to the end of the grass and back," he urged, and she docilely walked on by his side, holding the edges of her cloak together at the throat. In the houses on her right some of the blinds were still up, exposing light interiors. "I want to say something which can't fail to strike you as entirely inexcusable," said Ronald. "I passed you

several times before I could make up my mind to speak, but it seemed as if I were disregarding some signal of distress."

He had agreed with Aunt Lavinia's conclusion on seeing Christopher Sheffield driven past her window again so soon after his arrival at the bungalow. Ronald had little doubt about what had taken place during that brief visit.

"I sincerely hope I didn't hoist any signals," exclaimed Katherine hastily.

"Not a bit," said Ronald. "What I wanted to say was that if ever you should by any strange turn of the wheel find yourself in need of practical advice, I should like you to remember that I am to be found at No. 11 Brandenburg Street."

They had passed Miss Elliston's house in the middle of the Terrace, and now turned to retrace their steps, Katherine walking by Ronald's side with her neck bent, her eyes fixed on the grass.

"Of course," he continued, "I quite understand that I am guilty of the grossest impudence. Still I hope you won't be able to forget it. You see, it may not be the worst thing in the world to know that

somewhere in the background there's always a—a friend, if you will let me put it in that way."

She came to a standstill in front of her own house, and the light from one of the electric standards fell upon her face as she raised her eyes.

"I shall never need to trouble you," she said. "But, Lord Ronald, I shall never forget."

With that she hastened across the road, nor did she leave the house again during the whole of Sunday. Her grief was gradually giving way to bitter indignation at the injustice of it all, and every hour she grew more impatient to turn her back on Standerton. On Sunday afternoon she let both the servants go out, and, alone in the bungalow, began to look through drawers, examining one small possession after another, tearing up old letters, putting aside one or two highly prized photographs, thinking of the home at Hampstead. At half-past four, she prepared her own tea, sitting on dreamily in the small drawing-room, with the windows open, heedless of the flight of time, until she saw Miss Elliston outside.

Rising abruptly, Katherine stepped under

the veranda, inviting Lavinia to enter that way, and the moment she was within the room she seized Katherine's hands.

"My dear, my dear," she cried, "I don't think I need ask what has happened. I saw Mr. Sheffield driven past and your poor little face tells its tale. I have only waited till Ronald went to the station," she added, sitting down rather breathless.

"I am glad you came," answered Katherine, with more self-possession than Lavinia anticipated. "I shall leave here to-morrow morning."

"Not alone!" said Miss Elliston. "You are never going alone."

"Who, do you suppose, would keep me company?" demanded Katherine.

"I hope you have plenty of money!" suggested Lavinia.

"Money!" exclaimed Katherine contemptuously. "Why, Christopher offered me five hundred a year. Naturally I would sooner starve than be paid, but there! you need not feel a scrap of anxiety. Miss Elliston," Katherine continued, "I left home with just a few clothes in a handbag; my little stock of jewellery and ten pounds which

was left out of my allowance. That was exactly what I brought, and it is exactly what I am going to take away."

"But, my dear child," urged Lavinia, "ten pounds will last no time at all."

"Don't you understand," cried Katherine, "I am hoping to earn more."

"How is it possible? What can you do?" asked Miss Elliston.

"Oh there must be something. I am not in the least proud. How absurd if I were—a mistress who has been cast off!"

"Don't, my dear, don't speak so bitterly," said Miss Elliston, with a hand on Katherine's shoulder. "You must try to be practical," she continued. "Who, do you imagine, will employ you without references, and how can you provide them? You will be exposed to all manner of dangers. A few weeks and you won't have a penny."

"In that case," answered Katherine drearily, "there will remain only one course open to me. I shall go back to my father."

"Would he receive you?" suggested Miss Elliston.

"He said he would never see me or hold any communication with me as long as I was

connected with Christopher," Katherine explained. "But if Christopher left me there would always be a refuge at home. Of course," she cried, "I scorned the suggestion. With his promises ringing in my ears, how could I do anything else? Even now, I feel almost I would sooner kill myself than face father again. He won't say a word of reproach, but I know how he will look! Still, I shan't kill myself," she added. "If everything else fails I shall go home."

This assurance proved an intense relief to Lavinia, who could imagine no more suitable *dénouement*. She at once ceased to feel on Katherine's account that appalling anxiety on which she had dilated to Ronald. Perhaps, after all, the rupture with Mr. Sheffield might prove to be the best thing in the world. Provided that Katherine did not sink in consequence to a still lower depth, Miss Elliston could only rejoice at the severance of an unholy partnership.

"I shall write to Christopher as soon as I reach London," Katherine continued in a quite business-like tone. "Of course I shall not give him my address, but I shall explain that I have left here, and he must come down

to see you and get rid of the servants. As for me, I have done with it all."

Although she had striven to show a bold face to Miss Elliston, Katherine felt appalled at the notion of going out into the world alone. She had always lived a sheltered, protected life. Until the day she left Hampstead there had been her father and her brother behind her, and she had gone straight from them to Christopher, who, until the last few months, had been constantly by her side. Now, however, there would be no one; she would be entirely alone.

CHAPTER XII

ON reaching the London terminus Ronald looked up at the station clock, and then suddenly making up his mind turned to the parcels-office, where he deposited his suit case. Going to the buffet at the other side of the station, he ate a few sandwiches, then, entering a taxicab, directed the driver to the Hotel d'Albert.

He understood that Meriel had taken possession the previous Friday of the suite of rooms usually reserved for Royal Personages and American millionaires. It was the first time Ronald had entered this newest and most luxurious of London's palatial hotels, and now he was passed on from one gorgeous official to another until at last he found Meriel. In the middle of a very elaborately decorated room, entirely alone, she was seated on an enormous cushion, and hearing him announced she started suddenly to her feet,

going to meet him with both hands outstretched.

"You looked like a solitary queen!" he said.

"To tell you the truth," she cried, "I was feeling just a wee bit lonely."

"Upon my soul," he returned, "I should like to know what you are doing in this galley."

"Haven't I told you! Didn't I say I was going to have the most frightfully delightful time?"

"Still, you scarcely looked as if you had begun," he said.

"How could I?" she demanded. "I only left Grandison Street the day before yesterday. Prince Somebody or other had this suite and stayed longer than the manager expected. I am only just settling down, but I have people coming every day next week. This," she explained, waving her hand comprehensively as she sank down on to her cushion again, "is merely my private snuggery."

"Nothing very snug about it," suggested Ronald.

"Ah, you must see what they call the

'salon.' You need not be alarmed, I shan't take you round this evening. You will have to pay me another visit. Of course, you must come to my fancy dress ball."

"Good gracious! Are you giving a ball?" he exclaimed.

"Oh dear, yes, and I assure you I intend it to be something quite out of the way. There's a magnificent ballroom on the ground floor. You have no idea what I am capable of, Ronnie!"

"I begin to think that is about right," was the answer.

"My bedroom," Meriel continued, "is so lovely that I couldn't sleep for hours on Friday night, and the bathroom leading out of it puts me in mind of one of Alma Tadema's pictures. Then there is a room for my maid and two others for country cousins, you know."

"Have you got any cousins?" he asked.

"Goose! Of course not, but there were the rooms and I was bound to take them."

"Surely," he said, "you might have put up with a smaller suite."

"Oh well, I wanted to—to have a sort of

plunge," she replied. "You are actually my first visitor."

"I feel, somehow, as if I were dreaming," he murmured. "And, upon my word, Meriel, I'm afraid there's bound to be an awakening."

Although she had lived from the day of her marriage in the most comfortable manner and had her choice of society, Ronald knew that the present environment was entirely beyond her means. He supposed she had a love of extravagance and display which in anybody else might be called vulgar. This characteristic, so incongruous with some of her other traits, may have accounted for her behaviour seven years ago, and it jarred upon him especially this evening.

Having come from Standerton-on-Sea, where Katherine had mainly occupied his thoughts during the last twenty-four hours, he found it impossible to refrain from a comparison of the circumstances of the two women, and also of the conduct which had influenced their present positions.

Katherine, who had sacrificed everything for love, was rejected, desolate, half broken hearted, despised by ordinary pharisees ; while Meriel, who had refused to wait for the man

to whom she had given her heart ; Meriel, who had sold herself for fifty thousand pounds, was wealthy, admired, and courted !

“ Anyhow, I positively refuse to look forward to the time when your eyes will be opened,” she returned. “ Now, suppose you sit down, make yourself comfy and tell me why you have come. I don't imagine you are here only for the pleasure of seeing me.”

Instead of sitting down, Ronald leaned against the mantelshelf, with one hand in his trousers pocket, and when he explained that he had just travelled from Standerton, Meriel insisted that he must have something to eat.

“ That is the advantage of an hotel,” she cried. “ You press a button and hey, presto ! you get exactly what you want without a frown.”

Having convinced her at last that he would not dine, he looked down solemnly into her face.

“ I am afraid that Sheffield has chucked that little woman after all,” he said.

“ Oh, then that was what he meant ! ” cried Meriel.

“ So you have seen him again ? ” asked Ronald, reproachfully.

"Ye—es," she admitted.

"Although you told me you had done with the fellow."

"You mustn't put it in that way," she protested. "I had never begun with him. He had the audacity to come to Grandison Street on Friday, just as I was evacuating the house. He told me that his wife was dead, and insisted in the strangest way that he was making a fresh beginning. It is plain," Meriel continued, "that I was not so influential as you suggested. Although he quite understood that I should have nothing farther to do with him, that did not affect your friend at Standerton."

"The situation is complicated by Mrs. Sheffield's death," said Ronald.

"How?" demanded Meriel.

"He is free to marry again. While his wife was alive there might not appear to be much object in clearing the air, but now—well, goodness only knows what wild ideas may not have entered his head."

"Ronnie!" cried Meriel, "you are surely never insinuating that Mr. Sheffield dreams of—of marrying me!"

"Anyhow," said Ronald, with a shrug,

"there's no question that he ought to marry her. As it is, the girl—she is scarcely more—is in a dangerous position."

"Do you mean," she asked quietly, "that Mr. Sheffield would leave her without money?"

"I wish I could make you understand," was the rather irritable answer. "She would probably refuse to touch his money. It would seem to be the price of what she had already so freely given. Now he chucks her; she is thrown on her own resources; if no one lends a helping hand, God knows what may happen to her."

"But if she is the sort of woman you describe——"

"How in the world can I tell what sort she is?" he returned. "Everything depends on her character. Everything in this world always does depend on character. I know nothing of Katherine's. Her connection with Sheffield may have been due either to strength or weakness."

"Scarcely to strength," suggested Meriel.

"She loved the man," Ronald insisted. "She obviously could not marry him. She may have seen him going from bad to worse—"

may have risen superior to conventional considerations——”

“ I am not going to enter into an argument,” said Meriel, “ but I fancy there is something to be said on the other side.”

“ Why, naturally,” he admitted. “ And I don't pretend to be certain that she had that sort of motive. She may have joined fortunes with Sheffield simply because she hadn't the strength—the moral courage, to resist him. That is quite likely,” Ronald continued. “ She strikes one as the sort of good-natured, easy-going woman who happily married would have got through famously. Otherwise I should think one could twist her round one's little finger. That may not be quite fair though, and, anyhow, she's uncommonly attractive in a quiet, insinuating kind of way.”

“ Well, to come to the point,” said Meriel, “ what do you want me to do this time ? ”

“ Upon my word, I don't see what you can do.”

“ Then why are you here ? ” she asked.

“ I can scarcely tell you that either. Only that I suppose I was fed up with the affair.”

She fixed her frank eyes on his face, and

her own grew more serious than he had seen it for some time.

"So you actually thought you would like to talk things over!" she murmured. "By the bye," she added, "people are constantly asking me why I don't have my photograph taken at Lestocq's. I imagine I should have to be quick if I want you to operate on me. I think I must come to Brandenburg Street one day."

"Make an appointment now," he suggested, but Meriel slowly shook her head.

"I have too many engagements at present," she answered. "But I shall certainly come before you move."

CHAPTER XIII

MERIEL did not, however, go to Brandenburg Street during the next few weeks, nor did Ronald pay another visit to the Hotel d'Albert. He was in fact less likely to see her than if she had remained at Grandison Street ; her plunge into this unaccountable extravagance serving to intensify the disapproval which he always realised that it was egregious to entertain.

Yet there it was. In marrying Archibald Latham it appeared that Meriel had done Ronald an irreparable injury, and though he could never enter her presence without undergoing the most tantalising temptation, the balance seemed to be still against her. Her money was the principal, but by no means the only objection, while there were on the other hand moments when he felt inclined to throw everything to the winds and take her in his arms.

His experiences during the last seven years, however, had not been without influence. He had learnt to study cause and effect, and knew that though Meriel were to succeed in achieving the purpose which when they were alone together was scarcely disguised; though she were to beguile him into a proposal of marriage, he could never feel satisfied in the years to come. The circumstance that she loved him after all this time bore witness afresh to the sacrifice she had made—for fifty thousand pounds. Katherine's conduct approached, if the truth were told, closer to his ideal.

Although Ronald stayed severely away from the Hotel d'Albert, he heard more or less directly of Meriel's continued extravagance. Some of his information came from newspaper paragraphs and he had received an invitation to the fancy dress ball, which was spoken of as one of the events of the season. But Ronald's principal informant was Wilfred Osterby, who had been instrumental in making Mr. Lestocq known to Mr. Van Notten, and so in bringing about the conversion of the flourishing business into a limited liability company. Osterby would sometimes pay a visit to Brandenburg Street after Ronald was

supposed to have finished his day's work at six o'clock.

He had kept more closely in touch with Osterby than with any of his former friends. His own people had never really forgiven his striking departure from family tradition, although Ronald's brothers had condoned the offence sufficiently to borrow money of him. It was not that Ronald had much in common with a man who was fifteen years older than himself, short in stature, quite fat, with a round, florid shaven face, sleek dark hair and a suave demeanour. A confirmed bachelor, with a good income, he found life tolerable mainly because of an immense capacity for taking an interest in what did not concern him.

He had made up many a quarrel even between husbands and wives, and brought more than one eligible couple of young people together. Mr. Osterby had known Meriel before she met Ronald, and, indeed, Mrs. Fitzgerald had made him trustee of the small residue of capital which she was able to leave to her daughter. It amounted approximately to two thousand pounds.

Osterby knew of course all about Ronald's

early love affair, and at the time had strongly advised Mrs. Fitzgerald to allow Meriel to have nothing to do with that light-headed, impecunious "sprig of nobility." Naturally Mr. Osterby had since seen the error of his ways, but he assuredly had no suspicion that the interval of seven years had left Meriel, at least, of the same opinion still. So that Osterby had no scruple in bringing to Brandenburg Street all kinds of stories about Mrs. Latham's extravagance, quoting figures concerning the cost of living and of constantly entertaining at the Hotel d'Albert, which served to convince his hearer of the great gulf which was fixed between himself and the woman who, after all, stood apart in his mind from the rest of the world.

One afternoon about three weeks after the last visit to Standerton-on-Sea, Osterby reached No. 11 Brandenburg Street at half-past six; one Monday afternoon, just as Ronald, who had spent a busy day in the studio, was putting on his hat for a stroll. Osterby, inclined to discuss the affairs of the company, suggested walking the same way, and they set out together in the direction of Hyde Park.

In Oxford Street, on the point of turning the corner of Park Lane, Osterby hanging on his companion's arm as he had a habit of doing, Ronald saw Katherine standing on the kerb waiting for an opportunity to cross the road. He had the impression of a pair of extremely wistful dark eyes in a pale face which looked thinner than when he used to see it at Standerton, and if he had been alone Ronald would have stopped. He had understood from Aunt Lavinia's letters that Katherine intended in case of necessity to return to her father's house, but something in her appearance this evening suggested that she had not yet fallen on peaceful days.

Lifting his hat, Ronald walked a few yards along Park Lane.

"Osterby," he cried, coming to a halt a few seconds later, "you must excuse me half a minute. Some one I want to speak to."

"All right, I'm never in a hurry," said Osterby, taking out his cigarette case, while Ronald hastily retraced his steps, and seeing Katherine still on the same spot, could not help suspecting that she had waited on the chance of his returning.

"Oh, Mrs. Sheffield," said Ronald, offering

his hand, "I am afraid I have not a moment to spare. I have just left a man in Park Lane, but it struck me that you might have forgotten my address."

"I—I told you I should never forget," she murmured.

"Anyhow, I haven't seen you," he suggested.

"It wasn't that I should not have liked to come had I dared," said Katherine.

"Well, suppose we say a quarter-past six to-morrow afternoon. How would that suit you?"

"Any time would suit me," she faltered, and he saw the faint colour spread over her cheeks, and the fresh brightness in her eyes.

"Will you remember to ask for Mr. Lestocq," said Ronald, and now her face grew more deeply crimson.

"If I—if I have to send my own name in," she cried, "it will be Katherine Wilmot—Miss Wilmot."

"Then that's all right," said Ronald, and hastening back to Osterby, he refrained from answering a laughing inquiry concerning his "friend." Although Osterby knew so much about Christopher Sheffield's affairs, he had

never met Katherine, and it seemed just as well that he should not know that Ronald had any connection with her.

She reached Brandenburg Street punctually at the appointed time on Tuesday afternoon, where Ronald, who had been busy the whole day, was waiting for her in his private room on the second floor. As Jenkins, the one-armed commissionaire, showed her in, Katherine looked unmistakably nervous.

"I understood," began Ronald, when she had taken a chair by the table on which stood a pile of rough proofs in red envelopes to be examined before he went to bed, "that you were going home, but I suppose it has not come off yet."

"If I failed to find something to do," cried Katherine eagerly. "When I saw Miss Elliston last, I felt confident I should succeed. Of course," she added, in a quavering voice, "it is useless to pretend that you don't know all—all about me."

"Until the time you left Standerton," said Ronald.

"Very little has happened since," was the answer. "Nothing worth mentioning. I came to London and took a room at a women's

hostel near Vauxhall Bridge. I answered scores of advertisements and went to ever so many agencies. The best of them would not even take a fee or put my name on their books; it was always the same difficulty. I could not give them a reference. It was not many days before I saw I could never succeed."

"Have you had any communication with Sheffield?" asked Ronald, and she shook her head. "Then you must be drawing near to the end of your resources—according to what my aunt said about them?" he added.

"I can manage to hold out a few weeks longer," she said. "I have not suffered any actual hardship in London, though everything seems so—so different. But sooner or later of course I must reach my last penny, and then what am I to do? Rather than go home now the probability confronts me I feel I would do—oh! almost anything. I have often remembered what you said on the cliff that dreadful Saturday night," she murmured. "During the last fortnight I have not passed a day without wishing to see you, and if only you could tell me how to earn even the poorest living——"

"I might," answered Ronald, "be doing

you a real injury. Left to yourself, you will be driven home, you know."

"I am not certain," she exclaimed. "I am not in the least certain I could face it."

"Oh yes, you could," urged Ronald. "And if I were to make any suggestion——"

"I should be grateful for the rest of my life. Lord Ronald, I could go down on my knees," she cried excitedly, "and implore you to put me in the way of doing something."

"I say, you mustn't talk in that tone," he said. "You are in a mood to magnify the objections. Once in your father's house you would soon settle down again."

"Oh, don't you understand!" answered Katherine. "He foretold precisely what—what has happened to me. Imagine my creeping up to the house where I used to be the mistress; being taken to my father's room; having to confess that he was right from first to last; that I was utterly, humiliatingly wrong! Can't you understand?"

He understood none the worse, perhaps, because she was a pretty woman. An ascetic life had by no means made him indifferent to such charms, and wisely or unwisely he found it impossible to refuse her petition.

"Well, suppose you listen attentively," he said. "On your way up to this room I dare say you noticed Miss Biddle sitting at one of the writing-tables——"

"The tall, dark woman?" suggested Katherine.

"Yes, the younger is Miss Renshaw, but she usually gets away sharp at six. I suppose she has been extra busy to-day. Miss Biddle stays on to clear things up a bit. She receives the people who come to make appointments and that sort of thing, and as a matter of fact she has been hinting at the desirability of extra help. It is just possible you might serve her purpose."

"Oh, how splendid—how splendid!" cried Katherine, unable to remain seated in her excitement.

"Splendid, you may find, is scarcely the word," he returned with a smile. "The work is monotonous, the pay only thirty-five shillings a week."

"But I could live magnificently," said Katherine.

"Please don't count your chicks," was the answer. "Miss Biddle has the management of that floor. I never interfere with her, but

she could see you at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

He sent Katherine away with a radiant face, and as soon as Miss Biddle arrived on Wednesday morning, explained frankly that he was anxious to do a good turn to a friend who had been left stranded. She was entirely inexperienced, but he should be immensely obliged if Miss Biddle would take a little pains with her. At all events, Miss Wilmot must be given a trial, and she might be engaged to come on Monday.

Well, of course, it was not for Miss Biddle to raise an objection, although she considered it a mistake to let friendship interfere with business. However, she supposed she must do as Mr. Lestocq pleased and engage the young person, who certainly would not be permitted to stay if she did not mind her p's and q's.

"You can let me hear how you get along when you come back from lunch," said Ronald.

Miss Biddle tapped at his door as he was finishing his own meal. She had made the arrangements he desired, and Miss Wilmot was to put in an appearance at half-past nine on Monday morning. Ronald thought he

would be in the way on her arrival, but in her eagerness to please Miss Biddle, Katherine entered the reception-room at twenty minutes past nine, a timorous, bewitching little figure, standing there in the middle of the large room, the only other occupants being the commissionaire and the page-boy.

CHAPTER XIV

KATHERINE was still standing there, wondering what she ought to do, when she saw Ronald, who came hastily forward, holding out his hand. A number of easels stood about the thickly carpeted room, supporting mounted photographs, many others of eminent personages hanging on the walls. In each of three corners was a black oak, leather-topped writing-table, towards one of which Ronald led his new employee.

"This will be your billet," he explained. "But I think it will be better to leave Miss Biddle to put you in the way of things. You mustn't expect to see much of me, and for goodness' sake do your best to please her."

"I am going to please her," said Katherine. "I mean to like everything immensely, and you can't imagine how grateful I feel."

"Oh well, we'll take that as read," answered Ronald, turning away as Miss Biddle pushed

open the glass door and entered the reception-room as if the house belonged to her. At first, Katherine found her a little exacting, but never had a newcomer shown such eagerness to please, such willingness to be instructed. Miss Biddle soon grew more amiable, and Miss Renshaw was friendly from the first hour ; taking Katherine out to lunch that Monday, giving useful advice about the routine of work, and whispering as a close secret that Mr. Lestocq was really and truly the youngest son of the Marquis of Amberset.

When Miss Biddle and Miss Renshaw were either occupied or absent it became Katherine's duty to receive would-be sitters—always with a smile. Miss Biddle was insistent on that point. She must inquire the description of photograph desired, exhibit specimens and secure an order for as many as possible of the most expensive kinds. Katherine would then fill in an appointment card, and make out the bill, insisting in case of necessity that Lestocq's never took a step until money had passed. Her spare time was occupied by answering formal applications by letter, and attempts at the most elementary description of book-keeping and while nothing on earth

could possibly lessen her sense of indebtedness to Ronald, who had given her what she the most desired, Katherine nevertheless had the gratification of feeling that she was doing something for her money.

Between the hours of half-past nine and six she found little time for painful reminiscences, and the rather woebegone expression began to leave her face, which looked more as it had done that afternoon when Ronald had seen her struggling with the deck chair on the cliff at Standerton-on-Sea.

At least Katherine had no longer any suspense. She felt that she had passed through the worst, and, if her spirits had a tendency to droop now and then, a smile in passing from "Mr. Lestocq" served quickly to raise them.

She made the discovery that he sometimes came into the reception-room shortly after one o'clock on his way from the studio on the roof to his sitting-room. Katherine fell into the habit, constantly reproved by Miss Biddle, of dawdling when it was time to go out for her midday meal and in this way she often found an opportunity to exchange a few formal words.

But as she was leaving No. 11 Brandenburg Street on the second Monday evening Ronald overtook her at the corner and walked by her side for a few yards, inquiring how she was getting along.

"Oh, beautifully as far as I am concerned," she answered. "I only hope that Miss Biddle is half as well satisfied."

"That's all right," said Ronald. "I have been questioning her and she gives you quite a good character, though it's true she added something about new brooms. I suppose," he suggested, "you walk home across Hyde Park."

"Yes, but I am leaving the hostel," she explained. "Miss Renshaw has recommended some rooms and I shall be moving into them at the end of this week—next Saturday."

"Where are they?" asked Ronald.

"No. 4 Dorchester Place," she answered. "Close to Primrose Hill. I have taken two rooms on the second floor."

"I'm afraid they can't be up to much," he suggested; and in spite of himself his thoughts flew to Meriel in her sumptuous suite at the Hotel d'Albert. "By the bye,"

Ronald added, " I had a letter from my aunt this morning. She often writes on Sundays. She has managed to let her house for the season, so I dare say she will be coming to London before very long."

" Does Miss Elliston know—does she know how good you have been ? " asked Katherine eagerly.

" Upon my word," said Ronald, " I wish you would drop all that. You earn your money and there's an end of it."

But Katherine shook her head, and turning to look into her face he saw that it wore a transfiguring, a somewhat perplexing smile.

" Does Miss Elliston know that I am at Brandenburg Street ? " she persisted.

" Why, no," he answered. " I can't say I saw the least necessity to tell her."

" I am immensely glad," said Katherine ; " I know she was wonderfully kind to me, but yet somehow I would ever so much sooner never see any one again who knew me before—before I came to London."

Katherine felt disappointed when Ronald stopped and held out his hand, for she would have enjoyed walking across the park by his side. He went his way, however, telling

himself that hers were infernally hard lines, although, as a matter of fact, she was not nearly so miserable as the man whose conduct had brought her to the present pass.

If she had treated the affair sensibly and consented to accept the proffered allowance, which was, indeed, her due, Christopher might have slept better of nights. He had hoped that Katherine would realise the desirability of making the best of a bad business, until he received a brief letter on the morning after her departure from Standerton-on-Sea. It bore neither address, date, nor signature; it contained no reproaches, but he saw the dull spot on the sheet of cream-laid notepaper, and knew that a tear had fallen there.

Christopher travelled to Standerton, paid and dismissed the two servants at the bungalow, saw the bank manager, closed the account which had been opened in Katherine's name, and endured a bad five minutes with Miss Elliston. Although she did not mention Katherine, Christopher received the impression that Lavinia would not touch him with a barge pole.

On returning to London he was haunted by harassing memories. It seemed strange

that previous to his last interview with Katherine, while she was at Standerton and he was in London, he had been easily able to forget her. Now, however, he could not get her face out of his mind. Her small stock of money would not last very long! She would soon be reduced to destitution!

Nor had Christopher the alternative of basking in the sunshine of Mrs. Latham's favour. Although he had warned himself that it would be necessary to play a waiting game, he had never excelled at that sort of entertainment. He had not spoken to Meriel since the Friday afternoon they met outside her house in Grandison Street, but he had seen her twice in her motor car, when she scarcely condescended to return his bow. While he had heard that she was staying at the Hotel d'Albert, he lacked audacity to pay her a visit.

In moments of depression, which increased in frequency, he told himself that he had done a "caddish thing," and his loneliness was intensified by the circumstance that his bubble reputation had suddenly burst. So few people took the trouble to pay their shillings at the Newbury Gallery that it was a farce to keep

the exhibition open. His name had dropped out of the newspapers and he no longer received invitations from persons of whom he had never heard.

It seemed a long time since he had attempted to do any work, and although he had the run of the studio of one of his new admirers, the incentive of necessity was lacking, and also Katherine's influence, which counted for more than Christopher imagined. So it happened that he was thrown back more and more on his own unsatisfactory reflections, to say nothing of whisky and soda-water, until one morning about three weeks after Katherine's first day at Lestocq's, he met Meriel Latham at the corner of Brandenburg Street.

She would have passed with the coldest of nods if Christopher had not planted himself too deliberately in her way. He had practically passed out of her life, which had lately become extremely busy. As Christopher's name ceased to appear in the newspapers, paragraphs began to be printed about Mrs. Latham's entertainments at the Hotel d'Albert.

Her presence at the corner of Brandenburg

Street at twelve o'clock to-day was due to the fact that Ronald had been leaving her severely alone.

"To tell you the truth," she said, in answer to Christopher's inquiry, "I am going to Mr. Lestocq's to make an appointment for a sitting."

As she would have continued on her way, he was suddenly inspired.

"Now, that is a curious coincidence," he answered.

"What is?" she demanded.

"One can almost see the finger of Fate," he persisted. "I also want to make an appointment at Lestocq's."

As he persisted in walking on towards No. 11 by her side, Meriel bit her lip in vexation.

"Of course you know," she remarked, beginning to relent, "that Mr. Lestocq is actually Lord Ronald Eckington—a very, very old friend of mine. He is turning his business into a company so that there is not much time to lose if one wishes to make certain of being photographed by him personally."

"That is exactly what I told myself,"

said Christopher with admirable effrontery; and reaching the open door with the name of "Lestocq" on its posts Meriel led the way along the hall and upstairs to the reception-room on the first floor. Never having had an opportunity of inspecting Ronald's surroundings before, she looked about her with a good deal of curiosity. There were two groups of would-be sitters, one being attended to by Miss Biddle, the other by Miss Renshaw; and Meriel, entering in advance of Christopher, saw Katherine rise from her chair at the writing-table, and come forward to receive her with a welcoming smile.

Then suddenly she stopped, raised a hand to her forehead, tottered for a moment, and looked as if she were going to faint. Glancing over her shoulder as she ran forward to Katherine's aid, Meriel could not see Christopher, who in fact had lost his wits, turned tail and wasted no time in reaching the street.

Fortunately the two men who had been talking to Miss Biddle were on the point of going, and, leaving the page to open the door for them, she went to Katherine's side, whispering an order to retire, before turning

to ask Meriel's requirements with the indispensable smile. Some time was spent in the examination of various specimen photographs, and finally Mrs. Latham gave an extensive order, taking off her glove to draw a cheque for the amount of the bill.

On going downstairs she wondered whether she should find Christopher Sheffield waiting, but there was no sign of him in the street, and she set forth towards the Hotel d'Albert, feeling no doubt that he had been the cause of the girl's distress, but realising that it would be impossible to obtain anything resembling an explanation until she came to No. 11 Brandenburg Street again at three o'clock on Friday.

CHAPTER XV

CHRISTOPHER SHEFFIELD perceived that he had cut a poor figure before the eyes of the two women who stood at opposite poles in his thoughts. Coming upon Katherine unexpectedly, he had been unable to face her, and had fled under the eyes of Mrs. Latham, with whom he wished to stand supremely well.

But Meriel was quickly forgotten, and as he walked away from Brandenburg Street he could think only of Katherine. It seemed appalling that she should be reduced to earn her living in such a manner. The matter could not be allowed to rest, and whatever happened he must speak to her before he was many hours older.

After deep consideration he came to the conclusion that he could not attempt to approach her at Lestocq's or even to ask for her address. The simplest plan would be to

waylay her when she left business—why not this evening? Six would be a probable hour; in any case, she was not likely to leave earlier than half-past five, at which time he might have been seen hanging about the street corner where he had met Meriel a few hours ago.

Six o'clock had struck, Christopher had smoked two or three cigarettes and was growing more and more impatient, when at last Katherine came out, but to his disappointment she was not alone. As a matter of fact, these fine evenings she usually walked as far as the end of Dorchester Place with Miss Renshaw, who lived in the neighbourhood.

Christopher did not care to accost her while she had a companion, and the only way was to follow at a discreet distance, dogging her steps along several quiet streets, surprised that she should be chattering with apparent cheerfulness. Obviously she had recovered from the shock of the morning's encounter, and this was certainly more than Christopher had done.

Separation had not made him, however, less capable of admiring her charming figure, and now for the first time he saw how much better than the generality of English women

—her present companion, for instance—Katherine walked. Across Marylebone Road he followed the pair, keeping at a respectful distance until they reached Regent's Park. During the last three months Christopher had not spent more than an hour or two with the girl who had once been all he cared for in the world. He had deserted her at Standerton-on-Sea six weeks before that day of his return after his first rebuff from Meriel, the day when they would doubtless have been completely reconciled if he had not been summoned to his wife's deathbed.

Now Christopher's pulses quickened as he walked behind Katherine, and during the journey from Brandenburg Street to Dorchester Place he underwent something like an emotional revolution. He looked back to the good times which they had spent together in Paris; he remembered the condition into which he had fallen when she consented to go away with him in the first place, and once more he realised that during the last four years she had been his good angel. And he had left her in the lurch on account of a woman who did not care a straw for him, and who certainly, after what she had witnessed

this morning, could scarcely be expected to take him again into favour.

When at last Katherine stopped at the corner of Dorchester Place, still lingering to say a few parting words, Christopher drew back lest he should be recognised, until, seeing Miss Renshaw walk on, he followed his quarry in order to make certain of her number.

She entered a house which was precisely like every other in the dismal street, but he thought he would not ring the bell at once. Perhaps he experienced a little misgiving at the prospect, but he told himself it would be better to wait until she had taken off her hat and coat, and, lighting another cigarette, retraced his steps, wondering what he should say to her.

Meanwhile Katherine, admitted by a remarkably untidy but amiable-looking maid-of-all-work, went upstairs to her sitting-room on the second floor, where the first thing she did was to open both windows. The furniture was of the shabbiest description, and the carpet had long lost its pattern. Nothing was supposed to be done for her after breakfast, so that she always prepared her last meal as soon as she got home, and then, after she had

“washed up” in her bedroom on the same landing, the evening would be free to spend over a book from the Public Library.

Katherine had invested in a spirit stove, and, having taken off her outdoor clothes, she put a match to it, intending to begin by boiling the water for tea. While laying a coarse white cloth on the table, her thoughts returned to the incident of the morning: Miss Biddle had spoken sharply after Mrs. Latham left Brandenburg Street, suggesting that perhaps Miss Wilmot was not strong enough for the work; in any case, that sort of thing could not be put up with, and she must be more careful in the future.

By the time Katherine had laid the table, arranging a cup and saucer, two plates, a knife, the loaf and a pot of marmalade, the water was boiling, and when she had filled the small white teapot she dropped an egg into the water which was left in the kettle; an ingenious, labour-saving device, she considered!

Opening her book and sitting down she was prepared to linger over the meal, but before the egg was half eaten, there was an astonishing tap at the door, the maid-of-all-

work entering the room with an expression of astonishment on her smudged face.

"Miss Wilmot, there's a gentleman for you!" she exclaimed.

"Did he know my name?" asked Katherine, for she had been unpleasantly followed more than once.

"No," was the answer. "He didn't name no name. He wanted the lady what had just come in."

Katherine began to wonder whether the "gentleman" could possibly be Christopher. It would be exactly like him to pay her a visit, and probably he had followed her home.

"Did he give his own name?" she asked nervously.

"It's Mr. Sheffield, and he's an out-and-out swell," said the maid-of-all-work.

Katherine hesitated, but really only for a moment or two. If she declined to see him now she knew that he would give her no peace until he succeeded in obtaining an interview. He would wait for her out of doors, or worse, he might have the effrontery to come again to Brandenburg Street. But she would infinitely have preferred not to see him; by his own act he had gone out of her life, and

whatever happened he could never enter it again.

She said he was to be brought up, and wished there were time to remove the things from the table. She would like to impress Christopher by the fact of her perfect contentment and wellbeing; she should hate him to imagine that her welfare depended on his treatment.

As he came rather impetuously into the room, hat and stick in hand, well and, indeed, somewhat showily dressed, the maid-of-all-work regarded him with undisguised admiration. He began to speak almost before there was time to shut the door, standing a yard away from it with his arms akimbo.

"Look here, Kitty," he said with a grumble in his voice, "this is too devilish rough on a fellow upon my soul. It isn't fair, you know."

"No," she answered, having risen to her feet and pushed back her chair, "it—it isn't fair."

"Who in the world would have thought of your going in for this kind of rot?" he demanded. "Anyhow, it won't do. You will just have to turn it up. My offer is still

open—five hundred a year, you know ; five fifty if you like.”

“ I would sooner starve,” she exclaimed. “ I would sooner go back to my father. I should have been compelled to go if it were not for—for Mr. Lestocq.”

“ Oh, I know all about Lestocq,” said Christopher. “ Miss Elliston’s nephew.”

“ It was his friend Mrs. Latham who—who led you away from me to begin with,” murmured Katherine, in her excitement saying things which she would have preferred to leave unsaid. In the few minutes allowed for preparation, she had determined to maintain a calm, cold demeanour, but now her heart beat rapidly, her head was hot, and somehow the words came out as if she had no control over them.

“ There’s not been much leading about it,” said Christopher. “ A man can’t always help his feelings—worse luck, but what’s the use of crying over spilt milk ? ”

“ I have not shed a tear,” retorted Katherine.

“ Do, for Heaven’s sake, let me do the decent thing by you ? ” he urged. “ Why shouldn’t you have a rattling good time instead

of pigging along in this hole of a place? I dare say you think I'm a bit of a brute——”

“I try my hardest not to think of you at all,” she answered. “At first I thought my heart would break, but it didn't. I am getting over it.”

He became conscious of a desire that she should never be able to do anything of the kind. She had far more pluck than he had ever given her credit for, and standing there on the other side of the table, breathing quickly, slightly flushed, she tempted him as provokingly as she used to do in those days when it appeared inconceivable she could ever be induced to go away with him. He took a few steps round the side of the table, holding out his hands, and, indeed, the wild idea occurred to him of taking her away there and then, although he was still held back by a sense of shame.

Not without a suspicion of what was passing in his mind, Katherine stepped hastily backwards, raising a hand to ward him off. If he had received the slightest encouragement she would have been in his arms, but she looked at him with unmistakable contempt.

"If only I had never had the misfortune to see you!" she cried.

"I know it has been infernally rough luck on you," he said, drawing still nearer.

"You made me despise myself," she persisted. "I tried to believe that you looked upon me as your wife, until you showed what you really thought of me."

"Kitty, I swear——"

"Oh, you swore so many things," she retorted. "But I have managed to live through it—don't touch me!" she cried as he attempted to take her hand. "I will not put up with it. You may do anything you please as far as I am concerned, so that you leave me alone. You can marry Mrs. Latham!"

"Damn Mrs. Latham!" shouted Christopher, losing his temper; and opening the door, he walked out of the room, banging it violently after him.

CHAPTER XVI

IN the ordinary course of business at No. 11 Brandenburg Street, sitters were taken by either Miss Renshaw or Miss Wilmot to one of the dressing-rooms, and when the last magic touches had been added to their toilettes, they came out to the lounge, where presently the page arrived to show the way upstairs to the studio.

There they would be received by one of Mr. Lestocq's assistants, who would consult a book to see what description of photographs were required. He would then arrange the background, regulate the light by manœuvring the blinds, and, finally, a small door would open and Ronald would enter, usually with his hands in his pockets, to take control of the operation. Having seen who was due at three o'clock this afternoon, however, he took care to be alone in the studio.

"Didn't I threaten to beard you in your

den?" cried Meriel, holding out her hand. "It really is quite hot enough for one. I hope," she added, "you are going to make me look lovely as a recompense."

"Anyhow, you seem to have given a wholesale order," he answered with a laugh, and began to alter the arrangement of the blinds.

For the next quarter of an hour he set to work in the most business-like way, shifting the position of the camera, asking Meriel to adopt various poses, and assisting her with a few deft touches until several plates had been exposed.

"Do you mean to say that you spend the whole of every day in this fashion?" she demanded, rising at last with a yawn.

"Very nearly," he answered. "As a fact, I haven't half enough time for other things. We have a place at Pinner, you know, where the plates are sent to be developed and so forth."

"You can't possibly enjoy it!" Meriel insisted. "It must be too dreadfully monotonous."

"Not a bit," he returned. "I see a constant succession of fresh faces: some plain,

some beautiful, some neither one nor the other. You must remember that I was an amateur before I thought of going into business."

"If you were married, how shockingly you would have to neglect your wife!" she cried.

"But then, you see, I'm not," said Ronald. "What's more, I am never likely to be. On the whole, I suppose there's nothing more improbable."

"Ronnie! I shouldn't protest too much," answered Meriel. "Suppose some designing woman took you in hand."

"I should be on my guard."

"Ah, but I mean a clever woman who could disguise her art. You would be caught in the net before you could turn round. By the bye," Meriel added, "who is that nice-looking, dark-haired girl downstairs? The shortest of the three."

"That is Katherine Wilmot."

"Your—your friend from Standerton?" suggested Meriel.

"Yes," said Ronald.

"What in the world is she doing here?"

"Oh well, I happened to meet her about—"

I suppose it was about a month ago. When Sheffield turned her up she came to London to look for something to do. Of course, she didn't find anything, and I was able to make room for her downstairs."

"It seems a rather curious arrangement," said Meriel, walking towards the door.

"It was the best I could do," he answered. "Of course, her proper place is at home with her father, Sheffield having turned out such a complete bounder. Aunt Lavinia is coming to London to-morrow," Ronald added, as Meriel lingered. "In the afternoon, so that I shall be able to meet her train and see her safely to Manning's Hotel—you may remember it."

"I shall go to see her on Monday," said Meriel hastily.

"Better take all your courage in your hands," he cried with a laugh. "You will meet with no end of reproaches."

"Oh dear! What have I done?" she demanded.

"Well, you've plunged into this incomprehensible extravagance. It is really incomprehensible, you know," said Ronald.

"What a lot you have to learn!" she

murmured, resting a hand on his sleeve for an instant. "I shall never, never forgive you for not coming to my fancy dress ball," she continued, and then he opened the door, accompanying her as far as the dressing-room.

He had certainly devoted much more time than usual to the one sitter, and the consequence was that two or three others were waiting. He worked rather late that Friday evening, and the following afternoon went to meet Miss Elliston at the railway station. It took some time to collect her luggage, but at last she was deposited safely at Manning's Hotel, and Ronald promised to pay her a visit towards the end of the week. He was surprised, however, to receive an urgent letter on Tuesday morning asking him to come the same evening at nine. He saw the moment he entered her private sitting-room that something had happened to annoy Aunt Lavinia.

"I had a visit from Meriel Latham yesterday," she explained. "Why in the world did you leave her to tell me that Katherine Sheffield, or whatever one ought to call her——"

"Miss Katherine Wilmot," said Ronald. "After all, it is her proper name."

"I should very much like to know why you didn't tell me she was at Brandenburg Street!" cried Miss Elliston.

"The astonishing thing is that Meriel thought the matter of enough importance to mention," he answered.

"Nonsense! She recognised the danger at once."

"Danger!" murmured Ronald.

"The danger," Lavinia insisted. "Here is a nice-looking woman—a young woman—who considers she is under a deep obligation. You bring her to your premises, where she sees you every day of the week, and although I have certainly no desire to be unjust, her peculiar experiences can scarcely fail to make the situation more perilous."

"That *is* unjust," said Ronald. "Damnably unjust. You are hitting her while she's down."

"At all events, one thing is perfectly plain," exclaimed Lavinia.

"What's that?"

"Meriel is jealous!" was the reply, and he leaned back laughing in his chair. "What

is the use of pretending to be blind?" Miss Elliston continued. "If people would only recognise facts what a much pleasanter place this world would be! I say that Meriel is jealous, and what is more, I have discovered her reason for plunging into this mad extravagance."

"Upon my word, I wish you would tell me," urged Ronald.

"She did not mean to expose herself," Miss Elliston explained, "but she could not resist telling me you refused to help her to get some shares in your company. She knows that you adopt a critical attitude, though I must say I am astonished that any man can. Well, she thinks she has guessed the explanation. You will not marry her because of Mr. Latham's money; at least, she sees that is one reason, and so she has given up her house——"

"I admit I don't quite see the connection," said Ronald.

"It ought to be plain enough. You have driven her desperate. If she were a man she would—goodness knows what she would not do, but as public opinion still to some degree restrains a woman, she has to content

herself with plunging into this folly, and finds a vent for her indignation by living beyond her income."

"You mean that she is running amok!" suggested Ronald.

"Call it what you please," said Miss Elliston. "And of course she feels the more annoyed because she can't help seeing what anybody must see, that this lamentable association with Katherine Wilmot may lead to something undesirable. A soft-hearted, yielding woman, and nothing is easier than to slip into mischief. Anyway, I must have a talk with her," added Lavinia.

"Good Lord, you are not dreaming of putting into her head the idea which you have put into mine!" cried Ronald.

"Do, pray, give me credit for a small amount of tact," was the answer.

"Well, you must write," he suggested, "though I tell you frankly, I don't believe she will come."

"She will have to come," said Miss Elliston. "You must speak to Katherine and insist that she shall be here—say at half-past three on Saturday. And, Ronald," Lavinia continued, as he rose from his

chair, "I want you to oblige me by looking in for half an hour on Sunday afternoon. I am expecting Wilfred Osterby and one or two others."

Although he would have preferred that Aunt Lavinia should write to Katherine, he had shrunk from bringing farther reproaches on himself by refusing to deliver a message; the difficulty, however, was to find a suitable opportunity. Ronald did not care, especially since Lavinia had made him self-conscious, to take any step which might attract Miss Biddle's attention. In the end he asked the page to bring Miss Wilmot to his sitting-room as soon as she returned from luncheon on Wednesday, and at two o'clock she entered with an apprehensive expression.

"Lord Ronald," she cried, always finding it difficult to address him as 'Mr. Lestocq,' "I am afraid you have a reprimand in store for me?"

"Is your conscience guilty?" he suggested.

"Oh, then Miss Biddle hasn't been complaining," she said.

"She knows very well I seldom interfere with her department," answered Ronald.

"How fortunate for me that you went out of your way on one occasion!" murmured Katherine eagerly; and he wished once more that Aunt Lavinia had not put undesirable thoughts into his head. It could not be denied that Katherine Wilmot was far more attractive than Katherine Sheffield had ever been.

"It's true," he said, "that Miss Biddle told me something about your faintness——"

"Imagine the shock of coming face to face with Christopher," murmured Katherine.

"Has Sheffield found you out?" asked Ronald.

"He came here with Mrs. Latham," she explained. "For the moment I am afraid I lost my presence of mind."

Now Ronald was able to understand why Meriel had inquired about Katherine when she came to be photographed on Friday, and it appeared that she had been less frank than usual!

"As they—they came together," suggested Katherine, after a short hesitation, "I couldn't help wondering whether Christopher and Mrs. Latham were engaged to be married."

"Good Lord, no," said Ronald. "You needn't bother yourself about anything of that kind for an instant."

"It wouldn't bother me," she returned, a little confusedly. "Once I used to think I could never, never forgive him, but now——"

"You have come to a better frame of mind," cried Ronald. "The whirligig of Time brings strange events to pass, you know."

"Never," she insisted; "never what I suppose you are hinting at."

"Well, I mustn't stay," he answered, looking at his watch. "I have a busy afternoon, only I promised Miss Elliston to deliver a message. She wants you to go to see her at Manning's Hotel in Dover Street at half-past three on Saturday."

"Oh, I should so very much sooner not go," said Katherine. "Please don't ask me," she added, looking up entreatingly into his face.

"You see, I am asking you," he urged. "I want you to keep in touch with her. I think it would be good for you."

"I detest the notion of facing Miss

Elliston again," returned Katherine. "You remember I told you——"

"Upon my word, I wish you would go," he said, and she slowly shook her head.

Suddenly, however, she began to smile. "Of course, if you really make a point of it," she cried.

"I do," he answered.

"Oh well, I suppose I must give in," said Katherine, "just as I should do anything to please you."

She passed out of the room, leaving Ronald staring at the door. He drew a deep breath, wondering whether, after all, Aunt Lavinia could be justified! It might be, as she insinuated, easy to slip into mischief before one knew what one was doing, and Ronald came almost to the conclusion that Katherine Wilmot's days at No. 11 Brandenburg Street were numbered.