

CHAPTER XVII

MISS ELLISTON, on the whole, preferred to be first at Standerton-on-Sea. She could have had a small house or a flat in London if she liked, but she was a person of far more importance in the small town where the most of her property was situated, and where her connection with Lord Amberset was well known.

On the other hand, she was always pleased to come to the old-established, private hotel in Dover Street for a month or two during the season if she were fortunate enough to let her house furnished. In London she dressed much better than in the country, although her wardrobe was never brought "up-to-date"; Martha in the meanwhile living in a lodging and taking care of the three black pugs.

Lavinia had promised to pay Meriel Latham a visit on Friday afternoon, when she

found several people in the "salon." It would have been difficult on any afternoon during these days to catch Meriel alone, but to-day Miss Elliston was so deeply impressed by the luxuriousness of the surroundings that she deliberately outstayed the other guests.

"How do you like my gown?" asked Meriel, the moment they were alone, and Lavinia held her long-handled glasses to her eyes, putting back her head to make a better inspection.

"I suppose that is the latest enormity in fashion!" was the answer.

"It arrived from Paris only this week," said Meriel. "Miss Elliston," she added, "don't you think it's a lovely suite?"

"If you really desire my honest opinion——"

"That means you don't like it!" cried Meriel.

"Of course, it is a matter of taste," said Lavinia, with a sniff. "To me it seems just a wee bit common, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I do, you know," murmured Meriel. "I mind it frightfully."

"My dear," Miss Elliston continued,

"nothing can be more essentially common than to let your love of display induce you to live beyond your income, and positively one would need to be a Cræsus! What does Ronald say about it?"

"Oh, he is so tiresome!" exclaimed Meriel. "But, then, Ronald has a bias. In his heart he disapproves of me and all my works. He has only been here twice, and he refuses even to come to my fancy dress ball. So provoking!"

"I don't imagine he has been at a ball of any kind since he used to dance with you in the old days," said Miss Elliston.

"Dear old days!" whispered Meriel, with a prodigious sigh.

"What I should like to know," said Lavinia, "is how much money you are paying for all this?"

"You wouldn't," was the reply. "You would be tremendously shocked. The bill takes my breath away regularly once a week. I think they employ a special multiplier to mount it up, and I am afraid to keep the receipts lest any one should get a peep at them."

"How I wish you would listen to reason,"

urged Miss Elliston. "What a sad pity to fling away the income Mr. Latham left you! You will wake up one morning to find yourself over head and ears in debt; then you will have to trench on your capital before you can get straight again. I shall tell Ronald to reason with you."

"That would really be rather comical!" cried Meriel.

"Comical!"

"Oh, most frightfully funny," said Meriel. "The drollest thing in the world; I should enjoy it immensely."

"You may treat this extravagance as a joke," returned Lavinia, "but mark my words. The day of reckoning is bound to come."

"Why, naturally. I am quite looking forward to it," said Meriel with a laugh, but the next instant her face grew serious again. "Yet, I—I don't know," she added, rather enigmatically; and when about twenty minutes later Miss Elliston rose from her chair, Meriel reminded her of her threat. "You won't forget!" she said. "You will be certain to send Ronnie to reason with me, won't you?"

Lavinia had received a postcard from her nephew that Friday morning to the effect that Katherine would reach Manning's Hotel at half-past three on Saturday, and she took the precaution to be "not at home" to anybody else. Katherine was vexed with herself inasmuch as she found it impossible to enter Miss Elliston's presence without visible self-consciousness. Being asked her name, it proved embarrassing to hear herself announced as "Miss Wilmot" to one who had hitherto known her as "Mrs. Sheffield."

"Dear me!" cried Lavinia, cordially taking her hand, "how different everything seems now we are both in London! I confess," she added, "I was never much more astonished than when I heard you were at Brandenburg Street."

"For that matter," was the answer, "I feel surprised to find myself there every day of my life."

"Of course," Miss Elliston suggested, "the arrangement is only temporary. It could not go on for ever."

"I shouldn't very much mind," said Katherine. "I am far happier than I ever expected to be again, and Lord Ronald—oh!

it is hopeless to attempt to tell you how grateful I feel to him."

"That is all very well," returned Lavinia, "but there can be no question that your proper place is with your own people; unless, indeed, you should marry Mr. Sheffield and have done with it."

"For one thing," said Katherine, "Christopher is not in the least likely to ask me, and if he did——"

"You would go down on your knees in thankfulness!"

"Oh dear, no!" cried Katherine. "It is a day after the fair. Miss Elliston, in me you really see a person who is almost contented."

"Contentment," Miss Elliston remonstrated, "is sometimes the worst thing in the world. We are satisfied for the moment with our surroundings, and hug the notion that they will remain the same for ever. I remember the years I lived at home with my dear father and mother. Good gracious, it never once occurred to me that in the natural order of things we must all be scattered some fine day."

Lavinia was interrupted by the entrance

of a waiter with a more than usually elaborate afternoon tea, and now she devoted herself to please her guest with the object of tempting her to come again. She could not help regarding Katherine with mingled feelings; sincerely wishing to do her a good turn, yet being unable to get rid of a fear that she might prove a source of danger to her nephew. Although Lavinia hoped that Ronald would eventually overcome the soreness with which he presumed still to regard Meriel Latham, she had the poorest opinion of the average man's power of resisting temptation. Ronald might be regarded, no doubt, as above the average in some respects, but still Katherine had certainly improved, her sense of gratitude was perilous, and, in fact, to the best of Miss Elliston's judgment, Ronald could do what he pleased with her at Brandenburg Street.

The circumstance that she had easily risen above her trouble seemed to signify weakness rather than strength of character, and as a matter of fact, Katherine was showing herself as fickle as Christopher Sheffield. He, of course, had begun it, but Katherine used to protest that she considered their informal relationship as binding as a lawful marriage.

Yet she declared she was perfectly happy without him, thus proving the lightness of her disposition. His changeableness could not be held to excuse hers, whereas Miss Elliston entertained no doubt that Ronald had become the central object of Katherine's life!

Although Lavinia had invited three or four other people for Sunday afternoon, to her disappointment only Ronald and Wilfred Osterby put in an appearance. The truth was, that she had been absent from London a little too long. Still, it was an advantage that each of her visitors took an interest in Meriel Latham, so that Miss Elliston felt at liberty to speak plainly.

"Such luxury I never beheld!" she insisted. "I call it grandiose—yes, grandiose is the word. I cannot pretend to approve! When the rich persist in flaunting their wealth in this outrageous way what effect must it have on the poor?"

"It strikes me," said Osterby, "that the mischief is that Meriel is not rich enough."

"My dear Wilfred, everybody should cut his coat according to his cloth. I can quite understand," she continued, "that any woman should grow sick of housekeeping in these

days. But what in the world does Meriel want with all those expensive rooms? She showed me the bathroom! But she took care not to tell me how much she is paying."

"Nor me," said Osterby with a smile. "I admit a certain curiosity. Then not contented with entertaining ever so many people whom she didn't know from Adam six weeks ago, she must conceive the idea of this fancy dress ball. What are you going as, Miss Elliston?"

"Good gracious!" she returned indignantly, "I should be ashamed to go at my time of life. To dress myself up and look ridiculous."

"Anyhow, I hadn't the strength to resist," Osterby confessed. "Meriel may be infernally extravagant, but she is undoubtedly bewitching. A Venetian Noble, I thought. The ball will be one of the chief events of the season," he continued. "I understand the band is coming expressly from Vienna."

"You have known her longer than any of us," said Lavinia: "you ought to talk to Meriel."

"Talk to her! My dear lady, I've talked till I was hoarse and only been laughed at for

my pains. Latham ought to have tied up the money, but of course he was senile when he married her. The only consolation is that the flame must soon burn itself out. She can't stand this sort of thing very much longer."

"Ah well!" exclaimed Lavinia, "I am afraid it is a sign of the times. Since I have been in London nothing has struck me so forcibly as the feverish tendency to display, the love of excitement, of notoriety at all costs. No one does good by stealth any more."

"I fancy that's a little too sweeping," suggested Ronald, who had hitherto listened in silence.

"Even you," retorted Miss Elliston, "tell me you are going in for advertisement!"

"You must blame Osterby for that," said Ronald. "If it had not been for him I should never have known Van Notten, and I should have gone along till the end of the chapter in my own jog-trot way. Still, one comes across a man now and then who doesn't let his right hand know what his left hand does. There's the fellow who contributed twenty-five thousand pounds to the Hospital Saturday

Fund only last week. No one has the remotest notion of his identity."

"The exception proves the rule," Miss Elliston answered. "I told Meriel I should send you to reason with her."

"What did she say to that?"

"The suggestion seemed to amuse her very much indeed," said Lavinia. "But there! I suppose I have no sense of humour."

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was rather late that Sunday afternoon when Ronald came forth from Manning's Hotel. Hearing that Osterby was going to the right he explained that he must turn to the left, although he appeared still uncertain what to do next on reaching the corner of Piccadilly. He looked at his watch and wondered whether he was likely to find Meriel disengaged, then suddenly making up his mind walked rapidly in the direction of the Hotel d'Albert.

There he was told that Mrs. Latham was holding a reception ; there had been a crowd of visitors all the afternoon, and even now more than a dozen remained in the "salon." Not wishing to add to their number Ronald turned disgustedly away. It was, perhaps, a little difficult to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, so much depended on the character of the field. To pose a woman for

her photograph in his studio at Brandenburg Street one day and meet her the next in a drawing-room might prove embarrassing, especially if her husband happened to be a new millionaire.

Ronald walked away from the hotel without the slightest intention of returning; nevertheless something influenced him to retrace his steps an hour later, and, being taken to the larger room, he rejoiced to find Meriel at last alone. She was looking, indeed, a little desolate in the spacious, ornate, brilliantly lighted "salon," sitting on a low settee with a wistful expression on her face.

"Oh, what a relief!" she cried, rising impulsively as Ronald approached. "I was afraid you might be another of them."

"You agree with the preacher that all is vanity," he suggested.

"I was wondering whether I should see you," she answered with a shrug. "Miss Elliston threatened to set you on to me, and I knew you were going to pay her a visit this afternoon. Unfortunately I have an engagement," she added. "It's time I rang for my maid."

"A hint for me to go," said Ronald.

She raised her hands, clasping them behind her head, as she looked in her peculiarly straight, confident way into his eyes.

"Don't you want to go, Ronnie?"

"Not a bit," he returned.

"There's one excellent thing about an engagement," she cried. "It can always be broken."

"We have had proof of that," said Ronald.

"Please, no horrid reminiscences!" she entreated. "Don't you see that I should really like to succeed in pleasing you for once. What shall it be? Suppose we spend a sedate evening! Take me to church somewhere. We might go to the Abbey. You may smoke in here while I change," she continued, and before there was time for an expostulation Meriel was out of the room.

He scarcely knew whether he wished to expostulate or not, although he told himself it was weakness to philander. In a remarkably short time she returned in the act of putting on her gloves, very quietly dressed, a different woman from her who had been the life of the crowded room an hour or so ago.

They walked across the Green Park, past Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey, and neither of them found the service or even the sermon a moment too long. On coming out, Meriel astonished him by putting her hand through his arm.

"Let us walk a part of the way, anyhow," she suggested, as they crossed the road to Parliament Street.

A short distance down on the right they passed a woman with three young children huddled together in a doorway, and Meriel, disengaging her arm, went back to speak, opening the purse which hung from her wrist.

Ronald, standing a few yards off, saw her empty the whole contents into the woman's hand.

"Such a poor, wee mite of a babe," she murmured, rejoining him and taking his arm again.

"You seem to have denuded yourself," he said.

"I am entirely at your mercy," she answered. "I haven't even enough left for a cabfare."

"How much did you give the woman?"

"Oh, as if I stayed to count. Four or five pounds, I dare say."

"Meriel, upon my word, you're going it," said Ronald.

"How hard you are to please!" she retorted. "If I spend money on myself, you growl; if I give it away, you growl still."

"There's a word to be said for the happy mean," he suggested.

"Suppose that happiness is only to be found in the extreme, Ronnie!"

"I don't quite see what you're driving at," he answered.

"How frightfully astounded you would be if you only could!" she murmured, as they drew near to Charing Cross.

"Seriously," he urged, "I wish you would let me persuade you to draw in a bit. You won't half enjoy paying the piper."

"Shan't I?" she asked, and broke into a laugh.

"You see," he persisted, "you have become used to a certain standard of comfort, and you will hate falling below it."

"You are quoting Miss Elliston!" said Meriel. "But please go on," she added.

"I am enjoying this intensely. There's only one drawback. You, dear goose, are prevented from appreciating the humour of the situation. You would say it was the drollest thing you had ever heard of. Where are you going to take me?" she asked abruptly, as they were waiting to cross the road.

"To your hotel, I suppose!"

"Somehow, I don't feel like entering those gilded portals again just yet," she returned. "One seems to have slipped back years and years. Ronnie, if one only could! There ought to be home waiting for us, oughtn't there? Home and a cold supper just as we used to have after evening service every Sunday. Remember, Ronnie?"

"Oh yes, I remember well enough," he muttered.

"What about your own meal?" she asked.

"A movable feast—it answers to your description."

"You—you don't ask me to share it," she suggested, and he looked down solemnly into her face.

"I suppose it—it wouldn't quite do," he said.

"Oh well, that's for you to decide," she retorted. "Only if you graciously condescend to invite me I shall accept."

"You see, if any of your friends——"

"My dear, I simply don't care the wee-est, tiniest bit," exclaimed Meriel, "and I'm most ravenously hungry."

Two minutes later they were on their way to Brandenburg Street in a taxicab, but on reaching No. 11 Ronald kept his latchkey in his pocket, thinking it might prove less of a shock to Jenkins to see Meriel first on the doorstep instead of coming upon her without preparation in the sitting-room. The one-armed commissionaire certainly looked astonished, but Ronald led the way upstairs, switching on the electric lights as he went through the empty reception-room where Meriel had seen Katherine totter at the sight of Christopher Sheffield. When Mrs. Jenkins appeared on the scene with extra knives, forks, and plates, Ronald went out of the way to perform a sort of introduction.

"Mrs. Jenkins," he said, turning to Meriel, "has been good enough to look after my material wants the last seven years. Mrs. Latham," he continued, "is a very old friend

of Miss Elliston's. By the bye, my aunt is coming to see you, Mrs. Jenkins."

The housekeeper looked extremely gratified, and Meriel ingratiatingly offered her hand. As soon as she was alone with Ronald she took off her jacket and gloves, glancing round the room with considerable curiosity.

"What a time since you and I sat at meat together, Ronnie!" she said, taking a chair, while he began to carve the cold chicken. "Don't you find it frightfully dull now and then?" she asked.

"Dulness is the eighth deadly sin, you know," cried Ronald.

"Oh dear, no!" she returned. "Stubbornness. I hate a stubborn person. So narrow; so bigoted, always standing out for some ridiculous punctilio. He wants a world made to his own design; and because he can't have it he sulks in his tent. I liked those proofs you sent me immensely," she continued. "I really had no idea I looked half so nice."

"You didn't tell me that you came here with Sheffield," said Ronald.

"It was scarcely worth mentioning," she answered. "As a matter of fact, I met him

a few doors off, and he vowed he wanted to make an appointment for himself—all nonsense, of course. Then on seeing your friend Miss Wilmot he lost his head and ran away. That is the only time I have spoken to him since the day I left Grandison Street," she added.

"I wish to Heaven the fellow would play up and marry Katherine," said Ronald, with considerable feeling.

Meriel did not speak for a few moments, but, resting her arms on the table, sat staring at the carcass of the chicken.

"I don't think it would take a great deal to turn him either way," she suggested. "A superficial, impulsive creature."

"It would make all the difference between light and darkness to her," said Ronald.

"Well, I must think it over," murmured Meriel, rising from her chair. Standing before the mirror which hung between the two windows, she raised her hands to straighten her hat, smiling to Ronald in the glass when he came behind her holding the jacket while she thrust her arms into its sleeves. "Thank you for the most delightful evening," she said. "I shall remember it for ever so

long. Ronnie," she added, "I believe you like me better here than you do at the hotel!"

"Not a bit," he replied.

"How disappointing! Because it really doesn't seem that you approve of me there."

As a matter of fact, he was putting an immense restraint upon himself to refrain from taking her in his arms, but while he believed she would have been willing enough, he knew that he should feel sorry to-morrow morning. He never ceased to remind himself of the "tremendous cheek" of setting up as her judge, and he quite understood the folly of quarrelling with his bread-and-butter. In a manner Meriel was a necessity of life to him—of a perfectly full and happy life, but she had failed him at the pinch, she had sold herself to that doddering old man, and he could not forget. That transaction had put a stain upon her which he felt must prove indelible, and even if he could succeed in shutting his eyes to it, how could he make her his wife without deriving benefit, direct or indirect, from Archibald Latham's money?

Ronald accompanied her downstairs again, she insisting that she preferred to go home

alone. The people at the hotel would pay the cabman.

"Next Sunday," she said, "I shall be at Rookbury Saint Mary's—Lord Nerley's place, you know."

"You might choose your friends better," suggested Ronald, hailing a passing taxicab.

"Oh, but they say Lady Nerley's weekends are quite delightful," was the answer. "Anyhow," she added with a laugh as she crossed the pavement, "I shall have Mr. Osterby as a chaperon. We are going down together on Friday afternoon. He insists that it's too far to motor. Good-bye, Ronnie!" she cried, holding out her hand after she had taken her seat. "If you change your mind about my ball there will be plenty of room—Thursday week, remember! I should love you to see my frock, though you haven't even asked what character I am to appear as . . . good-bye," she added, and he stood on the kerb looking after the taxicab until it turned the corner.

CHAPTER XIX

MERIEL LATHAM leaned back in the taxicab as far as a rather broad-brimmed hat would allow, and during the short drive to the Hotel d'Albert allowed her thoughts to roam over the last few hours. She sat up late that Sunday night, and found it impossible to sleep for some time after she went to bed. Her eyes opened early on Monday morning, and her first thought was of Christopher Sheffield and his relationship to Katherine Wilmot.

She was wondering whether she could succeed in exerting any influence over Christopher ; whether she could conceivably attain the end which Ronald desired. As she had not spent many minutes in Mr. Sheffield's society during the last month or so, she could scarcely expect that her words would have such weight as they might have done before the day when she made her first reference to his wife.

But Meriel knew that a woman of her own stamp can always exert some influence over a man, if only she cares to take the trouble. She had experience to teach her that a smile had a distinct value, while on the other hand she could imagine that her plainly expressed disapproval—perhaps her contempt—might prove a potent goad. Moreover, as she had told Ronald, she regarded Christopher Sheffield as an erratic, impetuous man who could easily be made to fly off at a tangent.

After considerable deliberation she wrote a letter before luncheon, asking him to come to see her at eleven o'clock on Tuesday morning, the only time when she should be able to devote an hour to a solitary visitor. Still feeling a little uncertain, however, whether she could bring herself to take the affair in hand, she did not send the letter to the post until dinner-time, so that Christopher found it on the breakfast-table when he entered the small coffee-room of his hotel in Craven Street on Tuesday morning.

What in the world, he wondered, could Mrs. Latham want with him? At first he hesitated about obeying the summons, for since his visit to Dorchester Place, Katherine

had been uppermost in his mind again. Little idiot ! If only she had proved more amenable she might have ended by getting her heart's desire. If she had treated him with less contumely, who could tell ? No man was easier to deal with when he was rubbed the right way, and Katherine, by the employment of a little tact, might have become his wife in the course of a few weeks. But she had flouted him ; she had made him feel unnecessarily ashamed by her refusal to accept any sort of amends ; she had insisted that she never wished to see his face again !

Meriel Latham, on the other hand, after ignoring him all these weeks, obviously did wish to see him, and in the end he thought she should be gratified. On his way to the Hotel d'Albert he sincerely hoped that she would make no reference to the scene at No. 11 Brandenburg Street, where he realised that he had cut a sorry figure. Now, while even a self-satisfied man could not in the circumstances flatter himself that Mrs. Latham entertained any particular regard for him, Christopher squirmed at the notion of her contempt. The consequence was that he entered the hotel this Tuesday morning

with more of a swagger than usual, and the surroundings appealed to him favourably. Although the scheme of decoration was scarcely in accordance with his present artistic theories, he was impressed by the air of luxury and expensiveness; moreover, he had never seen Meriel look more enticing.

On the whole, in his present mood, Christopher was uncertain whether the palm should not be given to Katherine's quieter, more appealing, more dependent style of beauty. It was true that she had been independent enough the last time he saw her, but that was an exception. Mrs. Latham belonged to a vastly different, to a much more modern, type. While it had never been possible for Christopher to forget her sex, she, for her own part, appeared to ignore it. This morning she held out her hand in an almost boyish way, gazing straight into his face without the slightest embarrassment or self-consciousness.

"I have been expecting to see you," she surprised him by saying. "Or at least to hear from you."

"Oh well," he returned, brightening, "you did not send me your address, and although

I am not generally supposed to be a very bashful person, I scarcely had the effrontery to turn up."

"Still," urged Meriel, "one surely doesn't wait for an invitation to apologise!"

"Apologise!" cried Christopher blankly.

"Perhaps," she continued, "you did not consider anything of the kind necessary!"

"I was afraid," he admitted, fingering his moustache, "you might think my conduct rather—rather out of the way, you know."

"Rather out of the way! You invented a false excuse for forcing yourself upon me; you made me a very unwilling party to an incident of which you felt so deeply ashamed that you could only turn tail. I like the look of Miss Wilmot," Meriel added abruptly, "and I happen to know all about her . . . about her and the way you have treated her."

Christopher began to feel uncomfortable; he wished that he had acted on his first impulse and sent a telegram regretting his inability to keep the appointment.

"Anyhow," he answered, "I was never more astonished in my life. I need not tell you I had no suspicion she was at Lestocq's.

That is not my fault, and I went to see her the same evening."

"Then," asked Meriel, "may I congratulate you, Mr. Sheffield?"

"Upon my soul," cried Christopher, "there doesn't appear to be much reason for anything of that sort just now."

"You didn't go to ask Miss Wilmot to marry you?" she demanded.

Rising from his chair, he stepped towards Meriel, standing before her with his clenched hands resting on his hips.

"Do you know," he said with a short laugh, "it seems the rummiest thing in the world to be discussing this—this sort of thing with you."

"You didn't ask her to be your wife?" Meriel persisted.

"No," was the answer.

"Surely you were not banal enough to offer her money!" suggested Meriel.

"Oh well, it's true that I did——"

"How callous—how ordinary!" she murmured. "I am told that Miss Wilmot is of your own social standing; that she left her people and gave up everything for your sake. I suppose it's the fact that you swore you

would marry her if ever it became possible ? ” Meriel demanded.

He dropped his hands to his side and his wide shoulders drooped forward ; he lowered his eyes, and something in her tone prevented him from any attempt to turn her question lightly aside.

“ I—I am afraid it is,” he answered.

“ You said just now,” cried Meriel, “ that it seemed strange to discuss this miserable affair with me—I dare say it does. But then, you see, I have been dragged into it. I am going to be quite outrageously candid. I am going to speak to you as probably no other woman in London would do. My friend Lord Ronald Eckington has made a sort of—a sort of *protégée* of Miss Wilmot—— ”

“ Oh, I know all about Lord Ronald,” said Christopher, seizing the opportunity to hit back. “ I know why he became Mr. Lestocq.”

“ He has been telling me,” Meriel unblushingly continued, “ how anxious he is to see you do Miss Wilmot justice. I suppose,” said Meriel, “ those were quite happy years you spent with her abroad ? ”

“ Why—yes,” returned Christopher.

“ Then you brought her back to London,

where unfortunately I was introduced to you at the *Times* Bookshop by Mr. Osterby. I was foolish enough to feel interested in what you said about your work and to go to the private view at the Newbury Gallery; I allowed you to come to Grandison Street. Naturally," said Meriel, "I had no idea of the existence either of your wife or of Miss Wilmot until Lord Ronald told me. He believed she suspected you were neglecting her on my account. Is that the fact?" she asked.

"Well, yes, if you push me I suppose I must say it is," replied Christopher.

"You know, Mr. Sheffield," she said, with a wrinkled forehead, "honestly I can't blame myself. I have tried to search my heart—I dare say most women love admiration; I will make that concession, but really, you can scarcely pretend you met with much encouragement, now can you?"

"I shall not suggest that I met with any," he answered.

"It occurred to me after I had dismissed you," she admitted, "that perhaps I was laying myself open to misconception. You might imagine I was cutting you simply because I had learnt your wife was living.

The actual reason was simply that Lord Ronald suggested I might be keeping you away from the woman who was passing as your wife at Standerton. Then Mrs. Sheffield died—— I should like you to treat me as openly as I am treating you," added Meriel. "Tell me now! Were you egregious enough to dream that I could ever in any circumstances marry you?"

Again he was half tempted to turn aside her question with a jest, but Meriel seemed to have lifted the controversy to a zone in which flippancy would be unsuitable. Almost in spite of himself his estimate of Mrs. Latham was being altered. It was as if some one were doing for him what he was fond of doing for others concerning his own pictures. He enjoyed pointing out their inner meaning and significance, and was often rewarded by seeing the light of understanding come into the listener's face.

Having hitherto regarded Meriel as a butterfly, albeit a rare and remarkably beautiful specimen of a variety not very well known to him, he now began to realise the serious purpose which governed her. Peculiarly sensitive to every emotional suggestion, he felt

as if he had suddenly come into a more rarefied air.

"I suppose I was fool enough even for that," he confessed.

"It is necessary," said Meriel, "to keep on reminding myself of my absolute innocence so that I shall not feel odious. Of course," she continued, with her steady eyes on his face, "I perfectly understand the kind of man you are. How utterly mean——"

"Oh come," he remonstrated; "I know I've a good many faults, but whatever they may be, I've never accused myself of meanness."

"Naturally!" she cried. "You flatter yourself that all your faults are merely foibles—generous weaknesses, doing you credit rather than otherwise. But as a matter of prosaic fact," she continued, "you have acted in the basest and most despicable manner. You obtained what you wanted by a false pretence. You broke your word. You do not possess the most rudimentary sense of honour."

"I say, Mrs. Latham——"

"How I wish," she ruthlessly went on, "that I could make you see yourself as I see

you; as Lord Ronald sees you and Miss Elliston, everybody who knows what you have done. If I could open your eyes to your own character for just one fraction of a second you couldn't continue to live without going to Miss Wilmot and making the only amends in your power."

Christopher seemed to double up in the chair into which he had sunk. His back, usually so erect, was bowed as if he were an old man. His hands hung down between his knees, and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. For a few moments silence prevailed; then he made a poor effort to pull himself together.

"I—I fancy you have succeeded fairly well," he muttered; and, rising abruptly, Meriel came to his side, surprisingly resting a hand on his shoulder.

"I mean every word I have said," she exclaimed. "But if you see the error of your ways; if you will let me help you to get things out of the tangle, we are friends at once."

"Upon my soul, I should value your friendship," he returned with deep feeling in his voice. "You've tackled me as I was never

tackled before," he continued, "but I admit I deserved it."

"Well," said Meriel, walking back to her chair, "speak to me frankly."

"You're wrong in one way," he explained. "It's true I was fool enough to hope I might induce you to marry me, but that was practically done with some time ago. I was left to myself, and I had no peace. I saw I had treated Katherine abominably; I couldn't bear to think of her in London without money."

"In fact," cried Meriel, eagerly, "you are fond of her still. In spite of all that has happened you continue to love her. But if that is the case, why in the world didn't you ask her to marry you the last time you saw her?"

"I didn't meet with much encouragement," said Christopher, adding hastily, "I don't want to deceive you. The idea of asking her to marry me that evening didn't enter my head—but it might if she had dropped on me a little less heavily."

"What could you expect?" demanded Meriel. "As amends for—for everything, you admit you offered her money! Mr.

Sheffield, I think I know the sort of woman she is. Didn't she prove what she could do for love? With some of us it is rather different," said Meriel, with a sigh. "She asks for bread and you give her a stone, but go again without losing a moment; tell her you are longing to make her your wife as soon as possible; tell her that, and see how she will welcome you!"

"By Jove! I will," cried Christopher, and Meriel offered her hand.

Without another word he gripped it, then, making his way out of the hotel, walked along Piccadilly to the Criterion, where he drank two glasses of whisky and soda-water in rapid succession.

He wished it were possible to go to Dorchester Place immediately, but unfortunately he must wait several hours before the time came for Katherine to leave Brandenburg Street. On the whole, perhaps, it would be better to possess his soul in patience until after dinner. He would order an early meal and set forth in a taxicab as soon as he had finished.

CHAPTER XX

KATHERINE had finished her frugal meal at Dorchester Place; she had washed up the cup and saucer, the plates and knife and spoon, and put them away in the cupboard between the window and the fireplace. The room did not contain a very comfortable chair, but by sitting sideways and resting her book on its arm she made the best of existing circumstances.

It was an interesting book, and she was entirely lost to her immediate surroundings when there was a tap at the door and the untidy maid-of-all-work entered the room.

"It's the same swell what come before," she said.

Katherine sighed and frowned. If only Christopher would leave her alone! Of course he had come to bother her again about the allowance which would prove a sop to his own conscience. Still she thought it might

be better to let him be shown in, and this time she must do her best to convince him that it would be useless to continue such persecution.

Closing her book as the girl left the room, Katherine rose from her chair, and, standing, in front of the fireplace, assumed her most dignified demeanour. Dignity had never been her strongest point, perhaps, notwithstanding the charm of her effort to maintain it.

Christopher entered with a confident air which may have been due to a sense of righteousness. He felt quite impatient at last to do the proper thing. Walking round the table he stopped before her, holding out his hand.

"My dear little Kitty," he exclaimed, when she refrained from taking it, "aren't you going to say how do you do?"

"I told you never to come here again," she retorted.

"Ah well," said Christopher, letting his arm drop by his side, "I know I don't deserve anything better." She looked abruptly into his face, struck by the more genuine ring of his voice. "I hate to see you in this hole of a place," he added.

"It suits me quite nicely," she answered.

"Anyhow," he persisted, "we'll soon make a change—see if we don't. I'm not going to have any more of it, and that's the fact. I've come to take you away."

"You speak," she said, "as if I did not possess a will of my own."

"No, no, but you always made it yield to mine," he returned. "That's the good little sort you were. You haven't forgotten the ripping times we used to have together—so we will again, only for goodness' sake let us get out of this infernal slum as soon as we can."

"I—I don't understand what you mean," she cried, while the colour stole over her face.

"Come now," urged Christopher, drawing nearer, "suppose you get your things on at once. I've a taxi waiting a few doors round the corner."

For a moment she was almost too indignant to answer.

"Do you imagine," she demanded, "that you can put me down and take me up again as you like? You don't seem to have learnt to understand me very well during those years you talk about."

"It's you who don't understand, my

dear," said Christopher. "I ought to have explained to begin with, only I thought you would tumble to it. Don't you see, Kitty, I'm going to marry you."

His words took her completely by surprise. She had thought he was expressing merely a desire to renew the former conditions. In a way Christopher was flattered to witness the emotion which she could not restrain; it seemed to show how much he meant to her.

"Don't fret, little woman," he whispered, leaning over her shoulder. "That's all over and done with. No more bothers as long as you live if I can prevent them. I don't know the quickest way to do the trick, but take my word for it. We won't lose an hour. I'll see about the licence the first thing in the morning, so now get into your hat as soon as you can."

"I have not the least intention of going out," said Katherine, and he looked intensely disappointed.

"I see what you mean," he murmured. "Well, you must have your own way. You're to have your own way in everything. You would rather hang on here till the knot's tied."

"It never will be tied," said Katherine.

"But, my dear Kitty——"

"Chris," she exclaimed, "nothing in this world would ever induce me to marry you. Nothing!"

"I thought," he urged, "I was suggesting the very thing of all others you wanted."

"Yes, it was just what I wanted—once," she answered.

"So you do now!"

"No," she said. "I loved you then."

"Ah, you love me still," Christopher insisted. "Look here, Kitty——"

"It is of no use to talk about it," she cried wearily. "All the talking in the world won't make a scrap of difference. You know what I did—because I loved you. There was nothing I could not have put up with if only you had kept your word; but you didn't keep it; you shamefully broke it, and that was the end of everything between us. There can never by any possibility be another beginning. You have simply come back to me because Mrs. Latham has declined to have anything to do with you."

"I have never asked her," said Christopher.

"Kitty, I'm not going to make excuses. I

knew very well I was treating you like a beast. I suppose I had a devil in me, but anyhow I've got back my senses."

"You restored mine that afternoon at Standerton," answered Katherine. "I am not likely to lose them again. You can go your own way—only let me go mine. I think you owe me that."

"Kitty," urged Christopher, "I wish you would take a night to sleep over it. Upon my soul I'm anxious to make amends as far as I can. Even apart from the right and the wrong of it, there's nothing I want so much as to have you with me, and it would make a good deal of difference to you, you know."

"Oh yes, it would make a good deal of difference," she murmured, and he thought she was beginning to relent.

"When I look back," he continued, "I can't make out how I can have done such a caddish thing. You think I never had much respect for you, but you're wrong, dearest. I swear you're wrong. I don't suppose in the whole course of your life you ever did a shameful thing——"

"Ah yes, and I shall never forgive myself," she answered, silencing him awhile.

"I'm not sure I shall ever forgive *myself*," he began again. "Kitty, I know I'm an impulsive sort of chap, and if I talk till I'm blue in the face, you may not believe me, but only give me the chance and I'll do what a man can to wipe the slate. When once we are married I could write to your father. You could see him again. You could see your sister——"

"Don't try to tempt me, Chris," she said entreatingly.

"But you see I want to tempt you?" he persisted. "That's what I'm out for. I want to give you a rattling good time. We would run over to Paris and then come back and take a house somewhere. I've been thinking of Kensington; a house with a studio. I've not been doing a stroke of work. I'm no use without you, and that's the truth. Come, Kitty, think what you're doing and treat me better than I treated you."

"Chris, it's too late," she answered. "I could never live with you again. Can't you understand? You are offering just what I should love if only I felt capable of going through with it. I couldn't," she added,

solemnly, "and if I had the choice I would sooner be dead."

He was convinced at last ; convinced that difficult as it might be to realise, she had incurred for him a personal distaste which rendered their reunion impossible. Christopher took away from Dorchester Place the impression that at the last Katherine felt something like pity for him, and certainly he felt very sorry for himself. Her quiet refusal plunged him into the deepest remorse, and although he may have been the man to recover rather quickly, his contrition was perfectly sincere at the moment.

Katherine could not have done anything to make him more desirous to win her back, but for once hope failed him and he honestly believed that she had passed out of his life. On the other hand, he could not for a moment imagine that Meriel Latham could ever re-enter it. To do Christopher Sheffield justice, he was never likely to think of Meriel in that way again ; but he longed at least for her good opinion, and wondered whether she would be expecting to hear the result of his mission to Dorchester Place.

During the next day or two, however, he

had not the heart to go to the Hotel d'Albert, and it was not until Friday that he seriously thought of paying Meriel a visit. He felt that it was due to himself to explain that he had done his utmost to make amends for the fault about which she had so vigorously reproached him.

Christopher arrived at the hotel at a very inconvenient time on Friday morning. Meriel had arranged to meet Wilfred Osterby at the railway station at a quarter to twelve, her motor-car was already at the door, and she was on the point of setting forth when Christopher's name was brought to her. At another time she would have refused to see him, but she felt eager to hear that his marriage was to become an accomplished fact, or, perhaps, even that it had already taken place.

"I really have not a moment to spare," she cried, offering her hand. "I am just off to Rookbury Saint Mary's—Lady Nerley's place, you know, only I felt so curious to hear the news."

"About as bad as it could be," said Christopher, and she noticed that he looked crestfallen.

"Didn't you go to see Miss Wilmot?" asked Meriel.

"She refused to have anything to do with me," was the answer. "I employed every argument I could think of—no use. She would sooner go on as she is; sooner put up with any mortal thing than marry me. Not that I wonder at it," Christopher continued. "She made me feel even more forcibly than you did what a beast I have been. She wasn't exactly indignant—not a bit excited, she simply couldn't put up with me."

"Well, I am sorry," said Meriel. "I wish I were not going away. Is that really half-past eleven?" she added, in consternation.

Christopher looked at his watch.

"Yes, half-past," he replied, and Meriel walked to the door.

"I shall not return till Monday afternoon," she said hurriedly. "You mustn't look back from the plough, you know. Miss Wilmot must be taken in hand. I shall never catch my train, and there isn't another for hours," she added, and ran out of the room, leaving Christopher to follow.

When he reached the street, Meriel's motor-car had already been driven away from the door, and he stood irresolute, not knowing quite what to do with himself.

CHAPTER XXI

KATHERINE did not see Ronald either on Friday or Saturday. For all she could tell he might not have been at Brandenburg Street, but on Monday both Miss Biddle and Miss Renshaw left at a few minutes past six, and there was no one to remonstrate when she lingered by her writing-table after putting on her hat.

A quarter of an hour later she was rewarded by Ronald's appearance on the scene, but instead of coming to her side he crossed the reception-room to Miss Biddle's table at the farther end.

"Is there anything I can do?" suggested Katherine, and for an instant their eyes met.

"Were you asked to stay?" said Ronald, in a tone such as he had never used to her before.

"N—no, I wasn't exactly asked," she faltered.

"Then why," he demanded, "are you here so late?"

"I thought," murmured Katherine, with a feeling of acute disappointment, "I might be able to show you the books as Miss Biddle had gone."

"Better to stick to your time," said Ronald, brusquely. "You are indoors quite long enough."

"You," she retorted, "seem never to go out."

She may not have intended to be coquettish, but she was wearing a new hat this afternoon. It had not cost many shillings, and she had trimmed it herself, but no doubt it was extremely becoming.

"I question whether this sort of life suits you," said Ronald.

"Oh, it suits me splendidly," she exclaimed. "I am quite happy here. I hope," added Katherine, "that Miss Biddle has not been complaining."

"No, but you must have heard we are moving——"

"Soon?" she asked.

"Directly people begin to go out of town and leave us a little leisure. Everything will

be on a different footing," he insisted. "I am afraid you must—you must be prepared for changes."

To Katherine this was the severest blow she had received since the afternoon Christopher left her at Standerton-on-Sea. A suspicion that she would be required to leave No. 11 Brandenburg Street had never occurred to her until now, when Ronald seemed to be going out of his way to prepare her mind. She saw that he looked embarrassed, and, in fact, Ronald felt relieved to see Osterby enter with a glance at Katherine such as he would have bestowed upon any nice-looking woman.

As she turned away, Ronald took Osterby to his sitting-room, without a word concerning her identity. It was impossible to tell whether or not Miss Elliston had been gossiping about Miss Wilmot, but in any case Ronald had no desire to discuss her with his present visitor.

"I've just left Van Notten," said Osterby. "He was one of the week-end party at Lady Nerley's. We travelled up together this afternoon. You won't catch me there again in a hurry—a little too rapid. Meriel," continued Osterby, "had arranged to meet me at the station on Friday morning. She had insisted

on engaging a compartment, but, naturally, that didn't prevent her from being behind time. Upon my word, I was never in such a hole—no other train for hours! Nothing would serve her turn but a special. The first time I ever travelled in one."

"Rather expensive," suggested Ronald.

"Yes, rather! But then every blessed thing about the Nerleys smells of money—even the way of getting to them. Jacobsen was there—ever seen Jacobsen?" asked Osterby.

"I have taken his photograph."

"Ah well, he is precisely what he looks. The man hasn't a single interest beyond lucre, and the only possible way to entertain him is to make an opportunity of winning or losing a little."

"Auction!" suggested Ronald.

"Yes, but the trouble was to find three others rash enough to make up a table. Lady Nerley brought Van Notten and Wilbraham along, but there wasn't a fourth to be got until Meriel volunteered. I tried to give her a hint, you know, but it was a wasted effort, and as luck would have it she cut in as Jacobsen's partner. There was soon a group

round the table. Meriel and Jacobsen were completely outclassed; the stakes went up and up till even Lady Nerley grew quite uncomfortable. Of course it didn't matter a scrap to Jacobsen, but Meriel can't afford that sort of thing, though I must say she didn't turn a hair."

"How much did she lose?" asked Ronald.

"Goodness only knows. I fancy Lady Nerley wanted to keep it dark. You never know where you are, and as likely as not one of her guests might do a little journalism. Anyhow," said Osterby, "they were at it again on Saturday—entirely Meriel's own doing. She insisted on having her revenge, though it was turning the other cheek with a vengeance. The same tale over again! I shouldn't be surprised if the expenses of her week-end ran into four figures what with the special and one thing and another."

After Osterby had gone, Ronald lighted another pipe, flung himself into a chair, crossed his legs and gazed up at the ceiling. Such anecdotes about Meriel jarred upon him. He wished to goodness she would not have any truck with these people, and it was hateful to picture her at a card-table with

those three hoary money hunters. He told himself, rather vaguely, that she was capable of better things, and, suddenly looking at his watch, rose from his chair, knocked out his pipe and rang the bell.

He had intended to dine at some restaurant, but telling Mrs. Jenkins to do the best she could, he went to his bedroom and hastily got into his evening clothes. It was nearly nine o'clock when he left Brandenburg Street, walking in the direction of the Hotel d'Albert, where one or two cars were standing before the door, amongst them Meriel's, although Ronald had no means of distinguishing it. It seemed unlikely that he should find her disengaged, and, indeed, on entering the building he met her coming towards the door, attended by two of the officials. The long dark cloak which she wore seemed to intensify the brilliance of her hair, and her face, which had struck Ronald as looking somewhat sad, lighted wonderfully as she recognised him.

"Why, Ronnie!" she cried, offering her hand, and he began to apologise.

He ought not to have come, he would cut away at once.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"Only to Mrs. Melbury's," she replied. "There is a big dance to-night, and a few of us were invited to dine first. I didn't feel quite like it after the journey, and when I telephoned I had to promise to be there by nine."

"You won't do that, anyhow," said Ronald. "It's past nine already."

"Is it really?" cried Meriel. "I hate to be unpunctual. I simply shan't go."

Turning abruptly she went towards the lift, into which he followed her, and on leaving it she led the way along a corridor to her smaller room. She switched on the light, and as he closed the door Meriel unclasped her cloak, throwing it carelessly on to a chair.

"Why do you laugh?" she demanded, for he seemed unable to restrain himself.

"You take one's breath away," he answered, as she stood before him in her low-necked light-coloured evening gown. "I feel rather like a boy at a pantomime when the good fairy suddenly throws off her disguise. It's too bad to spoil your evening," he added.

"I can't afford to waste an angel's visit," she exclaimed. "It's always something immensely important that brings you my way.

I only got back from Lady Nerley's at about six," said Meriel, sitting down on the enormous cushion in the middle of the room.

"Osterby has just been telling me you were all there," returned Ronald, significantly, and she looked up with her most cheerful expression.

"How solemn! How reproachful!" she murmured. "You really frighten me, Ronnie!"

"I wish to Heaven I could," he said.

"Of course Mr. Osterby has been gossiping again," cried Meriel. "So you are inconsistent enough to feel afraid I may waste my substance."

"Inconsistent!"

"Well, should you consider it such an immense misfortune?" she demanded.

"Your money isn't the only thing I am thinking of," said Ronald, and she screwed her mouth on one side, gnawing her nether lip, regarding him as it seemed with deep contemplation.

"Oh—it isn't?" she whispered.

"Look here, Meriel," he persisted, "these people are not quite good enough. I don't want to see you mixed up with Jacobsen and

Co. It's true that Osterby was deploring your losses. I dare say you think it's no concern of mine——”

“Don't be ridiculous,” she cried, and leaning forward on the cushion she drew up her knees, clasping her hands around them. “Ronnie!” she added, “suppose you and I were just—just eight years younger.”

He seemed suddenly to lose his head. He had not seen her dressed as she was this evening since her marriage, and for once Ronald felt inclined to let himself go regardless of consequences.

“I think I should pick you up in my arms!” he said, stepping nearer as he bent towards her.

“You couldn't. You're not strong enough!”

He held out his hands, and she still maintained her position on the cushion, smiling provocatively.

“You doubt your strength after all,” she returned.

“Yes, that's about right,” he admitted. “I doubt my strength.”

“Well, and after this supposititious lifting up in your arms, Ronnie!”

“ Oh—Gretna Green,” he exclaimed, with a frown.

“ By the bye,” murmured Meriel, “ I didn't send my car away. I suppose it is still waiting. A glorious night ! What should you say to a drive into the country for an hour or so ? ”

“ I should say ‘ no. ’ ”

Meriel unclasped her knees, and, leaning back, pointed at him with her right hand.

“ Cowardy, cowardy, custard ! ” she cried.

CHAPTER XXII

RONALD would at least have gone as far as to admit that discretion was the better part of valour. Already, indeed, he had acted a little indiscreetly, and if he wished, as unequivocally he did, to maintain his self-denying ordinance regarding Meriel Latham, nothing could be more idiotic than to thrust himself into such very acute danger.

“I really wanted to speak to you seriously,” she said, leaving the cushion and taking a chair. “If you had not turned up to-night I should have written to-morrow. I have been taking Mr. Sheffield in hand. He was here last Tuesday, and I talked to him—oh well, very plainly indeed. The result was that he went to Miss Wilmot the same evening and asked her to marry him.”

“Upon my word that was rather wonderful of you,” returned Ronald, and she flushed with gratification.

“Oh well, it was she who was wonderful,”

said Meriel. "She actually refused to be his wife. I only saw him for a few minutes just as I was off to Lady Nerley's on Friday—as it was he made me miss the train, but, according to his own admission, she refused him very emphatically."

"There can be only one explanation," suggested Ronald.

"What is that?"

"Miss Wilmot must have thought he was asking her against the grain; simply as a matter of duty."

"The strange thing is," Meriel insisted, "that he wasn't. On the whole, I don't know that I should associate duty and Mr. Sheffield very intimately, although I believe I made an impression. He is a sort of sensitive plant. I mean that he acts upon the slightest stimulus. I feel doubtful whether it would not have surpassed my power to influence him if there hadn't been a certain receptivity."

"Anyhow," exclaimed Ronald, "one thing is obvious. Katherine Wilmot must be brought to reason."

"I suppose," said Meriel, "that being a woman you thought she must be meek! But, you know, Ronnie, if you tread on a

worm it will turn, and now I scarcely know what to say to Mr. Sheffield the next time I see him."

"For goodness' sake keep him up to the scratch," urged Ronald.

"I don't fancy there will be much difficulty," was the answer. "Anyway I don't intend to lose sight of the man just yet. I have sent him an invitation to my fancy dress ball next Thursday. If you will only change your mind and come I shall be able to introduce you. I am beginning to be tremendously excited," she continued. "Actually I have persuaded Miss Elliston. I made her so curious that she couldn't hold out. So she will be able to tell you all about it. But, concerning Miss Wilmot!"

"Whatever happens she mustn't refuse——"

"To marry a man whom she never wishes to see again!" Meriel interrupted.

"If Sheffield is willing to set her right in the face of Mrs. Grundy he must be allowed to have his way."

"Do you intend by any chance to reason with Miss Wilmot?" suggested Meriel, with a smile.

"Upon my word, I scarcely know. I must think it over," said Ronald, holding out his hand.

"I wonder," she asked, as she took it, "whether you understand anything about yachts?"

"Have you forgotten my cutter at Cowes?" he returned.

"As if I ever could! How terribly frightened I felt the first time you took me for a sail. You know, Ronnie, mother never discovered I had gone. But I was thinking of something rather different from your cutter."

"Are you going to buy a yacht?" he demanded.

"Oh dear, no. Nothing so extravagant," said Meriel. "I shouldn't wonder if you thought me extravagant enough for anything, but really I am not. All this," she added, with a comprehensive wave of her hand, withdrawn from his for the purpose, "furnishes positive proof that I am nothing but a person of the most simple, commonplace tastes. You will understand later on."

"Meanwhile I confess I don't," said Ronald.

"I want," she explained, "to hire a nice,

roomy, steam yacht, with captain, crew and all found. I have made out a list of twenty guests, and if you like you shall be the twenty-first."

"I am afraid——"

"Of course, you are, Ronnie!"

"The fact is," he continued, "my directors—I believe that's the correct term—want me to go to New York to start the branch there, though I shall be busy for the next month or two getting into the new place here. But why in the world," he asked, "should you take this crowd in a steam yacht?"

"Oh—just a fancy, a whim, you know!"

"How long do you propose to be away?" he said.

"A month or six weeks—perhaps, two months. It—it depends on the time the money holds out."

"Good Lord!" cried Ronald, "you don't mean that you have been discreet enough to set aside a definite sum?"

"Bravo!" she returned. "You have exactly hit the mark. Oh, I can assure you there's a good deal of method in my madness. I could tell almost to a shilling how much I intend to spend."

"Your plans seem beautifully cut and dried," suggested Ronald, wondering at her sudden, vivid colour, for Meriel was not given to blushes.

"I—I suppose they are," she faltered.

"Still, you know, the best laid schemes of mice and men——"

"Oh, don't throw cold water over me!" she entreated.

On the walk back to Brandenburg Street Ronald's thoughts turned to Katherine, whom he had certainly snubbed an hour or so earlier in the evening, and to the madness of her refusal to become Mrs. Sheffield. Her marriage would prove an admirable solution of his own problem and, reaching his sitting-room, he sat up late considering the situation, at last making up his mind to speak to her on this somewhat delicate subject the following afternoon.

"I am afraid you will think," said Ronald, when the page brought her to the sitting-room at a few minutes past six on Tuesday, "that I am rather skilful at interfering with what doesn't concern me."

She looked unusually timorous this afternoon, and, in fact, the moment the boy told

her she was wanted by Mr. Lestocq, she feared lest she might be going to receive formal notice to leave. Still she mustered a smile as she raised her eyes to his face.

"Where should I be if you had not interfered?" she suggested.

"At home," was the answer. "By far the best place. However, I understand you have been offered an alternative."

"Who told you?" she cried in astonishment.

"Mrs. Latham."

"I felt certain she had something to do with it," said Katherine. "Christopher," she added rather bitterly, "seems to imagine that every one can change so very easily."

"On the contrary," Ronald retorted, "he assumed you would never change. He took your eternal constancy for granted, you know."

"But I have changed—I have become an entirely different woman. That I should ever dream of marrying Christopher is out of the question. All I wish is to be allowed to go along just as I am."

"I warned you yesterday that might be impossible," said Ronald, with a coldness

which she did not imagine he was deliberately assuming for the occasion.

"You are trying to frighten me into it," she answered reproachfully. "But you wouldn't if—if you knew."

"I know so well," he insisted with more determination than she had ever heard in his voice till now, "that your proper place is with your father—in default of a husband; that when you leave here, even in opposition to your own wishes, I shall——"

"Lord Ronald," she entreated, "you don't mean that it is absolutely certain I am to leave?"

"Absolutely certain," he replied, feeling like a brute.

"What have I done?" she asked.

"Of course you have done nothing——"

"Then why are you so eager to get rid of me?"

"You must excuse my going into that," he answered. "But I have made up my mind. I am going to take the law into my own hands. I shall approach Mr. Wilmot."

"Lord Ronald, you mustn't—please, you mustn't," she cried excitedly.

"If you only behave sensibly it will not

be necessary," he urged, but Katherine shook her head.

"You are asking me the only thing in the wide world I would not do to please you," she said.

He perceived that she was not to be shaken, and without another word opened the door. With her head bowed she went downstairs to the lobby where her hat and coat were kept, and slowly put them on, then set forth to walk home to Dorchester Place, feeling almost that she had lost her best friend.

CHAPTER XXIII

As soon as Miss Elliston had allowed Meriel to persuade her to go to the fancy dress ball at the Hotel d'Albert she began to take an agonising interest in her dress for the occasion. The chief consideration was that she must on no account make herself ridiculous. At her age, she insisted, there was something absurd in the idea of being present at such an entertainment in any circumstances, but she trusted that for once it might be possible to touch pitch without being defiled.

Notwithstanding her acceptance of the invitation in due form Lavinia continued to regard the affair with the profoundest disapproval, not, however, unmingled with curiosity.

She took the precaution to consult everybody with whom she came into contact, but in the multitude of counsellors there appeared to be remarkably little wisdom. Lavinia

certainly had no desire to wear too youthful a costume, but still she was affronted at the suggestion that she should go as Juliet's nurse ; this seeming the opposite extreme. She also resented the notion of appearing as Queen Elizabeth, and was at her wits' end until Meriel suggested that she should come in a domino.

"If you leave it to me," she said, "I will see to everything. You can come in any dress you please and put on the domino in my room. You must have a mask, you know, and if you like you can wear it the whole evening."

"At least, it would hide my blushes at such folly," retorted Miss Elliston, and finally the idea was adopted. Meriel insisted on sending the motor-car to fetch her from Dover Street, and as Lavinia told Ronald when he came to Manning's Hotel on Saturday afternoon in response to her urgent summons, the scene reminded her of fairyland.

"Then you admit you enjoyed the evening after all," he suggested.

"No, I don't think I did," said Aunt Lavinia. "It is true the dresses were magnificent, and Meriel had certainly brought

together some of the loveliest women! Of course she outshone them all, and there was not a man in the room to compare with Mr. Sheffield, although I have no notion whom he was supposed to represent. But 'handsome is as handsome does,' and I could only think of that poor girl. I hear that she has actually refused to marry the man. Such wicked nonsense. I assure you I intend to talk to her."

"I wish to goodness you would," said Ronald, and he stayed half an hour longer, causing Miss Elliston intense gratification by explaining that whatever happened Katherine would be leaving No. 11 Brandenburg Street before many days.

After he had gone Lavinia set her wits to work. Her object was to do the best that could be done for Katherine without much consideration for Christopher Sheffield, although, to do him justice, he seemed to be, thanks no doubt to Meriel, in a contrite mood. Before Miss Elliston closed her eyes that night she had formulated her scheme, and as its result she ardently hoped that Miss Wilmot's position would be immensely improved.

Meantime Katherine was living in a condition of dread. On Saturday she would not have been surprised on receiving her week's salary from Miss Biddle to be told she need not come again. Although nothing of the kind occurred, she spent a miserable Sunday, wondering whether Ronald could possibly mean what he said about approaching her father. Between them they would be certain to succeed in bending her to their will. They would force her to return to Hampstead, and they might even try to drive her back to Christopher.

She went to her work on Monday in such a disturbed state of mind that she made a good many mistakes and incurred Miss Biddle's displeasure. It proved impossible to muster the ingratiating smile of encouragement for would-be sitters, and on the whole it was her most unfortunate day at Brandenburg Street. She felt thankful when the hour came to leave, and on following Miss Renshaw out into the street she saw a taxicab waiting before the door.

“Katherine! Katherine!”

She recognised Miss Elliston's voice, saw Miss Elliston's long thin face at the window.

"Jump in, my dear, the fare is mounting up," exclaimed Lavinia. "You are coming to dine with me, so don't lose time standing there."

It was difficult to refuse, so after a word of explanation to Miss Renshaw, Katherine took her seat in the cab. She was not certain she wished to refuse, for Miss Elliston had been very kind and sympathetic during that bad time at Standerton. As they were driven towards Dover Street no explanation of this act of kidnapping was vouchsafed; Miss Elliston made a perfunctory inquiry after her nephew, and, during the meal, which was served within a few minutes of their arrival at Manning's Hotel, the conversation turned to Meriel's fancy dress ball. Lavinia described some of the dresses of which she the most strongly disapproved, and it was not until the table was cleared that her hand was shown.

"My dear," she began, "I really think you must be the most idiotic person in the world. I am not going to beat about the bush; that is never my way, as you know. You must have guessed I didn't bring you here this evening without some definite purpose. I hear that Mr. Sheffield has at last asked you to marry him."

"Ye—es," murmured Katherine.

"And that you have actually been mad enough to refuse! I could scarcely believe my ears. It sounded really too incredible."

"After the way he treated me," exclaimed Katherine, summoning all her courage.

"For some mysterious purpose," said Miss Elliston, "women are so constituted that they nine times out of ten forgive a husband's ill behaviour. Experience has proved that again and again."

"But Christopher is not my husband!" urged Katherine.

"How extremely inconsistent after all your protestations. You declared that you regarded yourself as his wife. I simply adopt your own standpoint. Anyhow, I understand you are on the point of leaving Brandenburg Street," suggested Lavinia.

"Did Lord Ronald tell you?" asked Katherine, dismayed at this confirmation of his intention.

"Of course, he told me. Who else could have known! He is quite determined to take the matter out of your hands and into his own. He means to see that you return to your proper sphere. You must know that

when once Mr. Wilmot is informed of your circumstances he will accept no denial. Whether you like it or not he will insist on your returning to his roof. Now," Miss Elliston continued, "look on this picture and on this. Just try to imagine yourself at home in the present circumstances. I am not going to mince matters. You would be an object of shame—condemnation—contempt."

"Oh, I know—I know," faltered Katherine.

"Your former friends would decline to have anything to do with you. You would be avoided by everybody. I don't suppose even your own sister would invite you to her house. Your situation would prove intolerable."

For a moment Katherine covered her face with her hands. She was sitting close to the window, and pushed back her chair lest she should be seen by people in the opposite houses. Miss Elliston seemed to be treating her very cruelly.

"Yet you wish to drive me back!" she cried. "Do you imagine I haven't thought of it dozens of times? If I had not I should never have appealed to Lord Ronald; if I had not seen the hatefulness of it all."

"Ah," said Lavinia with a triumphant air, "but now let me show you the other picture. Suppose you were married to Mr. Sheffield."

"I never, never shall be," returned Katherine.

"Suppose you were," Miss Elliston persisted. "In comparison you would have a quite satisfactory entry. No one would know the precise date of your wedding. You would be Mrs. Christopher Sheffield. Your friends would welcome you warmly. Your father would not feel ashamed of you. You could hold up your head with the best, and the absence of a distinguished husband would not be extraordinary enough to be commented upon."

Katherine during the last few moments had been gazing at Miss Elliston with widely open eyes.

"I—I am afraid I don't understand," she said with a sense of bewilderment.

"Well, I am sure I have done my best to speak plainly," was the answer.

"But—don't you see, if I were to marry Christopher—I never shall, but granting for the sake of argument that I did, there would be not the least question of going back to

father. Lord Ronald only suggested the one thing to—to force me into the other.”

“My dear,” said Miss Elliston, “there can be no question of ‘force.’ Thank God, we live in a free country. You must act as you please, only I am hoping you will prove a reasonable being. I was assuming that you would not consent to return to Mr. Sheffield—at present, at any rate.”

“Never!” answered Katherine. “Never, as long as I live.”

“We admit that,” Lavinia continued. “Make your mind perfectly easy. But suppose you were to become Mr. Sheffield’s wife and say ‘good-bye’ to your husband at the church door. You would go direct to your father’s house. Now, consider how vastly different your position would be!”

Lowering her eyes Katherine pressed her hands against her throat. Her heart began to beat very quickly. The situation might have its advantages, although the notion could not have occurred to her own unassisted imagination. As Mrs. Sheffield she would certainly be able to look the world more boldly in the face, and, after all, what should she stand to lose? There could never be any

question of marriage to any other man ; while the protection of Christopher's name would be invaluable.

Katherine slowly shook her head, however.

" Has—has Christopher said he would be willing ? " she demanded.

" At present he has not been sounded," Miss Elliston was forced to confess. " What was the use," she added, " until I learned your own views ? "

" He would never dream of such a thing," murmured Katherine.

" That remains to be proved," was the answer. " What I want to know is whether you will agree if he should. That is as far as the matter can be carried this evening."

" It can never be carried any farther," said Katherine. " I know Christopher so well. I ought to know him. Although he is so impulsively generous and open-handed he never does anything which really seems to interfere with his own comfort, and this would, you know."

" Perhaps," suggested Miss Elliston, " you are afraid that he would appear to agree to the conditions and afterwards, when you were once his wife, try to go back on them ! "

"Oh, I am perfectly certain!"

"He might conceivably try," said Lavinia, "but the day you re-entered Mr. Wilmot's house there would be somebody suitable to look after you. My dear, you are one of those women who can never be quite trusted to look after themselves. Now, what do you say?" demanded Miss Elliston.

"It is waste of words to say anything. Christopher would never consent."

"To perform an act of elementary justice!" cried Miss Elliston.

"Ah yes, but he is free to please himself. It would be an immense sacrifice. He has offered to marry me and I have refused. He might turn his back on me almost with a clear conscience after that. It would ruin his life."

"Better than ruining yours," Miss Elliston snapped out. "I wish you would give me a plain answer. Will you marry the man on the understanding that he is to leave you the instant the ceremony is over, that he is never to molest you again as long as you live?"

Although Katherine still seemed to hesitate, Miss Elliston's arguments had not been without effect. It was still almost inconceivable that Christopher would consent to make her

his wife on such conditions, but if he did, perhaps, nothing better from her own point of view could now be hoped for. For what seemed a quite unnecessarily long time, Katherine still remained silent, but at last she raised a pair of pathetic eyes to Lavinia's face.

"Ye—es," she said. "If Christopher perfectly understands. But, oh," she added the next instant, "it is too much to expect."

CHAPTER XXIV

THERE was now nothing farther to be done until Christopher Sheffield had been sounded—by Meriel, if only she could be induced to take the matter in hand. If she refused, of course, Miss Elliston would be compelled to deal with him herself, but she much preferred to leave the matter to Meriel.

Meriel appeared to possess considerable influence over Mr. Sheffield, and this was certainly the time to exert it. Still Miss Elliston could not count on her acquiescence, and when she reached the Hotel d'Albert the following morning and entered on an account of what had passed in Dover Street Meriel's manner was by no means encouraging.

"It seems to me you are going to ask a great deal of Mr. Sheffield," she insisted. "Most men, with the exception of Wilfred Osterby, think of marrying and founding a family sooner or later, but you suggest that

this one is to cut himself off from such a possibility. I am afraid I cannot help you," added Meriel.

Miss Elliston, however, would not accept defeat so easily. She continued to urge the advantage to Katherine, and the amends which Christopher owed to her, and, finding Meriel still obdurate, Lavinia was not above a little diplomacy.

"It is extremely desirable," she said, "to remove Katherine from Ronald's sphere of influence."

"Why, he proposes to do that for himself by sending her back to her own people," cried Meriel. "Oh, I am not in the slightest degree afraid for Ronnie!"

"That is all very well," was the reply, "but you cannot help seeing the danger of the present situation. Imagine Ronald or any man of his age with Katherine looking up at him in that pleading, pitiful way of hers—the most pathetic eyes I have ever seen."

After some farther insistence Meriel began to give way. After all, she supposed that Lavinia was right to some extent, and that such a marriage would make an enormous difference to Katherine's situation. It seemed

a pity that Miss Wilmot was not more amenable, so that these two might make a fresh beginning together. Meriel could not help thinking that she should be putting Christopher to a rather severe test, and, in fact, she felt far from certain that he would prove capable of the necessary self-sacrifice.

"Well, I suppose I must give in," she said at last. "Though I don't in the least like the task. Anyhow, I will telegraph to Mr. Sheffield, and ask him to come here directly after luncheon—I have an appointment at half-past three."

"My dear," exclaimed Miss Elliston rising from her chair with a sigh of extreme relief, "you quite understand. It would be worse than useless to let the man imagine that Katherine will ever change her mind."

"Oh yes, I quite appreciate that," said Meriel, and the moment Lavinia had gone, she wrote the message which was at once despatched to Christopher at the hotel in Craven Street.

When he arrived at a quarter to three Meriel received him with almost more than her customary self-possessed frankness, asking him to sit down and plunging immediately into

an account of Miss Elliston's interview with Katherine Wilmot.

"She is leaving Lestocq's," Meriel continued. "Lord Ronald, who considers himself in a manner responsible for her welfare, has made up his mind to communicate with Mr. Wilmot. The result can scarcely be uncertain."

"Uncertain!" cried Christopher. "Oh, Lord, no! Poor little Kitty! A fine old time she will have. Of course," he continued, "Wilmot is quite all right, and I've never seen very much of him, but you know the type. So infernally respectable; a sort of moral iceberg. She would never be able to stick it, she wouldn't upon my word."

"Now comes the supreme test," said Meriel. "When you asked Miss Wilmot to marry you the other day you were really not making the slightest sacrifice. At last you have an opportunity. It rests with you to determine whether she shall return—well, with all the honours of war."

"If it rested with me," returned Christopher, "I fancy you know what would happen."

"Ah, but that I am told is entirely out of the question," said Meriel.

"You mean that she will never have anything to do with me," he answered dismally.

"She is willing to become your wife——"

"Good Heavens!" cried Christopher, "why didn't you tell me that at first!"

"Provided she may say 'good-bye' to you at the door of the church," Meriel continued, "and go direct to her father's house."

His face fell ludicrously, and he looked almost as completely broken down as on the last occasion. With his neck bent, his eyes fixed gloomily on the carpet, he remained for some time without speaking.

"Miss Elliston's idea is," urged Meriel, "that you should do the only thing in your power to make Miss Wilmot's situation more tolerable. You would marry her and still allow her to go her own way as long as she lives."

Rising from his chair he took a few slow paces about the room, suddenly coming to a standstill before Meriel.

"I'll tell you straight," he said. "I don't half like the notion. You must give me time to think it over, anyhow."

"It is just a question," Meriel insisted, "whether you are capable of an act of pure self-denial."

"I'm not a man who usually looks very long before he leaps," said Christopher. "I know my own weakness, you see. I usually look afterwards, but in this case——"

"You must fix your thoughts on Miss Wilmot," Meriel interrupted. "You cannot deny that you broke faith with her. You killed the love she bore you. I say nothing of what happened four years ago; but you left her in the lurch, and for that you ought to make amends."

Seeing that he was on the balance so that a little might turn him either way, Meriel spared no effort to put a little more weight into the scale. Waxing quite eloquent she spoke as she had never spoken in her life before, and at last, Christopher, scarcely able to trust himself to answer, so forcibly had she appealed to his feelings, held out his hand.

"You mean to try to do your duty!" she urged, as if she did not notice it.

"Upon my soul I do," he muttered.

"You cannot help seeing it is your duty," she insisted. "You will succeed," she added, grasping his hand, but she could not help telling herself that, in the circumstances, it was a counsel of perfection. For he had

offered to make Katherine his wife and she had refused, while yet Meriel, roused by her own exhortation, hoped that he would give the lie to his record by taking this generous step.

He walked away from the Hotel d'Albert in an unprecedented mood. No miracle had been performed, but although he remained the same reckless, impulsive person as ever, he was strongly under the spell of Meriel Latham's influence. He not only experienced a desire to stand well in her eyes, but also, wonderful to relate, to follow the stream of tendency which makes for righteousness.

After all, the issue lay between himself and Katherine. He soon came to the conclusion that he must see her again before he could come to a determination. He must make one farther effort to induce her to relent, and impetuous, as usual, he wished it were possible to see Katherine without loss of time, even considering the feasibility of taking her by surprise at Brandenburg Street. But on the whole it appeared wiser to possess his soul in patience until the evening, when he reached Dorchester Place before seven o'clock.

CHAPTER XXV

CHRISTOPHER, having rung the bell, was told by the untidy maid-of-all-work, who always took such a flattering interest in him, that Miss Wilmot had not come home. She was expected every minute, however, and would he walk upstairs and sit down? He said he would not, and going back to the pavement, walked backwards and forwards, listening to an organ a few doors off, until presently he saw Katherine and Miss Renshaw stop at the corner of the street.

As usual, although they had been together for more than half an hour, there seemed to be something pressing to say before they separated, but as Katherine turned from her companion she came almost to a standstill on recognising Christopher. Her first impulse was to retrace her steps, until she realised that this visit might prove entirely different from any which he had troubled her with before. Perhaps it was due to Miss Elliston's

intervention, and in that case it was out of the question to refuse to hear what he might have to say.

As she walked on towards her lodgings he came to meet her half-way, and she noticed the unwonted gravity of his demeanour, which appeared to lack some of his characteristic exuberance and self-assertion.

"Ah, Kitty," he exclaimed, turning to walk by her side, "I want you to give me a few minutes. I promise not to keep you very long. A ripping evening, if you would sooner talk out of doors. Lord! what a time since I was at Primrose Hill! What do you say?"

"I—I think we may as well go in," she answered, going up the steps, and taking her latchkey from the small chain bag which hung from her wrist. She led the way upstairs to the second floor, and entered her sitting-room, walking at once to the windows. "I don't know why these people always insist on keeping the room shut up all day," she cried, in the ordinary, cheerful tone which he remembered well. The present seemed to be the first occasion on which they had met since their parting at Standerton-on-Sea without some resentful overture on her side.

Hastening to open the window while she drew back, taking off her gloves by the table, Christopher turned to face her again.

"Look here, Kitty," he cried, "I've come for the last time to see whether you can give me another chance. I know how infernally badly I've treated you, and no man could be more sorry. I hear you're leaving Lestocq's——"

"I—I am going home," she answered.

"You'll never be able to stick it," he urged. "You know what people are. It'll be too much against the grain."

Resting a hand holding her gloves on the table, she sat down with an air of more intimate familiarity.

"It seems that I can't help myself," she said. "Lord Ronald is going to write to father."

"What business is it of Eckington's?" demanded Christopher.

"He has been immensely kind to me," she explained. "He stood my friend when—when there was no one else."

"Oh, damn it, Kitty, you make me feel I don't know how!" muttered Christopher.

"That appears to give him a sort of right,"

she continued, "though with all my heart I wish I could have stayed at Brandenburg Street. But Lord Ronald won't let me; he will communicate with father, and I suppose I shall have to go home whether I like it or not."

Christopher planted his fists on the table, leaning across it towards her:

"Marry me instead," he whispered with the greatest eagerness, and Katherine raised her eyes encouragingly, expecting for the moment to hear the astounding assurance that he had fallen in with Miss Elliston's suggestion. "Marry me and let us get away together at once," he disappointingly added, and she shook her head with an air of intense determination.

"I have told you already," she answered. "What is the good of going over and over the same thing again? It is absolutely out of the question."

He stood erect at once.

"I'm sorry, Kitty!"

For a few minutes there was perfect silence save the piano organ which had moved on to the corner of the street. Since Katherine had found time to consider Miss Elliston's

proposal, she was more and more convinced of its advantages. Not that she could really believe that Christopher would be capable of such a self-denying ordinance.

"Look here, Kitty," he said at last. "I am anxious to do the best that's possible for you. I know you must think I've done about the worst. I took you away from your people——"

"No, I have never really blamed you for that," she returned. "I was a free agent. I was glad," she added, as the vivid colour overspread her face, "to go. The one of us was to blame as much as the other. It was what happened afterwards, when your wife died."

"And you don't think you can ever overlook that," he asked.

"Chris, don't you understand," she said; "it isn't anything to do with what I think; it is what I feel. I can't reason myself back to what—what I was a few months ago. The day you refused to keep your promise I honestly believe something was killed in me. It will never come to life again, never!"

"But, Kitty, if we came together again, don't you see that in time—by and bye——"

"No," she answered. "If I loved you—but I don't, and without love all the forms and ceremonies would count as nothing to me."

Again he remained silent for a few long moments, and then Christopher put back his shoulders, and pulled down his waistcoat.

"Anyhow," he exclaimed, "as you're bent on going back to Hampstead, you must go as my wife."

She looked up eagerly into his face with an expression of inquiry on her own.

"Oh, you need not be in the least afraid," he said, rather bitterly perhaps. "It has been put to me quite clearly. There's no room for misunderstanding. You take my name for your own protection—that is all. I shall never attempt to interfere with you. You've only to say the word and I'll set things in train. I fancy it will take about three weeks. You don't like the notion even of that," added Christopher, as she brushed her hand across her eyes.

"If you do really understand—if you quite mean what you say!" she murmured.

"Oh yes, I mean it—every word, as Heaven is my witness." It was impossible

to keep her thoughts from the night when he had similarly appealed before. "I know what you're thinking," he continued hastily. "I've been a selfish sort of chap, Kitty, and I suppose there are a few things a man will stick at to get what I wanted then. But the Lord knows I've nothing to look forward to this time. Upon my soul I'm only thinking of what's best for you."

His voice had the ring of truth, and she felt there would be something paltry in herself if she did not believe him. Nothing, of course, could call her love back to life again, but there could be few things worse than to repulse a sincere penitent. Although it was difficult to imagine Christopher in the *rôle*, she became convinced in spite of herself.

"I—I believe that," she cried cordially. "It's immensely good of you, Chris."

"Good—oh, Lord!" he said. "Anyhow, I may take it you will marry me as soon as things can be fixed up. Is that right, Kitty?"

"Ye—es," she answered in little above a whisper.

He walked round the table to her side, stopping by her chair, and holding out his hand.

“ Shake on it, Kitty,” he suggested, and after a momentary hesitation she took it. Having gazed intently down into her face for a while, he turned abruptly towards the door : “ I’m only just beginning to see the confounded fool I’ve been,” he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXVI

AFTER Christopher had gone, Katherine still sat by the table without making any attempt to prepare her evening meal. Rising at last she went to the adjoining room to take off her hat and coat, then, returning, opened the cupboard and set a match to the spirit stove. As she had half a rolled tongue left in a glass mould there was nothing to do but boil some water and make the tea.

She did not open her book as usual this evening, but frequently left off eating to think of what had passed during the recent momentous interview, of what awaited her in the near future. After half an hour had gone by, her chief interest lay in Christopher and the immense change which must have taken place before he could offer to make her his wife on Miss Elliston's conditions.

It appeared certain that he stood to gain nothing, unless he had formed the deliberate

intention to play her false, and this Katherine could not believe. In any event, he should not be allowed to prevail, but if love had become impossible between them, it seemed that he had earned the friendship to which in a manner she felt he had been readmitted when she took his hand.

She lay awake some hours that night, and the next morning took a motor 'bus the whole way to the corner of Brandenburg Street, wondering whether Ronald had heard of the fresh development. It seemed probable that he, Miss Elliston and Mrs. Latham, had elected themselves into a committee to deal with her "case," although she did not resent such interference so deeply as some women might have done. She did not possess a large share of pride, while yet it was difficult not to feel some resentment against Mrs. Latham. If she had never cared for Christopher, the fact remained that she was the cause of his defection, but now he was, surely, doing his utmost to turn over a new leaf.

Katherine was not much surprised that the page asked her to go to Mr. Lestocq's room at two o'clock, when Ronald held out his hand and cordially congratulated her. It

was evident that Christopher had not lost any time in enlightening Mrs. Latham or Miss Elliston, who had passed the news on.

"You—you think I am doing right," said Katherine, a little timorously.

"Why who could doubt it?"

Ronald had returned to his original, more kindly, tone. He no longer spoke coldly, but then, of course, he was getting his own way.

"Nothing could be better all round," he continued. "Now the question is whether I shall write to Mr. Wilmot or go and see him?"

"Neither," said Katherine.

"Of course, if you prefer to tackle your father yourself——"

"Oh no," she answered.

"I understood it was an essential condition that you should go home," said Ronald hastily.

"Ye—es," murmured Katherine.

"Then surely you ought to prepare the way?"

"If I did," she explained, "father would want to interfere. He is that sort of man. He would insist on being present at the wedding. There would be unpleasant scenes between him and Christopher. What is the

use of—of raking up the past? I should hate his hearing a word until—until afterwards. My wedding," she continued, with a blush, "is to take place in about three weeks' time. The moment after leaving the church I shall get into a taxi for Hampstead. And, Lord Ronald," she said, looking up entreatingly, "I should like to stay here until I am compelled to leave."

"As long as you please," he answered.

"Only you seemed so extraordinarily anxious to get rid of me!" said Katherine, reproachfully.

"Anyhow," he cried with a laugh, "I feel extraordinarily pleased at this development. I congratulate you without the least reservation."

During the next few days she, perhaps a little incongruously, dwelt frequently on the wedding ceremony, supposing that Christopher would let her know the actual date and wishing she had a more suitable frock for the occasion . . . not white silk or satin and orange blossoms or anything of that kind, but still something a little more suitable than she should be able to muster.

Although Katherine had seen Ronald once

or twice since he offered his "congratulations," he seemed to have drawn into his shell again. She deplored that subtle something in his manner which made it vastly different from what it used to be at Standerton-on-Sea, or during their first conferences in London.

She was a flower which could flourish only in sunshine. Her sympathy, her gratitude, her affection were easily aroused and as easily benumbed. There was a rift in the lute which had been so harmonious; something jarring in her relations with Ronald, while, on the other hand, she could not cease to marvel at Christopher's self-abnegation. His capacity for sacrifice had been quite unsuspected, and as if to find some warrant for it in her previous experiences Katherine began to look back over the years they had spent together, remembering innumerable acts of kindness; good days when they were all the world to each other. Gradually the lamentable lapse after his wife's death shaped as something abnormal, something exceptional, by which it were grossly unfair to judge his whole career.

Nature, in Katherine's case, abhorred a vacuum. She was bound to have an idol of some kind, whatever its feet might be made

of, and in default of anything better she could still, surreptitiously, have played with a doll. She almost wondered that she had not received another visit from Miss Elliston, who had, however, written a few cordial lines of congratulation and encouragement.

Lavinia had asked Ronald to come to Manning's Hotel on Sunday afternoon when Meriel also was present. Just before their arrival Wilfred Osterby had looked in, but only, as he at once began to explain, for a few minutes.

"The fact is," he cried, shaking hands with Meriel, "I was telling Miss Elliston I had come on a begging expedition. 'The better the day the better the deed,' you know. The Duchess of Perborough (Mr. Osterby obviously enjoyed the association) is interested in the fund that's being raised for the rebuilding of Saint Sebastian's Hospital. We're getting up a play, and somehow or other we must raise fifteen thousand pounds. As you've turned up so conveniently, suppose you shout first, Meriel!"

"Oh, well, if five guineas are of any use——"

"Dear me, yes. Your turn next, Ronald!"

"Stick me down for three," was the answer.

"I am afraid I must have strength of mind enough to refuse," exclaimed Miss Elliston, and when Osterby had gone she turned rather apologetically to Meriel: "I can't get Katherine out of my mind," she explained. "She has not much money, and she must hate the prospect of returning home without a rag to her back. Besides, I don't like the idea of leaving her to herself just now, and I thought of inviting her to stay here until the wedding."

"Miss Elliston, you're a perfect dear," cried Meriel, putting her arm round Lavinia's neck.

"A splendid suggestion," said Ronald, and so it was arranged that Miss Elliston should call at Brandenburg Street at one o'clock on Monday and speak to Katherine in Mr. Lestocq's private room.

When Meriel said "good-bye" Ronald accompanied her downstairs and out to the street, where she began to talk about the steam yacht.

"If you can spare time to come in for a few minutes," she added, as they drew near

to Piccadilly, "I will show you some photographs I have had from a man at Cowes."

They went up in the lift together, and on entering the smaller of her two rooms Meriel at once sank down on to the enormous cushion, telling Ronald where to look for the envelope containing the photographs. She insisted that he could find space to sit down by her side, and presently showed him a list of guests, twenty in number, whereupon he was surprised that he did not recognise any of the names.

"Oh well," explained Meriel, in an apologetic tone, "it's a sort of collection of what you might call 'poor relations.'"

"Whose?" he asked.

"Goodness knows, but they must be somebody's. People who don't usually get a chance of anything of this kind, you understand."

"What put the idea into your head?" said Ronald.

"How can I tell you?" she murmured, with a shrug. "Anyhow, I think I shall go to Cowes to-morrow, and if you like to come in on Wednesday evening, I can tell you what I have decided."

"Shall you be alone?" he asked.

"I—I have no one coming all the week," she answered.

He smiled, as he held out his hand.

"Beginning to draw in your horns," he suggested.

"Oh, I am growing so sick of it all," she answered.

"There is nothing to prevent you from turning it up when you like," said Ronald.

"Just what I have been telling myself," cried Meriel, who did not seem to be quite in her usual high spirits this afternoon.

"You might have been expected to know it already!"

"The idea occurred to me at Miss Elliston's," she said, rising from the cushion. "Well, I shall see, Ronnie. I wish you were going to take me to the Abbey again!"

He laughed, and then looked grave as he withdrew his hand. He seemed to be on the point of offering to do what she proposed, and then to think better of it.

"Oh well, good-bye!" she cried, and, sitting down again as he left the room, she rested her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees. Her eyes were fixed on the flowers in the

fireplace when suddenly the door was flung violently open and, turning in astonishment, she saw Ronald on the threshold.

“ I say, Meriel,” he exclaimed, “ suppose we go !”

CHAPTER XXVII

IF Katherine had not wanted as much money as she could obtain it is probable that she would have left No. 11 Brandenburg Street at once, instead of asking permission to stay until the eve of her wedding. During the past few days she seemed to have lost interest in her work, and on Monday morning she felt bored to death.

Relief overcame even astonishment when Miss Elliston entered the reception-room at one o'clock and, leading the way to Ronald's quarters, forthwith invited her to come to Manning's Hotel the same evening and stay until she became Mrs. Sheffield.

"I am sure you are not required here," said Lavinia, "and your thoughts must be somewhere else. I want you to let me advance you some money; we will go shopping together, and it will be far better for everybody."

Katherine would have assented without a moment's hesitation but that she wished to remain at Dorchester Place until she heard from Christopher. If she removed it would be necessary to send him her address, whereas she shrank from taking any sort of initiative. Had he deliberately planned to keep himself in her mind, he could not have gone more successfully to work.

The last few days had been an anticlimax. Even in her peculiar circumstances she could not look forward without a little excitement. A wedding—any wedding—was an interesting affair, and yet she did not know its time, place, or anything about it. Perhaps Christopher had repented and she should never hear from him again—a surprisingly alarming prospect!

Before Miss Elliston left Brandenburg Street a compromise was effected, Katherine promising to say "good-bye" to Lestocq's on Wednesday and to forsake her lodgings the following morning.

Christopher, however, was not making the least attempt to keep her in suspense. He was, in fact, thinking less of his own advantage than he had done for many years, yet

probably reminding himself occasionally that he was doing a fine thing. He had not begun to hope that Katherine would relent ; he was going to sacrifice his own future, and accordingly, albeit without much enthusiasm, he obtained the licence, saw the Vicar of Saint Matthew's, and ordered a new suit of clothes, because that was his way of marking any unusual event.

He felt extremely restless and, scarcely knowing how to kill time on the day after Miss Elliston's visit to Brandenburg Street, he thought he would take the Tube to Hampstead and look at his former studio. He walked up Heath Street, so familiar in the days before he took Katherine away ; recognising names over shop doors, and one or two faces.

His studio, with the three or four rooms attached, would not suit everybody, and he hoped that it might be unoccupied so that he might look over it. There were, to his disappointment, curtains in the windows and a baby-carriage outside the door ; Christopher walked towards the White Stone Pond, where some dogs were yelping just as he had heard them scores of times, and a pair of

horses were dragging a coal waggon through the water this hot afternoon.

A relief to turn out of the glaring sunshine along a shady road on the left, and presently he stopped outside a high brick wall. Crossing the road to obtain a better view of the house which had been the home of Katherine's childhood, he looked up at the windows. That used to be her room on the left.

Suddenly he realised that there was a forlorn, deserted air about the place, and, going to the iron gate, pushed it open and saw an old man placidly mowing the lawn. Christopher learnt that he had been Mr. Wilmot's gardener the last three years, and at present was acting as caretaker.

Mr. Wilmot had been ordered away on a sea voyage for his health six months ago, but, growing worse, had been left behind in a nursing home at some port in Australia; the gardener did not know its name. Mr. Wilmot was, however, unlikely to return to Blackthorn House, and the furniture had, only a few weeks ago, been removed to a depository.

So that Katherine's plans were rendered nugatory. It was certain that she could not

find refuge with her father, and perhaps the circumstances might be turned to profitable account. Now, once more, Christopher's motives became entirely self-regarding. He determined to keep his own counsel. She should not hear a word from him of her father's absence; she was not likely to be told by any one else.

As soon as she left Saint Matthew's Church she would be driven to Blackthorn House to find it empty. She was unlikely to turn to her brother or her sister. She would have no home, little money, and there would be Christopher—her husband—waiting. He would take care to reach the spot first, and in her extremity she might turn to him for succour!

At eight o'clock that evening he reached Dorchester Place, and, for the only time since the parting at Standerton-on-Sea, was received without reluctance. While Katherine was actually pleased to see Christopher, he, playing a calculated part, did not even offer his hand, speaking in the most business-like tone and explaining his arrangements:

"Wednesday week, if that will be convenient," he suggested.

"Yes—quite," murmured Katherine.

"Would two o'clock suit you?"

"If that will do for you," she answered.

"Anything—anything," cried Christopher.

"I've only one desire in the world, Kitty: to do everything to please you."

"Chris, you are wonderfully good," she said, and he broke into a scornful laugh.

"I'm a beast—an infernal beast, that's what I am, Kitty," he exclaimed, feeling half tempted to tell the truth, as he took his hat from the table.

"Oh, you must hear how kind Miss Elliston has been," Katherine explained. "I am going to Manning's Hotel to-morrow morning—in Dover Street, you know. I am to stay there until—until I return to Hampstead. I thought it better to tell you. What are you going to do afterwards?" she asked shyly.

"I'm off to Paris," he answered. "Once there I may be able to settle down to work again. I'm doing simply nothing in London."

"Are you going to take a studio?" she said.

"Ah, you remember our little flat in the Rue Stassart?" he cried.

"The duckiest little flat," returned Katherine, with a sigh.

"I've written to Brissot to see whether it's possible to get in. Well, good-bye, Kitty," he added; "I suppose our next meeting will be at Saint Matthew's."

"At two o'clock on Wednesday week!"

"You will find me waiting for you," said Christopher, and as he was on the point of turning towards the door Katherine held out her hand. Five minutes later the room seemed so gloomy that she wished she had arranged to go to Dover Street that evening. To pass away the time she went to her bedroom, thinking rather wistfully about the flat in the Rue Stassart, while she collected her possessions.

She liked the life in Paris far better than in London, and although, perhaps, Christopher had grown a little colder during the last few months in France, on the whole Katherine had been wonderfully happy there. Her stock of clothes having to some degree increased since she left the bungalow, overflowed the handbag, and she would have to make a parcel, though she could not imagine what the people at the hotel would think!

Katherine had come to the conclusion that she need not hesitate to allow Miss Elliston to become her banker. Money would be no object when she returned to Hampstead, and the sum she borrowed her father would at once repay.

Whatever happened she should soon have the means to get out of debt. Whatever happened! What did she wish to happen? Katherine was not the first woman in the world to be a little inconsistent.

When Wednesday afternoon at No. 11 Brandenburg Street at last seemed as if it would really pass, she found herself looking forward to saying "farewell" to Ronald, with far less concern than a week or so ago she could have believed possible. Of course, she must see him before she left, but although Katherine waited about at luncheon time he did not enter the reception-room. When six o'clock struck she parted from Miss Renshaw with real regret, and five minutes later, being asked by Miss Biddle whether she was not going, she mustered courage, for this occasion only, to say she was waiting to speak to Mr. Lestocq.

There was still no sign of him, however,

and at last Miss Biddle retired to the lobby to put on her hat. She shook hands with Katherine, who, going in search of the page, sent him with a message to Ronald.

"I—I could not go away without thanking you," faltered Katherine, when he joined her five minutes later. "I shall never, as long as I live, forget what you have done for me."

"That's quite all right," he returned, "and I wish you all manner of luck."

"Is there such a thing?" asked Katherine.

"Oh dear, yes, call it what you will, there's that incalculable element in human affairs which turns up now and then to make or mar us. I hope it may go in your favour."

"And in yours," said Katherine quietly.

She had been inexpressibly pleased to come to Brandenburg Street, and had lamented the prospect of going away; yet now she looked for the last time round the room, and went so cheerfully that Ronald wondered whether Aunt Lavinia had not after all hit upon a mare's nest; whether he had not gone out of his way to snub that poor little woman unnecessarily.

CHAPTER XXVIII

RONALD had promised to go to the Hotel d'Albert that Wednesday evening to hear the result of Meriel's visit to Cowes, where in all probability she had chartered a steam yacht which would let her in for enormous expense.

He sat smoking in his own room after Katherine's departure, inspecting proofs from the works at Pinner, until the housekeeper entered to prepare the table for dinner. Rising hastily Ronald went to change his clothes, then lingered so long over his meal that it was half-past nine before he reached Piccadilly. With Meriel he found Osterby, who was in the act of folding up a cheque :

" I have come on a dunning expedition," he explained, taking Ronald's hand with a laugh. " This is for the Duchess of Perborough's Fund, you know. By the bye," Osterby added, " we've had a wonderful stroke of luck—twelve thousand pounds, no less ! "

"Who gave you that?" asked Ronald.

"Goodness only knows—and the solicitor who sent the draft. Some anonymous benefactor. Anyhow, the duchess is delighted."

"How paltry it makes my—my mite appear," cried Meriel, and Ronald could not help thinking that she spoke with an unusual ring of excitement in her voice. She regarded him askant, lowering her eyes the next instant, and when Osterby insisted that he must go, besought him with curious eagerness to stay, almost as if she dreaded being left alone with Ronald.

"Well, when did you get back?" he asked.

"Get back!" she murmured, lifting her eyebrows.

"From Cowes?" he suggested.

"Oh, I—I didn't go after all," answered Meriel.

"Have you changed your mind about the yacht?" said Ronald.

"I am thinking it over. If you imagine I never go in for that sort of thing you make an immense mistake, Ronnie."

"You certainly create the impression that you are beginning to—to draw in a bit," he

exclaimed, and she appeared to hesitate for a moment.

"Anyhow," she said, "I have sold my car. You see, I really hadn't half enough use for it."

"How much?" asked Ronald.

"Inquisitive person!" she returned. "Captain Wentworth gave me two hundred and fifty pounds."

"What did you pay in the first place?"

"Nine hundred and something," said Meriel, and Ronald insisted that she ought to have got more. He could not induce her to say whether she had entirely given up the notion of a cruise, and, on the whole, left the Hotel d'Albert with the impression that there was something strange about Meriel this evening.

Two days later she received a visit from Christopher, anxious to hear whether she had seen Miss Elliston since Katherine's removal to Manning's Hotel. As Mrs. Latham could give him no information, Christopher began to haunt the neighbourhood of Dover Street, but it was not until Wednesday afternoon, a week before the wedding, that his perseverance was rewarded.

Offering her hand in a perfectly friendly way, Katherine explained that she was going to have a frock fitted, and permitted him to walk as far as the dressmaker's. He seemed to have little to say because he had so much, but suddenly she asked whether he had heard from Monsieur Brisson.

"Oh ah, yes; it's all right about the flat," was the answer. "Ripping to be there again, won't it, Kitty? You remember all the men! Le Gros, Fontaine, and that queer fish, Chevalier! The sonnets to your eyebrows—just as well I wasn't of a jealous disposition. You will be able to picture me there!"

"You mean when I am at Hampstead," she faltered, coming to a standstill outside the dressmaker's.

"Ah yes," answered Christopher, guiltily, although he had not the least intention to open her eyes.

He should take care to reach Blackthorn House before she arrived, keeping safely in the background until she came forth from the walled garden perplexed to know which way to turn. Then Christopher meant to step forward and plead his cause as never before. Would she lend a favourable ear? He would

have attained a new energy of position. She would be his wife. It was true that he had promised to let her go her own way, and in no case was it possible to compel her to come his. Still, circumstances were working on his behalf, and he had reached a condition in which he was prepared to employ any means to gain his end.

On returning to Craven Street he found a note from Mrs. Latham, asking him to be at the Hotel d'Albert at half-past eleven on Thursday morning. Although he did not like to disobey the summons, Christopher set forth with considerable diffidence. He felt chary of meeting Meriel's straight, confident gaze; once before she had accused him of meanness, and was he not acting meanly now in keeping his own counsel about Mr. Wilmot?

When Christopher entered the smaller sitting-room Meriel was in the act of shaking hands with her maid.

"No, there's nothing else, Hickson," she said. "And I hope you will be very happy."

Murmuring a few words of thanks the maid left the room, and Meriel held out her hand to Christopher.

"Are you making a change?" he asked.

"Oh well, yes, I suppose I am," was the answer. "I am going away——"

"Leaving here for good?" he suggested.

"That is why I asked you to come this morning," she explained. "You may not have forgotten how—how plainly I spoke to you on one occasion."

"I got nothing worse than I deserved," said Christopher.

"Anyhow," continued Meriel, "I felt that I should like to register my opinion—whatever it may be worth—that you have made the most excellent finish. When you asked Miss Wilmot to be your wife in the first place, I scarcely did you justice. I believed you were merely pleasing yourself."

"Well, you were perfectly right there!" said Christopher.

"But now," she cried, "the case is altogether different. You have no selfish purpose to serve. You are doing right for right's sake. I thought, perhaps, you might be feeling a—a little low down about it all," she said. "As I shall not see you again for a very long time, I wanted to assure you of the respect which has been compelled from us all. I feel that what I am saying may sound

stilted—a little patronising,” cried Meriel. “Indeed, I don’t mean it in that way. Oh, you know what I mean,” she added, and wondered why his hands fell from his hips to his sides, why he could not meet her eyes unless it were because it is often more embarrassing to be praised than blamed. Then a suspicion occurred to her :

“ You are not feeling any temptation to—to look back ? ” she suggested.

“ Why no,” answered Christopher quietly. “ I don’t often hesitate when I’ve once made up my mind.”

“ Fortunate person ! ” she murmured. “ How I envy you ! ”

“ Do you ? ” he asked, with a rather forced smile.

“ Oh, it’s dreadful—dreadful ! ” she said, holding out her hand.

CHAPTER XXIX

THERE was a great surprise in store for Ronald on Friday afternoon. Having finished work for the day he had lighted a pipe and opened the window when, at half-past six, the one-armed commissionaire announced :

“ Mr. Osterby.”

Now it was extremely unusual for Osterby to show the slightest sign of excitement, yet before he crossed the threshold he exclaimed :

“ When did you see Meriel Latham last ? ”

“ On Wednesday week—you were present, you remember. Why do you ask ? ” said Ronald.

“ My dear fellow, she has left the Hotel d'Albert. No one knows where she has gone. I hoped you might be able to tell me. She went away at half-past three yesterday afternoon. She settled up on Wednesday night, dismissed her maid yesterday morning, left yesterday afternoon—in a taxi with just a

couple of trunks. The hotel people are keeping the rest until they hear."

"That," suggested Ronald, "is certain to be in the course of a day or so."

"Look here, Ronald," cried Osterby, "I can't help feeling a bit anxious. Her stock-broker happens to be a pal of mine—Vignolles, you know. Since I am her trustee under Mrs. Fitzgerald's will, he went out of his way to give me a hint. She has been unloading at a tremendous rate, and, upon my word, she can't have very much left."

"Oh well, of course, she has been rather extravagant," said Ronald, "but it would take longer to get rid of fifty thousand pounds."

"I'm afraid she gambles," was the answer. "I can't make her out. She seemed to take the plunge so suddenly. She had been going along quite steadily since old Latham's death, then she might have been bitten by a tarantula and unable to keep still. The move to the Hotel d'Albert was the beginning of it all, and I'm wondering whether this can be the end."

"A figure of speech," suggested Ronald. "You don't mean it literally."

"I can't swear she has come to her last pound," said Osterby. "But according to Vignolles there have been two particularly heavy sales: one for twelve thousand pounds last week; the other for fifteen thousand a little while ago. That accounts roughly for half her capital, and doesn't it seem to point to gambling in some form or other? It's my firm opinion that one of two things has happened. Either she has cleared herself out and gone off to consider her position, or she has taken the little she has left to Monte for a final plunge."

"Have you told Aunt Lavinia?" demanded Ronald.

"Not yet," said Osterby, and as soon as he left Brandenburg Street Ronald rang up Manning's Hotel, explaining that Meriel had left Piccadilly, and asking whether Miss Elliston knew her address. Having succeeded in thoroughly alarming his aunt, Ronald went to the Hotel d'Albert and obtained an interview with the manager—a very important personage indeed. But nothing farther could be learnt, and experiencing a strong desire to discuss the matter, Ronald walked to Dover Street, where he

found Miss Elliston examining, in conjunction with Katherine, various articles over which she hastily threw the newspaper on his entrance.

After a few casual words Katherine left the room, whereupon Miss Elliston began to express her astonishment at Meriel's fresh vagary with various exclamations.

"But after all," she concluded, "there is really not the least reason for alarm. We shall be certain to hear where she is before many days have passed."

"How is Miss Wilmot getting along?" asked Ronald rather perfunctorily.

"Her position is no doubt an exceptional one," was the answer, "but anybody quite so self-contained I have never known."

"She has never struck me in that way," suggested Ronald.

"I assure you," Miss Elliston insisted, "that she will sit for hours and never utter a word unless she is spoken to. I suppose she still dreads the prospect of facing her father."

"Anyhow," urged Ronald, "she will get through much better than if she were not going home as Sheffield's wife."

"Oh, she admits that," said Lavinia. "I

never cease to feel thankful the idea occurred to me. She never mentions Mr. Sheffield's name, but still she seems to enjoy buying odds and ends for the occasion, almost as if she were going to be married in the ordinary way."

"I suppose you won't bet," returned Ronald, and Miss Elliston energetically shook her head, "but I would lay odds that it won't be very long before Sheffield and his wife set up housekeeping together again."

"But, my dear Ronald," cried Lavinia, "what in the world has happened to alter her determination?"

"Nothing," he admitted. "But then, you know, nothing may be necessary. The original cause of a quarrel always has a tendency to be forgotten, so that in course of time it seems to turn on something entirely different. Fortunately people become reconciled in the most illogical, inconsequential ways. In the present case, we know that Sheffield is willing, and, as for Katherine, who can tell what may be passing in her head?"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Miss Elliston, "you never mean to insinuate that while she sits by the window with her forehead full of wrinkles she is considering whether she

shall take Mr. Sheffield back into favour again?"

"Oh well, not just at once, perhaps," said Ronald, "but after all he's the same man whom she used to be fond of."

"He certainly went a strange way to show his fondness for her," was the reply.

"Yes, of course, but we are fearfully and wonderfully made, Aunt Lavinia. It's proverbial that memory plays strange tricks now and then."

"There are things no woman could ever forget!"

"Very few if she believes a man really wants her," said Ronald.

"Well," cried Miss Elliston, "it is easy to talk, but you must excuse my saying it is a pity you don't practice what you preach. Now there is Meriel——"

"At the moment we don't know where," he answered, "and we were talking about Katherine. She may possibly find things a little dull at Hampstead. She may begin to hanker after a house of her own, and she has only to say the word. She is just the sort of woman to have a passion for children—however, I know you won't bet," added

Ronald with a smile, although his face grew grave enough as he walked slowly back to No. 11 Brandenburg Street that Friday night.

On the way he stopped at a restaurant to obtain a belated meal, and on reaching his own room sat up for some time, smoking pipe after pipe long after the one-armed commissioner had gone to bed. Even when he at last lay down he found it impossible to sleep, thinking of Meriel, of her experiences as far as he knew them, since her departure from Grandison Street, and wondering whether her flight could have any real significance.

Concerning her physical wellbeing he felt no shadow of anxiety. There was no fear of that kind, perhaps there was no fear of any kind, but hope rather, although hope on which he scarcely dared to dwell. As the ceiling was becoming lighter he fell into a doze, but before long opened his eyes again, sitting up in bed, curiously wide awake.

It seemed almost as if some subliminal process had been going on in his mind while he slept. A sudden inspiration had come upon him. His hopes had gained strength, and he was able to understand much which had been dark before.

Meriel's conduct appeared beautifully simple and clear from the day she surprisingly announced her intention to leave Grandison Street—shortly after he had repulsed her suggestion to buy some shares in his company. Of course, she could have obtained as many as she wanted if she had taken the trouble to set her stockbroker to work, but now Ronald came to the conclusion that her request had been of the nature of a "feeler," to confirm some already existing suspicion.

He remembered that he had been provoked by Meriel to express himself more plainly, more brutally, perhaps, than he had done hitherto. He told her that if he were starving and were offered a penny of Archibald's money to buy bread he would sooner die than accept it!

Well, the words sounded melodramatic and "high falutin'" this early morning with the antiseptic sunlight falling into his room, but he had meant them at the time; he had meant them honestly, though he ought to have kept them to himself.

He could never dream of asking Meriel to marry him while she was polluted by the possession of that fifty thousand pounds; the

price for which she had been sold to Latham in his senility. He tried to check his thoughts from falling back into the old groove, but the fact was that he could never become capable of considering that transaction as a man of the world.

Now, however, according to Osterby, Archibald's money had been dissipated! According to Osterby, Meriel had denuded herself of it. After all it was only a theory, and it still required to be tested. But it seemed to account for many phenomena, including Meriel's vagaries and extravagancies. Of course, it was possible that she had indulged in high play, but Ronald could not for an instant believe anything of the kind. He certainly had little desire to believe it. He preferred to account for her extravagance in a manner as outrageous as itself.

With such notions in his mind nothing could be more hopeless than to attempt to go to sleep again. Tumbling into the cold bath which stood at the foot of his bed, he lost no time in getting on his clothes, in making his way downstairs and out of the house. It was long since he had gone abroad so early, but, turning in the direction of the Green Park, he

soon reached Hyde Park Corner, thence to the Serpentine and Kensington Palace, hastening his steps to keep pace with his thoughts, and when once his face was towards Brandenburg Street again, walking still faster in the hope that there might be a letter from Meriel awaiting him.

The commissionaire had not yet taken the letters out of the box on the front door, and Ronald stood on the threshold looking eagerly through the budget addressed to "Mr. Lestocq"; but there was nothing from Meriel. In spite of his early exercise he had little inclination for breakfast, and still less for work. The day being Saturday, however, he would be free at one o'clock, and his impulse was to set forth in search if only he held the faintest clue to her whereabouts.

It was tantalising to think that in all probability she had not gone very far, especially if she were as short of money as Osterby believed. Her destination was most likely one of the south coast watering-places, for Ronald remembered her love of the sea, and that in earlier days they had spent hours together close to the water's edge.

She used to have a peculiar fondness for

walking by the tumbling waves, and he could recollect various conversations full of veiled hints of love. As it was, he could only await the time when it should please her to communicate with him, directly or indirectly, and if he were to make a plunge after her haphazard he might only lose time in the end—the last thing he desired. He longed to learn the truth; to know whether he was merely deluding himself, or that Meriel could in fact have made this sacrifice for love of him. Never had he been more deeply convinced of his own unworthiness than this Saturday morning; for he realised that he had been incapable all these years of an equally efficacious sacrifice for her.

CHAPTER XXX

ON Sunday morning Miss Elliston had a happy thought. She suggested that she should take Katherine to Saint Matthew's Church, where the wedding ceremony was to be performed on Wednesday. The only objection was that, perhaps, Christopher might be there, but Katherine did not seem to think it very probable, and they set forth in good time. The congregation being small, there was no difficulty in getting a seat, and during the service Katherine could not refrain from picturing herself at the altar rails with Christopher.

She looked with particular interest at the vicar, although on the way home Miss Elliston insisted that most likely the youthful curate would officiate. When Lavinia proposed going to church again in the evening, however, Katherine seemed disinclined.

"I should so much prefer to stay at home

if you really don't mind," she said, and Miss Elliston tried to look as if she did not.

"My dear," she answered, resting a hand on her guest's shoulder, for she had become quite caressing as the fateful day drew nearer, "of course you must do as you please, but I certainly shall not leave you alone."

"Oh, but why not?" demanded Katherine. "I should love to be alone. You know what I mean," she added hastily, Lavinia being easily wounded. "I seem to have so much to think about."

"I should dearly like to know what does go on in your mind," was the answer, but Katherine only shook her head with a rather pathetic smile, and a few minutes later Lavinia went upstairs to put on her hat.

There were moments when she could not help wondering what chance Ronald would have stood of winning his bet! For her own part Miss Elliston preferred to believe that her fellow creatures were more reasonable beings than he would allow. She liked people to act from comprehensible motives. It was easy enough to understand Katherine's conduct in refusing to marry Christopher Sheffield after the way he had treated her; it was easy

also to see why she changed her mind when that important stipulation was made.

What Lavinia could not imagine was the possibility of a change of face, since nothing had occurred to account for it. She would doubtless have experienced a shock if it had been in her power to witness from her pew what was taking place in the private sitting-room at Manning's Hotel. It would have astonished her even to hear (while the psalms were being chanted) the servant announce "Mr. Sheffield," to see the flush of excitement on Katherine's face as she rose to receive him.

Christopher had lived in torment since his visit of farewell to the Hotel d'Albert on Thursday morning. Meriel's encomium had awakened the most humiliating sensations; her righteous enthusiasm proved as infectious as a zymotic disease, and his efforts to shake it off worked him almost into a fever. After many tergiversations he had made up his mind to live up to Mrs. Latham's estimate, and the chief remaining difficulty was to succeed in finding Katherine alone.

He thought that Miss Elliston would be certain to go to church on Sunday evening, and from his knowledge of Katherine,

that she might conceivably stay at home. Christopher determined to keep watch in Dover Street, and, having seen Lavinia come forth alone, he allowed a decent interval and entered the hotel. On the way upstairs to the sitting-room he felt well-nigh confident that the wedding would be postponed. In the first place, the confession which his self-respect (stimulated by Mrs. Latham) compelled him to make would re-awaken Katherine's distrust. Knowing that he had deceived her until the eleventh hour, she might think he was not to be trusted to leave her alone in the future. Moreover, the situation presented other difficulties. He did not imagine she would consent to accept the means of support at his hands, whereas Miss Elliston could not be expected to entertain her much longer.

When Katherine learnt that Mr. Wilmot was at the antipodes and that the house at Hampstead was empty, she would at least wish to reconsider her position, so that even if she were still willing to become his wife she would scarcely commit herself until she had somewhere to go on leaving the church.

He was obviously labouring under unwonted emotion, as they stood confronting

each other, and the servant shut the door. Then, a little timorously, Katherine held out her hand, but instead of taking it Christopher flung his arms out with a gesture of despair.

"Kitty," he cried, "I've been living in hell the last few days; I have, upon my soul."

"Why, what is the matter?" she faltered.

"You can't imagine what sort of brute I am," he continued. "I'm not going to offer the least excuse. I made up my mind in cold blood. I meant to let you marry me——"

She drew in her breath quickly and her face, flushed a moment ago, now grew white.

"Aren't we—aren't we going to be married?" she murmured.

"Wait till you've heard," answered Christopher. "I was going to take an infernal, low-down advantage of you. Not at first—not when you said you would be my wife. Your welfare was all I thought of that day, and the way I could best make amends. But I wanted you back, Kitty. How I could ever have dreamed of letting you go—well, I've given up speculating about that. I'm no good without you, and never shall be. I wanted you back, and I fancied I saw a

chance—a poor chance, perhaps, but still I couldn't help counting on it. You see, Kitty, I took it into my head to go to Hampstead—just to have a look at the studio, and, being close by, I thought I might as well walk past your old house. Well, I found it empty——”

“Empty!” she exclaimed.

“There was only a caretaker there.”

“What—what has become of father?” she asked anxiously.

“He was ordered to take a sea voyage for his health,” Christopher explained; “but instead of doing him good, I suppose it made him worse; anyhow, he was left behind in a nursing home—somewhere in Australia, the man couldn't tell me the name of the place.”

Katherine sat down, and for a few moments Christopher remained silent, seeing that her thoughts were with Mr. Wilmot. Absorbed by his own interests, he had scarcely realised the effect of his announcement. Inconsistently enough she began to question him concerning the nature of her father's illness, until Christopher impetuously interrupted her.

“Kitty,” he said, leaning eagerly forward,

"I was going to take advantage of you. I meant to let you marry me on Wednesday under the impression that there was a home waiting for you. I made up my mind to go straight from the church to Hampstead, and get there before you. When you found the house empty I hoped I might be able to persuade you—oh, hang it all, you can guess what I hoped," he added. "I can tell you I've gone through a deuce of a struggle, but now it's out at last."

After a short silence, Katherine slowly raised her eyes to his face.

"I'm immensely glad you told me," she faltered.

"Well, I suppose I'm glad, too, in a way," he answered with a shrug. "Anyhow I didn't seem able to help myself, somehow. Kitty, I want to go straight. Yes, I'm glad it's off my chest. If you can make arrangements to go somewhere, we can be married just the same on Wednesday. You know there's no question of money. By Jove! you wouldn't believe how I've turned this way and that," he added. "One moment I made up my mind to tell you, the next to hold my tongue."

“ If you had,” she exclaimed, “ if you had left me to find out about father afterwards, I—I don’t think I should ever have been able to forgive you. Oh, Chris,” she added, as he gripped her wrists the next instant, “ you are hurting me ! ”

CHAPTER XXXI

CHRISTOPHER withdrew his hands from her wrists and, going down on one knee, planted them on her shoulders.

“Kitty, for God’s sake don’t tantalise me,” he cried. “Upon my soul I’m fed up with that sort of thing. Tell me if it’s possible you’re going to take me back after all?”

Miss Elliston, settling herself in the corner of her pew to listen to the text would have considered the next development supremely ridiculous. There was no beating about the bush, no farther explanation between those two stumblers on the face of the earth. Perhaps Christopher read assent in Katherine’s eyes, but, in any case, she lay in his arms the same moment, and her next words after a few incoherences on his part certainly would have struck Lavinia as irrelevant.

“How idiotic I shall look!” murmured Katherine.

“Ah, my dearest, but it doesn’t matter

how you look," he protested, "though you're always ripping if it comes to that."

"But, Miss Elliston—what in the world will she think of me after all that—that has happened?"

"Think of what's going to happen—good Lord! I shall lose my senses for joy!" said Christopher. "Besides," he added, after a little reflection, "Miss Elliston need not know. No one need know. We can part outside the church door just the same——"

"Oh, but——"

"It will be all right," he continued impetuously. "You will get into a taxi and tell the man to drive to Hampstead. As soon as you're round the corner you will order him to Victoria instead."

"But I—I thought you had an objection to deceit, Chris," Katherine expostulated.

"Oh well, I'm not a prig, anyhow," he urged. "You needn't be afraid I shall ever humbug you again as long as I live. You'll tell the fellow to drive to Victoria, and never fear you won't find me there! We'll take the first train to Dover or Folkestone—it doesn't matter which, and by Thursday we shall be in Paris—the Rue Stassart again, Kitty!"

To this proposal she offered no insuperable obstacle, and, in fact, she felt that she could never face Miss Elliston or Ronald with the confession of this right-about face. She began nervously to urge Christopher to leave the hotel much sooner than he wished lest Lavinia should return from church and find him in her sitting-room.

"I suppose," he said, "there's not much chance of seeing you to-morrow!"

"Not until Wednesday, Chris!"

"You might meet me somewhere——"

"Better not," she insisted, opening the door. "Miss Elliston always wants to know where I am going."

"Well, then, Saint Matthew's at two," he grumbled, as she accompanied him stealthily down to the street door. Before it was opened he crushed her in his arms again, and now Katherine warned herself to dissemble. She was able the more easily to meet Lavinia with a grave face, however, because of the slight reaction which set in as soon as Christopher had left the hotel.

As long as he was present she had experienced no misgiving after the critical word had once been spoken; but, left alone, she

was haunted by the shadow of former determinations, by the faintest of shadows, but still some of her enthusiasm deserted her.

"I ought not to have gone this evening," said Lavinia, after her return. "You look as if you have been worrying. Sunday is the worst evening in the week for painful reminiscences."

Katherine looked more solemn than ever, dreading discovery; she went to bed early, and shed a few tears, she scarcely knew why, on her pillow. But on Monday morning she opened her eyes with a sense of exaltation, telling herself that she ought not to have changed so unreasonably, although the fact remained that she had. A few weeks ago she had shrunk at the mere suggestion of rejoining Christopher. True, he had displayed unexpected virtue, but that was not the explanation. She did not know precisely what it was.

"Ah, you look brighter this morning!" said Miss Elliston at breakfast. "Now, Katherine, I have been thinking. 'It is never too late to mend.' There is still time to write to your father. If you don't send your address or the name of the church he can't

possibly interfere, and he certainly ought to be warned that you are going home."

In spite of Katherine's vehement protests the subject was discussed at intervals all that day and the next, but on Tuesday afternoon Miss Elliston gave way.

"I suppose you must do as you please," she exclaimed, "but how extremely inconvenient if Mr. Wilmot should be out of town, as he easily might be at this time of year. What should you do?"

"I could go to some hotel," murmured Katherine.

"Indeed you would do nothing of the sort," Miss Elliston insisted. "You would come back to me. Please understand that."

Katherine's answer was to fling her arms round Miss Elliston's neck, but still she kept her own counsel. She felt very grateful, very affectionate, yet quite unable to admit that she had altered her mind.

Never was a bride more delighted to see the sun shine on her wedding day. Rising early on Wednesday morning she drew up her blind and looked out at the window, feeling profoundly thankful that her alarms and

excursions were at last going to end—in the only satisfactory manner.

“Now, my dear,” said Miss Elliston, “you must try to keep up your spirits. In the circumstances it can’t fail to prove a trying experience, but be brave, Katherine, be brave!”

In excellent time a taxicab was driven to the door, and Katherine’s new trunk and her old handbag were put by the side of the chauffeur.

“You are sure you will have enough money,” suggested Miss Elliston, at the latest moment.

“Oh yes, plenty,” answered Katherine. “And I have made a note of what I have borrowed. Dear Miss Elliston,” she added, “I shall never forget what I can never attempt to repay.”

“Well, well,” said Lavinia with a sniff, and taking Katherine’s arm she went downstairs. “I shall tell the man exactly what he has to do,” she added, at the door of the hotel, and crossing the pavement she spoke to the cabman: “You know Saint Matthew’s Church——”

“Middleton Street,” was the reply.

"You will take us there and wait until we come out again," said Lavinia. "Then you will drive this young lady to Blackthorn House, Hampstead Heath. You had better explain the way, Katherine."

"You go to the White Stone Pond," faltered Katherine, flushing quite painfully, "and turn to your left."

"I'll find it right enough," said the man, and Miss Elliston entered the taxicab, followed by the bride. As they drew near to the church Lavinia grasped her hand.

"Courage, my dear, courage," she whispered, and when the cab came to a standstill she saw Christopher at the door, his arms akimbo, dressed so that no one could conceivably mistake him for anything in the world but a bridegroom. There was a flower in his buttonhole, a smile on his face, as he stepped forward to help Miss Elliston to the pavement.

"How extremely inappropriate!" she thought, for although he had behaved atrociously he looked exuberantly happy, and dramatic justice was, in Lavinia's opinion, certainly not being done.

The interior of the church, however, was

depressing enough for anything, and the youthful curate lost no time. One or two spectators had wandered in, but Miss Elliston and the vergier were the only persons near the altar save those mainly concerned. When the ceremony was over and Christopher Sheffield and Katherine Wilmot had been made man and wife, Lavinia breathed a sigh of relief and self-congratulation. She kept her seat while they followed the curate to the vestry, until the vergier came to ask her to sign the register. It was almost a shock to see Katherine with a smile on her face, but she demurely lowered her eyes nor raised them as she walked by her husband's side towards the west door.

Outside the church she turned to Miss Elliston, offering both hands.

"Good-bye," she whispered, adding rather surprisingly, "and please—please don't think too badly of me!"

Before there was time to answer she took her seat, and the officious boy who held the cab door open looked as if he expected Christopher to follow. Lifting his hat, however, he turned abruptly away.

"You understand," said Miss Elliston. "Blackthorn House, Hampstead. Good-bye—"

good-bye, my dear," she added, and wiped her eyes as the chauffeur released the lever.

For a moment Katherine showed a wistful little face at the window, then leaned back wondering how she should succeed in attracting the man's attention. Suppose she should be unable to make him hear and be driven all the way to the empty house at Hampstead!

Discovering presently that the front windows could be let down she began to experiment with the strap, and a few minutes later was able to prod the chauffeur in the back.

"I—I want to go to Victoria!" she said nervously, and, sounding his hooter, he drew up to the kerb.

"Not Hampstead?" he demanded, looking over his shoulder.

"N—no," she answered, profoundly thankful to change the route. "Victoria Station, if you please."

He muttered something not very complimentary, as he jerked his head up and down once or twice, and at last Katherine could feel she was on the way—the way to happiness, she believed.

Of course, she wished (who does not?) that

some of the past could be wiped out. She knew that there would be times when she should look back with regret—upon her own part as well as Christopher's. Perhaps, after all that were as well.

If she had remained perfectly stedfast, if for a few weeks she had not thought so much of Ronald, she might not (incongruous as it seemed) be on the way to rejoin Christopher at this moment. Her own fall from what she regarded as perfection had at least made for tolerance. If there had been no cause to blame herself for a very warm regard for another man she might never have come to love Christopher afresh.

She did love him ; she was going back without the slightest misgiving, but now that the hurly-burly was done Katherine realised with quite painful distinctness that if at one time Ronald had met her half-way——

She sat upright with a start as the taxicab was steered into the station yard, and her reminiscences faded as she saw Christopher flourishing off his hat.

“ Ah, my dear little wife ! ” he cried. “ Not a second to lose. I've taken the tickets

—a compartment to ourselves. Porter, get this trunk labelled to Folkestone Central. Yes, we'll have the bag in the carriage. Come along, Kitty," Christopher added, and quite contentedly she went.

CHAPTER XXXII

MISS BIDDLE never objected to stay late at No. 11 Brandenburg Street on any evening of the week from Monday till Friday, but whatever happened she liked to leave punctually at one o'clock on Saturdays. She frequently went to a *matinée*, and there was not too much time to get something to eat and take her place in the queue outside the pit door.

On the Saturday after Katherine Wilmot's wedding, the announcement of which she had seen in the *Daily Telegraph*, Miss Biddle put on her hat at five minutes to one. Although Mr. Lestocq had not come down from the studio she intended to be outside the house as the clock struck, but just as she was going to the door she saw Miss Elliston enter.

Miss Elliston always made a point of being very polite to Ronald's young women, and Miss Biddle was afraid she might be delayed

until she noticed Lavinia's prompt, business-like demeanour, which suggested that, for her own part, she had no time to lose.

"I want to see Mr. Lestocq," she said.

"William!" cried Miss Biddle, and the page took his eyes from the clock, he also having made arrangements for the half-holiday.

"Yes, Miss Biddle," he answered briskly.

"Take Miss Elliston to Mr. Lestocq's sitting-room, and tell him she is waiting," said Miss Biddle, and two minutes later she was outside in the street.

Entering the room, where Ronald's cold luncheon lay on the table, Lavinia, feeling far too excited to sit down, stood tapping the carpet with her shoe until a little later Ronald arrived with an apology for keeping her waiting.

"I had a letter this morning!" exclaimed Miss Elliston, cutting him short.

"From Meriel——"

"From Katherine," she answered, and, observing his disappointment, added, "from Paris."

"Paris!" murmured Ronald.

"It appears," Lavinia stiffly explained, "that Katherine had been plotting behind my back—I must say she was extremely cunning."

Mr. Sheffield came to Manning's while I was at church on Sunday evening. How it came to pass I cannot pretend to understand, but she was persuaded to go to Paris with him on Wednesday afternoon."

"I thought," cried Ronald with a laugh, "you saw her driven away to Hampstead by herself."

"I did," said Lavinia, holding her back very straight. "She admits she felt too much ashamed to speak out. No wonder, after all that had taken place. I consider she was extremely ungrateful——"

"Extremely human, anyhow," answered Ronald.

"I know you dislike to be interrupted during business hours," said Miss Elliston, "so I would not come till one o'clock had struck. It appears that Katherine saw Meriel——"

"Where?" demanded Ronald, looking at the door as if he intended to dash off at once in pursuit.

"At Folkestone," was the reply. "That was on Thursday morning. Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield spent the night at the Pavilion Hotel and took the eleven o'clock boat to Boulogne. After they were on board they

saw Meriel leaning against the parapet on the pier. What are you doing?" said Lavinia, as Ronald stepped towards the fireplace.

" Ringing for a time-table."

" Do you mean that you are going to Folkestone ? "

" Without losing a moment."

A few minutes later he was standing by the table, eating his luncheon while he looked up the trains. Leaving Lavinia alone, he hastened to the adjoining room to thrust a few things into his suit-case. The one-armed commissionaire had by this time brought a taxicab to the door, Ronald shook hands with Miss Elliston on the step, and was quickly on his way to Victoria station.

By two o'clock he was in the train, speculating concerning the best means of searching for a needle in a haystack. But if his aspirations were justified Meriel would, surely, be haunted by " long, long thoughts " ; was it an excess of sentimentality to imagine that she would seek a suitable environment ?

On stepping out of the train at the Central Station Ronald took a cab to the Pavilion Hotel, engaged a bedroom, deposited his bag, and set forth at once to the Lees so as not to

waste a moment of daylight. Walking with long strides, he kept close to the railing at the edge of the cliff, looking down at the beach below. The sea was calm, the tide stealing quietly in; the sun was setting without any violent effects of colour.

There were too many people on the Lees to allow the subdued beauty of the late afternoon to be fully appreciated, but when Ronald had passed the bandstand the beach below was almost deserted, although far out by the water's edge he saw a tall, slender, straight figure, and without wasting a moment sought a way down to her level. She stood with her back towards the cliff, gazing at the horizon; the sunlight caught her vivid hair, and the sea almost lapped her feet.

Half running, Ronald made his way down the zigzag path, reached the stone esplanade, jumped on to the rocks, and crossed the sands until only a few yards separated him from Meriel. She did not turn her head until he called her name—"Meriel! Meriel!"—nor even then did she take a step towards him. As he came to her side she faced about again; he took her arm, and for a few seconds they stood silently looking out to sea.

"Is it true," said Ronald at last, "that you have managed to get rid of all your money?"

"N—no," she answered, but as he drew in a deep breath she continued, "I have still mother's two thousand pounds left. On the other hand, I am responsible for the rent of the house in Grandison Street."

"You can't have spent fifty thousand pounds in a few months," he suggested.

"N—no," she murmured again.

"How did you dispose of it?" he demanded.

"Oh, I—I gave a good deal away."

"Why?" said Ronald, and she hesitated for a moment, still refraining from looking in his direction.

Their faces were so anxious, so intent, they stared so persistently at the horizon, that they might have been watching for the return of some wanderer.

Then the Meriel he knew spoke out:

"Because you were stupid and obstinate!" she cried. "Because I could never forget that I once played you false. You will never be able to imagine the pressure that was put upon me, and how could I have thought you were going to succeed? It wasn't really that

I wanted a lot of money, Ronnie, but we couldn't—couldn't do anything without a little. I did not know," she continued with deep emotion, which she tried hard to control, "I did not know what—what I was letting myself in for. I did not dream of the horror of it. I was incapable of realising what it might mean to you. Ronnie, it was just because I gradually learned to understand how you must feel that I put up with so much at your hands."

"Why did you run away?" he asked quietly.

"From very shame of what I had done. How could I tell that you had not some insuperable objection to me as well as to that odious money?"

"Meriel——"

"How was I to know?" she persisted. "A dozen times you hurt me to the quick. A dozen times I was tempted to fall back on my pride and leave you to do as you pleased!"

His fingers tightened on her arm, and he drew her back a few inches out of the way of an incoming wave. The sun was gradually sinking towards the sea, and the clouds were putting on fresh glory.

"Will you be magnanimous and let me do as I please now?" he whispered.

"Yes," said Meriel, "if you are quite certain——"

"I shall take you back to London tomorrow—to Aunt Lavinia at Manning's Hotel. I shall marry you on Tuesday."

"Look, Ronnie!" she cried. "Look at the sky!"

It was changing, growing still brighter every second, but his eyes were fixed on her face instead.

"Meriel," he said, "I shall never as long as I live be able to say a word about what you have done——"

"It will be just as well," she murmured.

"Or how I feel about it."

"Then we shall have a fresh start in life, Ronnie."

"On Tuesday," answered Ronald.

"Aunt Lavinia," said Meriel, "may think it rather soon."

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