

JANE
OGLANDER
MRS-BELLOC-LOWNDES

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Jane Oglander

By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes

"Something even more imperious than reason admonishes us that life's inmost secret lies not in the slow adaptation of man to circumstance, but in his costly victories and splendid defeats."

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<u>CHAPTER XXI</u>

JANE OGLANDER

PROLOGUE

"Elle fut née pour plaire aux nobles âmes,
Pour les consoler un peu d'un monde impur."

Jane Oglander was walking across Westminster Bridge on a late September day.

It was a little after four o'clock—on the bridge perhaps the quietest time of the working day—but a ceaseless stream of human beings ebbed to and fro. She herself came from the Surrey side of the river, and now and again she stayed her steps and looked over the parapet. It was plain—or so thought one who was looking at her very attentively—that she was more interested in the Surrey side, in the broken line of St. Thomas's Hospital, in the grey-red walls of Lambeth Palace and the Lollards' Tower, than in the mass of the Parliament buildings opposite.

But though Miss Oglander stopped three times in her progress over the bridge, she did not stay at any one place for more than a few moments—not long enough to please the man who had gradually come up close to her.

Having first noticed her in front of the bridge entrance of St. Thomas's Hospital, this man had made it his business to keep, if well behind, then in step with her.

A human being—and especially a woman—may be described in many ways. For our purpose it was fortunate that on this eventful

afternoon of her life Miss Oglander happened to attract the attention of an observer, who, if then living in great penury and solitude, was yet destined to become what a lover of literature has described as the greatest interpreter of the human side of London life since Dickens.

When he was not writing, this man—whose name, by the way, was Ryecroft, and whose misfortune it was to be temperamentally incapable of sustained, wage-earning work—spent many hours walking about the London streets studying the human side of London's traffic, and especially that side which to a certain type of observer, of saunterer in the labyrinth, is full of ever recurring mystery and charm. He wrote of the depths, because the depths were all he knew, with an intimate and a terrible knowledge. But he had your true romancer's craving for romance, and his eager face with its curiously high, straight forehead crowned with a shock of rather long auburn hair, was the face and head of the idealist, of the humourist, and—now that he is dead, why not say so?—of the lover, of the man that is to whom the most interesting thing in the world remains, when all is said and done,—woman, and man's pursuit, not necessarily conquest, of the elusive creature.

Ryecroft had been already on Westminster Bridge for some time before he became aware that a feminine figure of more than common distinction and interest, a young lady whose appearance and light buoyant step sharply differentiated her from those about her, was walking toward him. As he saw her his eyes lighted up with a rather pathetic pleasure, and in an instant he had become sensitively aware of every detail of her dress. She wore a plain grey coat and skirt, and a small hat of which the Mercury wings, to the whimsical fellow watching her, evoked the Hellas of his dreams. A black and white spotted veil, which, as was then the fashion, left the wearer's delicately cut sensitive mouth bare, shadowed her hazel eyes.

Ryecroft noticed—he always saw such things—that the young lady wore odd gloves, the one on her right hand was light grey, that clothing her left moleskin in colour. The trifling fact pleased him. It showed, or so he argued with himself, that this sweet stranger had a soul above the usual pernicky vanities of young womanhood.

For a moment their eyes met, and he admired the gentle, not unkind indifference with which she received his eager, measuring glance.

In a sense, Jane Oglander never saw at all the man who was gazing at her so intently, and he never saw her again, but for some moments—perhaps for as long as half an hour—this singular and gifted being felt himself to be in sensitive, even close, sympathy with her, and in his emotional memory she henceforth occupied a niche labelled "The Lady of Westminster Bridge."

Ryecroft allowed Miss Oglander to pass by him, and then quietly and very unobtrusively he followed her; stopping when she stopped, following the direction of her eyes, trying as far as might be to think her thoughts, and meanwhile weaving in his mind a portrait of her having as little relation to reality as has a woodland scene in tapestry to a real sun and shadow-filled glade.

"Here," he said to himself, "is a girl who is assuredly not accustomed to walking the more populous thoroughfares of London by herself. Were she quite true to type she would be what they called 'chaperoned' by a lady's maid, that is by a woman who would be certainly aware that I was following them, and who would probably take my attention for herself. A dozen men might follow this young lady and she would not be aware of their proximity. There is something about her of Una, but Una so completely protected by a quality in herself, and by her upbringing and character, that she has no need of a lion.

"For me she holds a singular appeal, because she is unlike the only

woman I ever have the chance of meeting, and because we, that gentle, austere attractive creature and I, have much in common. Effortless she has achieved all that I long for and that I know I shall never obtain—intellectual distinction in those she frequents, the satisfaction attendant on proper pride, and doubtless, in her daily life, refined beauty of surroundings. She is very plainly dressed, but that is because she has a delicate and elevated taste, and happily belongs to that small, privileged class which is able to pay the highest price, and so command the best type of gown, the prettiest shoes, the best fitting gloves—even if she wears them odd—and the most becoming hat.

"But what has Una been doing on the Surrey side of the Thames?"

Ryecroft smiled; he thought the answer to his question obvious.

"She has been"—he went on, talking to himself, and forming the words with his lips, for he was a very lonely man—"to St. Thomas's Hospital, either to see some friend who is in the paying ward, or to visit a poor person in whom she is—to use the shibboleth of Mayfair—'interested.' It is a more or less new experience, and though she is evidently in a hurry, she cannot help lingering now and again, thinking over the strange, dreadful things with which she has, doubtless for the first time, now come in contact. She doesn't care for the Houses of Parliament—they represent to her the thing she knows, for she often takes part in that odd rite, 'Tea on the Terrace.' But she is timorously attracted to the other side—to the dark, to the pregnant side of life. And above all what fascinates her is the river—the river itself, at once so like and so unlike the Thames she knows above Richmond where she goes boating with her brothers' friends, with the young men with whom she seems on such intimate terms and of whom she knows so extraordinarily little, and who treat her, very properly, as something fragile, to be cared for, respected...."

When she reached the end of the bridge, after looking to the right and to the left, the young lady walked across the roadway with an assured step, and Ryecroft's eager, sensitive face brightened. This was in the picture, the picture he had drawn and coloured with his own pigments. "For this kind of young Englishwoman the traffic stops instinctively of itself," he said to himself; "and she has no fear of being run over" (perhaps it should be added, that this little one-sided adventure of Henry Ryecroft's took place before the advent of the trams). And still he followed, keeping close behind her. Suddenly she turned toward the Underground Railway, and this annoyed him; he had hoped that she (and he) would walk down Great George Street, across the two parks, and so into old Mayfair.

As an alternative he had promised himself the pleasure of seeing her get into a hansom-cab. Were she to disappear into the ugly gulf of the Underground it would disappoint him unreasonably. But stop! She had turned her back on the cavernous entrance to the station and she was gazing down at the posters of the evening papers.

The placards were all emblazoned with the same piece of news, differently worded: "General Lingard in London," "Reception of Lingard at Victoria," "Return of a Famous Soldier."

Ryecroft's lip curled. He had an intellectual contempt for the fighting man as such, and a horror, nay a loathing, of war. He knew what even a brief and successful war means to those among whom his own lot was cast, the London woman whose son, whose brother, whose lover is so often called Thomas Atkins.

And now, at last, he heard his lady's voice. She beckoned to the smallest and most ragged of the lads selling newspapers:—

"I want all to-night's papers:" her voice fell with an agreeable cadence on Ryecroft's ears. He was singularly susceptible to the cadences of the human voice, and he thought he had never heard a sweeter. She

took a shilling out of her purse, and, rather to his surprise, he saw that her purse was small, black and worn.

"How much?" she asked gently.

The boy hesitated, and then answered, "Five-pence halfpenny."

She handed him a shilling. "You can keep the change," she said, and a very charming smile quivered across her face, "for yourself."

The man who was watching her felt touched—unreasonably moved. "Thank God," he said to himself, "that, unlike many of her friends, she has nothing to do with the C.O.S.!"

Then to Ryecroft's surprise, instead of going on as he expected her to do—he had already made up his mind that she was taking the papers home to an invalid father, or to a brother who had hurt himself in one of those mad games in which, as the watcher knew well, the young English oligarch delights to spend his spare time—the young lady turned, and crossed over again on to the bridge, but this time she chose the other side, the side which commands the more beautiful view of the London river.

"Dear me," he said to himself, "the plot thickens!" and then he suddenly told himself that of course she was going back to the hospital. The person she was going to see had asked for an evening paper, and in her generosity she had bought them all.

But on the bridge she stayed her steps, and, opening one of the papers, spread it out against the parapet, and began eagerly reading it, unheeding of the human stream flowing to and fro behind her.

Ryecroft gently approached closer and closer to her, and at last he was able to see what it was she was bending over and reading with such intentness: "*General Lingard's Home-coming.*" "*Splendid Reception at Victoria Station.*" So was the column headed, and

already her eyes had travelled down to the last paragraph:

"To conclude: by his defeat of the great Mahomedan Emir of Bobo, General Lingard has added to the British Crown another magnificent jewel in the Sultanate of Amadawa."

Then came a cross-head—"Pen Portrait."

"Lingard is above all things a fighter. His eye is keen, alert, passionless. He is a tall man, and he dominates those with whom he stands. His life as a soldier has been from the beginning a wooing of peril, and as a result he has commanded a victorious expedition at an age when his seniors are hoping to command a regiment. He does not talk as other men talk—he is no teller of 'good stories.' He is a Man."

Jane Oglander looked up, and there came a glow—a look of proud, awed gladness on her face.

Then, folding the paper, she walked steadily on. But though she crossed over the bridge as if she were going to the hospital, to the side entrance where visitors are admitted, she walked on past the mass of buildings. Then she turned sharply to the left, Ryecroft still following, till she came to a small row of houses, respectable, but poor and mean in appearance, in a narrow street which was redeemed to a certain extent by the fact that there was a Queen Anne church at one end of it, and next to the church a substantial rectory or vicarage house. To Ryecroft's measureless astonishment, she opened her purse, took out a latch-key and let herself into the front-door of one of the small houses....

Three weeks later Henry Ryecroft happened to be in that same neighbourhood, and he suddenly remembered his Lady of Westminster Bridge. Greatly daring—but he ever loved such daring

—he rang at the door of the house at which he had seen her go in.

A typical Londoner of the hard-working, self-respecting class answered his ring. She stood for a moment looking at him, waiting for him to speak.

"Is the lady in?" he asked, feeling suddenly ashamed and foolish. "I mean the young lady who lives here."

"Miss Oglander?" said the woman. "No, she's away. But I'll give you her address."

She handed him a piece of paper on which was written in what he thought was a singularly pretty handwriting:—

Miss Oglander,
Rede Place,
Redyford,
Surrey.

He took the little piece of paper and walked away. When he found himself on the bridge he dropped the paper into the river. "Oglander," he said to himself, "a curious, charming name, rhyming with Leander, philander——" he shook his head and smiled, "no, no, not philander," he said, speaking the words aloud. "Lavender, that's what her name should rhyme to,—Lavender...."

Henry Ryecroft, in his way a philosopher, would have been at first gently amused, and then perhaps moved and interested, had he known both how right and how wrong had been the kitcat portrait he had evolved out of his inner consciousness.

He had been right as to the type. He had even been successful in realizing something of Miss Oglander's inward mind and character from her outward appearance, but he had been quite wrong as to the present circumstances of her life.

It was true that she belonged to the privileged class who alone in the seething world of London have the command of money, and also the command, materially speaking, of the best. But if born and bred in the west of London, she now belonged by deliberate choice to the south side of the Thames. At a moment when she desired to hide herself from the world, she had chosen that ugly, formless district of London which lies between Westminster Bridge and Vauxhall Bridge because a distant relation of her mother's had married a clergyman whose parish lay there, and he had offered to find her in that parish plenty of hard work to still her pain.

As a young girl, Jane Oglander had lived the life that Ryecroft imagined her to be living now. While keeping house for a bachelor brother, she had seen, from a pleasantly sheltered standpoint, all that was most agreeable and amusing in the cultivated London world. Treated with the gentle gallantry and respect Ryecroft had supposed by her brother's friends, she was—as is so often the case with a young woman who has been almost entirely educated by men and surrounded with masculine influences—graver, less frivolous, more austere refined than were most of her contemporaries.

Her nature, the core of her, was happy, tender, sensitive, capable also of a depth of feeling—and feeling always implies a certain violence—unsuspected by those round her. Thanks to the circumstances of her birth and upbringing Jane Oglander might conceivably have lived a long beneficent life, and have finally slipped out of that life without becoming aware that there were such tragic things as sin, shame, and acute suffering in the world.

Humility was not lacking to one endowed with many of the other endearing graces. Jane Oglander was very conscious of the lack in herself of those practical qualities which make their fortunate possessors ever punctual and unforgetful of the minor duties of life. She would forget to answer unimportant letters, mistake the hour of

unessential invitations, arrive late for trains, and, as we have seen, tempt gifts her way by putting on odd articles of clothing which her wiser friends always wore in pairs.

But she was never found lacking in that beautiful quality which the French call *la politesse du cœur*. Thus, her mental lapses were never of a nature to hurt the feelings or the pride of those whose feelings and whose pride are often regarded by people more fortunate in a material sense than themselves as so unimportant as to be probably non-existent.

First her father, and then her brother, had been instinctively careful that she should only know the best of life. They had preserved her with firm decision from any of those influences which might have injured, thrown ever so small a speck or blemish, on her feminine delicacy. Her father's death, occurring when she was eighteen, had meant that the first year of her life as a grown-up girl had been spent in sincere mourning.

Two very happy years had followed, and then on a certain thirteenth of September—that is, almost exactly five years ago—there had befallen Jane Oglander a thing which befalls daily, it might be said hourly, some unfortunate human being.

There had cut right into and across her young, peaceful life a tragedy full of ignoble horror, of that horror which attracts the eager interest and attention of the morbid, the idle, and the vulgar.

Jane Oglander's kind brother, some years older than herself, whom she had taken as completely on trust as all normal young women take those who are near and dear to them, had left the club where he had been dining, and hailing a cab, had driven to a distant quarter of the town, a quarter of which the very name was unknown to his sister and to those with whom she generally associated. There, in the space of a very few moments, he had killed, not only a man who was regarded

as in a special sense his friend and as a peculiarly harmless individual, but also the woman with whom he had found this man.

Certain circumstances of the affair, circumstances of quite an everyday nature, though they had appeared to the amazed and agonised sister incredible, had roused a good deal of public sympathy with Jack Oglander. Though the fact that he had taken a pistol with him, as well as some confidences he had made to yet another friend who had played a minor part in the sordid drama, pointed to premeditation, the verdict had been manslaughter.

Fortunately, as everyone except his poor sister thought, Jack Oglander fell ill and died a normal death in the prison infirmary within two months of his trial.

Friends had rallied—too many rather than too few—round the unfortunate girl; but her best friends, those to whom she felt she owed the greatest gratitude, were a certain Richard Maule, one of the trustees of her small fortune, and Richard Maule's wife, Athena.

Mr. Maule, at the time of the tragedy already an invalid, had been able to do nothing in an active sense, but his country house, Rede Place, had immediately become, whenever she chose that it should be so, Miss Oglander's home. In this matter the husband and wife were one in a sense they had scarcely ever been, but in the happy, cloudless days which now seemed to have belonged to a former existence, Jane Oglander had already become as much as a young girl can be to a married woman some years older than herself, Mrs. Maule's closest friend.

With these two dear friends was joined in the same wordless sense of deep gratitude Dick Wantele, Richard Maule's cousin, and in this affair his spokesman and representative.

It was this young man who, shaking himself free of a constitutional

lethargy, had become the indispensable adviser and friend of both brother and sister; it was he who had persuaded Jack Oglander to plead "not guilty"; it was he who had gone to great personal trouble in order that Miss Oglander might be spared, as much as was possible, the dreadful publicity into which each such tragic happening brings innocent victims.

During the weeks which elapsed between the arrest and the trial, Miss Oglander learnt to lean on Dick Wantele, to ask for, and defer to, his advice, far more than she was at the time aware. Wantele's tact and good feeling, and his intelligent withholding of the sympathy with which she was at that time nauseated, were almost uncannily clever considering the end he had in view.

An offer of marriage very seldom takes a woman by surprise, but twice Jane Oglander was so surprised immediately after her brother's arrest.

The very next day a man much older than herself—whom she had regarded with the kindly affection and indifference with which girls so often regard one whom they unconsciously consider as a contemporary of their parents rather than their own—had come and implored her to marry him there and then. He was a member of the administration then in office, and he had hinted that by doing this—that is, by marrying him—she would almost certainly benefit her brother's cause. But though she was touched, and touched to tears, by the strangely worded proposal, it formed but an incident, to herself an unimportant incident, in days crowded with such pain and amazing unhappiness.

Some weeks later, while driving back with Jane Oglander from her first interview with her brother in prison, during that long—it appeared to her that endless—drive from Holloway to Westminster, Dick Wantele also asked her to marry him, and this offer she also refused.

But Wantele would not allow his disappointment to affect their apparently placid friendship. He it was who brought her the news that her brother was ill, and he was actually present at Jack Oglander's mournful deathbed in the prison infirmary.

Rather ruefully aware that it was so, Dick Wantele now stood to Jane Oglander much in the position her dead brother had once stood. She had come to feel for him a deep unquestioning affection; it was to him she would have turned in any new distress.

They met frequently, for though Miss Oglander had become absorbed in the work among the London poor to which she henceforth dedicated her life, her happiest, her only peaceful days—for she took keenly to heart the material cares and sorrows of those with whom she was brought in contact—were the weeks she spent each year at Rede Place.

When there, the thrice welcome guest of Richard and Athena Maule, and of their kinsman and housemate Dick Wantele, Jane's content would have been absolute had her host and hostess been on the terms of amity Miss Oglander supposed all married people as noble as Richard and as good and beautiful as was Athena should be. But she had in this matter, as one so often has to do when dealing with a dual human relation, to compromise. She gave, that is, her grateful love to both these people who, if themselves on unhappy terms, were yet one in their affection for her.

It was to her an added perplexity and pain that her friend Dick sided with his cousin Richard Maule rather than with Richard's wife Athena. Nay, he went further—he took no pains to conceal his contemptuous indifference to the beautiful woman who was perforce his housemate for much of the year. Small wonder that Mrs. Richard Maule generally absented herself from home when her friend Jane Oglander was there to take the place only a woman can fill in a country house of

which the master is an invalid, his heir a bachelor.

So it was that the two women only saw much of one another when Mrs. Maule was in London.

CHAPTER I

"A flag for those who go out to war,
A flag for those who return,
A flag for those who escape hell fire,
And a flag for those who burn."

In spite of many a proverb to the contrary, a plan or plot, when carefully imagined and carried out by an intelligent human being, does not often miscarry or go wrong.

The fact that Mrs. Kaye was now sitting staring through the window of the little waiting-room of Selford Junction was the outcome of a plan—what she knew well the one most concerned would have called a plot—which had succeeded beyond her expectations. She had come there secretly in order that she might see the last, the very last, of her son now starting on his way to rejoin his regiment in India. She was here in direct disobedience to his wish, aware that had he known she would be there he would have found some way of eluding her vigilance.

The plan she had made had succeeded by its very simplicity.

After the quiet, measured "Good-bye and God bless you, Bayworth!" uttered by the father to his only son at the gate of the poverty-stricken garden of the vicarage; after the mother's more emotional farewell, Mrs. Kaye, leaving her husband to go out into the village, had hastened back to the house. There she had flung on her shabby bonnet, and waiting a moment till the trap in which her boy was

driving to Selford Junction, some four miles off, had turned the corner, she had gone quickly out of the garden. Walking at a rapid pace, for she was still a vigorous woman, she had taken a short cut across the fields to the small station where she knew she would be able to catch the slow local train which was run in connection with the London express.

Once at Selford Junction, it had been a comparatively easy matter for her to slip into the waiting-room and take up her station close to the grimy window commanding the platform alongside of which the express had already drawn up.

Mrs. Kaye had had two motives in doing what she had done. Her first and very natural motive was that of seeing the last, the very last, of her son. Her second, which she hid even from herself, was to discover why he had refused, with a certain fierce decision, her company as far as Selford Junction, where, ever since he was a little boy bound for his first school, she—his mother—had always gone with him when there had come the hard moment of saying good-bye.

To the tired labourer in the further corner of the waiting-room; to the sickly-looking, weary working woman, accompanied by two children, who had unwillingly made way for her, the sight of Mrs. Kaye was familiar, and, in an apathetic way, unpleasing.

Each of them—even the children—had disagreeable associations with her tall, spare figure, her severe looking weather-beaten face, crowned with still abundant fair hair streaked with grey. They knew, with a long, contemptuous knowledge, her short black serge skirt and the old-fashioned beaded mantle, which formed her usual week-day, outdoor costume in any but the very hottest weather.

The poor are better judges of character than the rich. Mrs. Kaye's hard good sense and intelligent idea of justice, secured her the grudging respect of her husband's parishioners, but her rigid

closeness about money—which they argued must mean either exceptional poverty or else unusual meanness—alienated them. And yet the working woman, sitting there, looked at Mrs. Kaye with a certain furtive sympathy. She well knew that Bayworth Kaye—he had been christened Bayworth because it was his mother's maiden name—was leaving for India that day.

Now Bayworth was in a sense part of the village. He had been born at the Vicarage. His father's parishioners had followed him through each of the stages of his successful young life, and they all liked him; partly because the kind of success Bayworth Kaye had achieved is not the kind which arouses dislike or envy, and even more because he was an open-handed and good-natured young gentleman, very unlike—so the villagers would have told you—either his gentle, unpractical father or his hard mother.

Also, and this was very present to the woman now watching Mrs. Kaye, "th' parson's son" had been, during the last few months, the hero of one of those dramas which, because of certain elemental passions slumbering in all men and in most women, whatever their rank or condition, always arouse a certain uneasy, speculative interest and sympathy in the onlooker. All unconsciously the village was grateful to young Kaye for having provided them with something to talk about, something to laugh about, something, above all, to relieve the uneventful dullness of their lives.

This was why the man and woman whom Mrs. Kaye—if she was conscious of their presence at all—regarded as merely of the earth, earthy, were keenly aware of the last act of the tragi-comedy being played before their eyes. They knew why their clergyman's wife was sitting here in the waiting-room, instead of standing out on the platform saying a last word to her son; and over each stolid face there came, when the eyes of these same faces thoroughly realised at what the lady sitting by the window was looking, an expression of

cunning amusement, as well as of doubtful sympathy.

Mrs. Kaye's eyes were fixed on a group composed of two people, a man and a woman. The man—her son Bayworth Kaye—was standing inside one of the first-class carriages of the London express; and below him on the platform, her right hand resting on the sash of the open carriage window, stood Mrs. Maule, the woman whom Mrs. Kaye had only half expected to see there. In coming to Selford Junction to see the last of Bayworth Kaye, Mrs. Maule was doing a very daring thing; those of her neighbours and acquaintances whose opinion counted in the neighbourhood would have said a very improper and shocking thing.

To Mrs. Kaye—such being her nature—there was a certain cruel satisfaction in the knowledge that she had been right in her suspicion as to why her son had told her that he would far prefer, this time, to say good-bye at home. Given all that had gone before, it was not surprising that Mrs. Kaye had guessed the reason why her boy had refused her company at Selford Junction.

And yet, now that the reason stood before her, embodied in a slim, gracefully posed figure which she and the two dumb spectators of the little scene knew to be that of the squire's wife, she felt a dull pang of resentful surprise.

She had hoped against hope that Bayworth would be here alone, and that there might perhaps come her chance of a last word which would break down the high, gateless barrier which had risen during the last few months between herself and her son. Mrs. Kaye staring dumbly through the waiting-room window knew that last word would never now be uttered.

Young Kaye's good-looking, fair face—the look of breeding derived from his mother's forebears crossed with the more solid good looks which had been his father's—was set in hard lines; yet he was

making a gallant effort to bear himself well, and he was smiling the painful smile which is so far removed from mirth. The anguished pain of parting, the agony he was feeling had found refuge only in the eyes which were fixed on his companion's face.

Mrs. Kaye tried to see if that beautiful face, into which her son was gazing with so strange and tragic a look of hungry pain, reflected any of his feeling. But the delicately pure profile, the perfect curve of cheek and neck, the tiny ear half concealed by carefully dressed masses of dark hair, in their turn covered by a long grey veil becomingly wound round the green deer-stalker hat, revealed nothing.

Now and again she could see Mrs. Maule's red lips—lips that told of admirable physical fitness—move as if in answer to something the other said.

Bayworth Kaye was leaning out, speaking earnestly. With a sudden gesture his lean, brown fingers closed on the little gloved hand resting on the window-sill. Mrs. Kaye could not hear what her son was saying, and she would have given the world to know, but in the composed, steady glance directed by her through the waiting-room window there was nothing to show the bitter, helpless anger which oppressed her.

The excursion train for which the express had been waiting glided into the station. Mrs. Kaye reminded herself with a strange mixture of feelings that the time was growing very short; that not long would her eyes be offended, as they were now being offended. In five minutes the London train was due to start.

And then there came over the mother an overmastering desire which swept everything before it. She must hear what it was her boy was saying; she must see him clearly once more; she must run the risk of his becoming aware that she had spied on him.

Mrs. Kaye rose from the hard wooden seat, and she made what was for her a mighty effort to open the grimy waiting-room window; but it remained fast.

Words were muttered behind her, words of which in her agitation she was quite unconscious.

"Help the lady, can't ye!"

The big labourer in the corner rose to his feet; he lumbered across the boarded floor, and laid his mighty shoulder against the sash; the flange gave way, and as the window opened there seemed to rush in a loud, confused wave of sound. A crowd of Saturday holiday-makers were streaming over the platform, and as they swayed backwards and forwards they completely hid for a moment the man and woman on whom Mrs. Kaye's eyes had been fixed.

Then, as if the scene before her had been stage-managed by some master of his craft, the crowd thinned, divided in two, seeking on either side the few third-class carriages in the express, and Mrs. Kaye once more saw her son and Athena Maule; saw, with a sharp pang, that the look of strain and anguish had deepened on Bayworth Kaye's face, that his poor pretence at a smile had gone.

The train groaned and moved a little forward, bringing the first-class carriages quite close to the waiting-room window. Putting out her hand, Mrs. Kaye could almost have touched Mrs. Maule on the shoulder; she shrank back, but the two on whom her whole attention was fixed were so far absorbed in each other as to be quite oblivious of everything round them. And at last Mrs. Kaye heard the voice she loved best in the world, nay the only voice she had ever really loved—asking the pitiful, futile little question:

"Athena? Darling—say you're sorry I'm going!"

There was a pause, and then the woman to whom the question had been put did in answer a very extraordinary thing. After having looked round, and with furtive, deliberate scrutiny noted that the platform was now practically deserted save for one man standing some way off, facing the bookstall and with his back to the express—she moved for a moment up on to the step of the railway carriage and turned her face, the lovely face now flushed with something like tenderness and pity, up to the young man.

"Of course I'm sorry you're going——"

Her clear, delicately modulated tones floated across the short space to where Mrs. Kaye was sitting.

"Kiss me," breathed the beautiful lips; and then with a touch of impatience, "You can kiss me good-bye. Don't you understand?"

His sudden response, the way his arm shot out and crushed her face, her slender shoulders, was far more than she had bargained for. She stepped back and shook herself like a bird whose plumage has been ruffled.

And then the train began to move.

Young Kaye leant out, dangerously far, but, in answer to a slight movement of Mrs. Maule's hand, he sank back quite out of his mother's sight. She heard his last hoarse cry of "good-bye," and for the moment it had a strange effect on her heart. It seemed to set a seal on her deep pain and wrath, to bring a certain fierce comfort in the knowledge that her boy was gone, that he had left the shameful joy of the last year, the tragic pain of the last few weeks, behind him. She even told herself that, in the years that must elapse before he came home again, he would have time to forget—as men do forget—the woman who had made such a fool and worse, such a traitor, of him.

Mrs. Maule stood for a while looking after the train. Things had not fallen out quite as she had expected them to do. She sometimes—not often—acted on sheer impulse, but she seldom did so without very soon repenting of it. She had been suddenly moved to do a daring thing,—one of those things which give a sharp edge to a blurred emotion. But she had not known how to allow, so she told herself, frowning, for the existence in the subject of her experiment of an unreasonably primitive violence of feeling.

She moved back and looked about her with an uncomfortable, rather fearful, look in her eyes. As she did so, the man standing by the bookstall also moved, and she became aware, with the quick instinct she had for such things, that he had a striking, in fact, a very peculiar face. She hoped he had seen nothing of that foolish little scene with Bayworth Kaye.

As she looked at the stranger—he was still unconscious of her presence—a wave of colour came over her face, or rather over as much of her face as the veil swathed about her hat allowed to be seen of it. With a curious, impulsive, un-English movement she pulled off one of her gloves and put up her hand to her hot cheek. Then she turned abruptly and began walking to the further end of the platform.

Mrs. Kaye, looking grimly after her, believed that Athena Maule had seen her, and, having the grace to be ashamed, had blushed. But, in so thinking, the clergyman's wife made one of her usual mistakes concerning the men and women with whom her life brought her into unwilling contact. Mrs. Maule had not seen her, and had she done so it may be doubted whether she would have felt any more ashamed or annoyed than she did now.

With a feeling of infinite lassitude, of physical as well as mental fatigue, Mrs. Kaye turned her back on the window through which she had seen a sight which was to remain with her for ever.

There were still some minutes to run before there would come into the station the local train in which she could return to her now empty home, and so drearily her mind went back, taking a rapid survey of the whole of her son's short life and hitherto most prosperous career.

Mrs. Kaye came herself of a long line of distinguished soldiers, and even before her child's birth she had been determined that he should follow in the footsteps of her own people, not in those of his mild, kindly father's. From his cradle the lad had been dedicated to the god of battles, and only the mother herself knew what her intention had cost her in the way of self-denial and of incessant effort.

Inadequate as had been their clerical income, supplemented by pitifully small private means, she and her husband had grudged nothing to Bayworth. Mrs. Kaye was a clever woman, cleverer than most; she had been at some pains to find out the best way in which to put a boy through the modern military mill, and everything had gone with almost fairy-like smoothness from first to last.

From the preparatory school, where she had ascertained that he would have among his mates the sons of the then Minister for War, down to the day when he had won the Sword of Honour at Sandhurst, young Kaye had been everything that even his exacting mother had desired. Nay more, he had once or twice said a word—only a word, but still it had amply repaid Mrs. Kaye for all she had gone through—implying that he understood the sacrifices his father and mother had made for his sake.

When he had been specially chosen to take part in a dangerous frontier expedition, it was his father who had appeared miserably anxious, but it was with his mother, softened, carried out of herself, that the whole neighbourhood had eagerly sympathised when there had come the glorious news that Bayworth Kaye had been mentioned in despatches for an act of reckless courage and gallantry, and recommended for the Victoria Cross.

Then had followed the lad's happy home-coming, and quite suddenly, before—so it now seemed to his mother—Bayworth had been back a week, Mrs. Maule had thrown over him the web of her fascinations. Not content with having him constantly about her at Rede Place, she had procured for him invitations to the houses where she stayed, and made him her slave in a sense Mrs. Kaye had not known men could be enslaved.

Mother and son had had one painful discussion in which the mother had been worsted. With terror she had plumbed for a moment the hidden depths of her boy's heart. "You tell me there has been talk," he said very quietly. "If you will give me the name of any man who has talked unbecomingly of Mrs. Maule, I will deal with him——" "Deal with him, Bayworth? What could you do?" "I could kill him." He had uttered the words almost indifferently, and Mrs. Kaye looking into his set face had said no more.

It was well that his father had known and suspected nothing.

The whole matter was to Mrs. Kaye the more amazing and iniquitous because she had hitherto always defended Mrs. Maule when that lady's conduct was discussed, as it constantly was discussed, in the neighbourhood of Rede Place. At Redyford Vicarage such talk had never been tolerated; and with a few stinging words of rebuke Mrs. Kaye had ever put the gossips in their places.

It had suited her far better to have to deal with a brilliant, beautiful,

rather reckless woman, who was much away from home, and who always treated her with the courtesy and indifferent good-humour due to an equal, rather than with the type of great lady to whom she knew some of the other clergy's wives were in subjection.

CHAPTER II

"L'opinion dispose de tout. Elle fait la beauté, la justice, et le bonheur qui est le tout du monde."

To say that the most important events of life often turn on trifling incidents has become a truism, and yet it may be doubted if any of us realise how especially true this is concerning the greatest of human riddles, the riddle of sex.

Had the man of whose presence on the platform of Selford Junction Mrs. Maule had become aware, turned round and watched the London express before it steamed out of the station, his own immediate future, to say nothing of that secret, inner life of memory which each human being carries as a burden, might have been considerably modified. But at the moment when Mrs. Maule had been engaged in trying her not very happy experiment with Bayworth Kaye, the only other occupant of the platform was staring with a good deal of interest and curiosity at a long row of illustrated newspaper pages pinned dado-wise round the top of the bookstall.

The newsagent's clerk, when arranging his wares that morning, had had what he felt to be an unusually bright idea. Picking out what he considered the two most attractive items in the illustrated paper with which he was dealing, he had repeated these items alternately with what to most onlookers would have seemed an irritating regularity.

The two pages he had selected for this honour were very different. The one consisted of a set of photographs, nine officers in uniform:

General Hew Lingard and his Staff, just returned home after the victorious Amadawa Expedition. "Here," the bookstall clerk had probably argued unconsciously, and quite wrongly, to himself, "is a page that will interest gentlemen and boys. Now I must find something that will cause ladies to purchase the paper," and he had accordingly put next to the page of military portraits one consisting of a single illustration—the reproduction of a beautiful painting of a beautiful woman.

The man staring up at the black and white pages was true to what the clerk took to be the masculine type of newspaper buyer and reader, for he devoted his whole attention to the group of military portraits. He had, however, a special reason for staring up as he was now doing at the rather absurd dado, for it was his own portrait which occupied the place of honour in the centre of the page.

Being the manner of man he was, Hew Lingard felt at once elated and ashamed at seeing himself hung up in this queer pillory of fame. He was moved more than he would have cared to admit, even to himself, at seeing the honour paid to that old photograph taken some seven years before, at a time when he was out of love with life, having been, as he imagined, shelved by a small home appointment.

The portraits of his staff were comparatively new; they had doubtless been supplied in haste by the happy mothers and sisters of the sitters, and his grey eyes, set under deep overhanging brows, rested on them proudly. It was to these eight comrades—so he would have been the first to admit, nay to insist—that he had owed much of the sudden overwhelming success which had now come to him.

At last he resolutely concentrated his attention on the opposite illustration, and coming up a little closer to the stall, he read what was printed underneath:

"This modern picture, only painted ten years ago, fetched ten

thousand pounds at Christie's last week. It is a portrait of the beautiful Mrs. Richard Maule in the character of a Greek nymph. Mrs. Maule, before her marriage to the well-known owner of Rede Place, one of the show places of Surrey, was Miss Athena Durdon. Her father was British Consul at Athens, and her mother a Greek lady of rank; hence her interesting and unusual Christian name."

"Why, it's Jane's friend," he said to himself. "How very odd that I should see it here and now!"

General Lingard had glanced at the illustration, when his eye had first caught sight of it, with distaste. But now that he knew that this rather fantastic picture was a painting of the dearest friend of the woman who was going to be his wife, he looked with kind, considering, and even eager eyes at the Greek nymph.

The famous soldier did not find it easy to adjust his imaginary portrait of Athena Maule, Jane Oglander's Athena, to this lovely embodiment of a pagan myth. But artists, or so he supposed, sometimes times take strange liberties with their sitters—besides, this was not in any sense a portrait....

"Your train's in, sir. Redyford is the second station from here."

He turned away and walked quickly to the side-platform where the short local train was standing ready to start.

There were still some minutes to spare, and Mrs. Maule, on her way to the train, stopped and looked up with a curious sensation in which pleasure and anger both played a part, at the dado formed of the two pages taken from the *Illustrated London News*.

Only one of those pages—that which was a reproduction of the

picture sold the week before at Christie's—attracted her attention and aroused in her very mixed sensations: pleasure at the thought that her portrait should be displayed in a fashion so wholly satisfying to her own critical and now highly educated taste; anger at the knowledge that the splendid painting had been sold to an American, instead of taking its place in the picture-gallery of Rede Place. When the picture had suddenly come into the market, she had ardently desired that her husband should buy it, and she had even ventured to convey her wish to him through his cousin, Dick Wantele, but to her mortification Richard Maule had refused.

Mrs. Maule now remembered with a sharp pang of self-pity the circumstances which had surrounded the painting of this picture. A portrait which her husband had commissioned the famous artist to paint of her was scarcely begun when the painter, who had taken an adjoining villa to theirs at Naples for the winter, had asked her whether she would sit to him in the character of a Greek nymph. Pleased and flattered, she had assented. Then, mentioning what she was about to do to her then indulgent and adoring husband, he, to her great astonishment, had disliked the idea: disliked it sufficiently to beg her as a personal favour to himself to make some excuse for not keeping her promise.

But even in those malleable days Athena Maule was incapable of denying herself a fleeting gratification. While appearing to assent to her husband's wish she had secretly fulfilled her promise to the artist, and the picture had excited such keen admiration when it was first exhibited that it had made Mrs. Richard Maule's beauty famous even before she came to England. The episode had also resulted in her first serious quarrel with Richard Maule.

When he had first seen the painting—for rather against her will the great artist had insisted on showing it to him—Mr. Maule had expressed an admiration it was impossible not to feel for the

technical qualities of the work, but he had refused, with angry decision, any thought of commissioning a replica for Rede Place.

At last Mrs. Maule made her way to the train, and deliberately she chose a carriage which had, as its one occupant, the man she had noticed standing by the bookstall a quarter of an hour before. She had liked the look of him then, and she liked it even more now. She wondered where he was going to stay—whether with people she knew.

As she sat down in the opposite corner, she glanced at him with instinctive interest and curiosity; he was lean and brown, and his face had the taut, tense look of the man who achieves—whose life is spent in combating forces greater than himself.

She longed for something to distract her mind from the emotion—a mingling of impatient annoyance and self-pity—induced by her parting scene with Bayworth Kaye. She blamed herself for having come to Selford Junction; they, she and Bayworth, had said good-bye, in a real sense, yesterday. Why, acting on a good-natured impulse, had she been so foolish as to write him a last word saying she would come and see him off? He had not understood, poor fellow—men never did. Instead of having something touching, sentimental—in a word, soothing to look back to—there would only be a sad, painful memory. She was still, even now, haunted by young Kaye's desperate, unhappy eyes—and yet she had been so kind, so very kind to him!

Yes, she had made a mistake in coming to Selford Junction. With a pettish movement she pulled down her veil yet further over her face.

Three more travellers made sudden irruption into the railway

carriage, and both Athena Maule and the man opposite to her turned round with frowning faces; they were one in their dislike of noise and vulgarity. But the man soon looked away, indifferent to his surroundings; he opened a German Service paper, and was soon reading it intently.

Athena Maule glanced distastefully at the three people who had just come into the carriage. She knew them to be a Lady Barking and Lady Barking's married daughter, very wealthy people new to the neighbourhood. They had been pointed out to her by her husband's cousin, Dick Wantele, only a day or two before, driving past in one of the horseless carriages which were then becoming the fashion, but with which Richard Maule obstinately refused to supersede—or even allow them to be added to—his stables.

She also knew, and in a more real sense, the man who was with the two ladies. He was a Major Biddell, one of those men only to be found, so Mrs. Maule now reminded herself, in hospitable England. Such men drift about from country house to country house, making themselves useful to the hostess; they are able to take part with modest success in any of the games and sports that may be going on; and with advancing years they endear themselves to the dowagers by an unceasing flow of malicious and often very unsavory gossip.

Athena Maule had no use for this type of man, and as for the particular specimen who was now fussing round his two companions, thrusting illustrated papers into their hands, pulling up and down the window, and offering to change seats with them—she remembered that she had snubbed him once, cruelly. They had met at a moment when she was enjoying the new, the intoxicating experience of a suddenly acclaimed beauty.

She turned her head away, for she did not wish to be recognised by

Major Biddell; and then, as the train moved out of the station, she suddenly became aware, not without a certain amusement, that she was being discussed by the two ladies.

The younger lady, "the vulgar married daughter," as Athena mentally described her, had opened the illustrated paper with which Major Biddell had provided her, and begun looking at the reproduction of the picture which had fetched a record price at Christie's.

"If that is really like Mrs. Maule, then she's a very beautiful woman," she said thoughtfully. "Is she really very like that, Major Biddell? You know her, don't you?"

"Oh yes. I know her quite well," he said promptly. "She often stays with the Kershaws of Cumberland, old friends of mine."

He bent his sleek head over the page, and jerked his eyeglass in and out of his right eye. "H'm," he said, "rather a fancy portrait that! I doubt if the fair Athena was ever as lovely. Of course she may have been when she first married poor Maule, a matter of fifteen to sixteen years ago."

"Has she been married as long as that?" said Lady Barking. "I *am* surprised! I thought Mrs. Maule was still quite a young woman."

"She's fairly young still—but then Maule married her when she was almost a child. She was Greek, you know, and the women blossom and fade very quickly out there. But still, I'm not denying that she's good-looking. In fact she's still an uncommonly handsome woman," he admitted generously. "I saw her at Ascot this year, and I was quite struck by the way she was wearing."

The elder lady leant forward with sudden eagerness. "If you know her so well"—she hesitated—"I wonder if you would mind going over and seeing her, Major? Rede Place is the only house that hasn't called on

us since we've been in the neighbourhood."

Major Biddell shook his head very decidedly.

"Oh no," he said, "you don't understand the kind, my dear lady! It's true that I do know her very well in a sense—but the likes of her doesn't condescend to look at the likes of me," he laughed uncomfortably. "She has no use for any one who isn't in love with her, or who hasn't been in love with her. The first time I saw her the whole crowd were at her feet. I was the only one who stood apart, so you can imagine whether she likes me or not!"

"Do tell us, Major Biddell; is it really true that——" the voice dropped, but the two other silent, unknown occupants of the carriage caught a word or two which the young lady who spoke them had certainly not intended them to hear.

"They're all like that in her particular set," declared Major Biddell briefly. He looked round uncomfortably. It is always a mistake to talk of people, especially women, by their names, in a railway carriage or any other semi-public place.

Then the mother chimed in: "One does hear very peculiar stories about her, Major."

The little man winced. "Well," he said, "there's a lot of excuse for her, isn't there? Think of the state Maule's in! There she is, a beautiful woman tied to a kind of mummy!"

"I don't think a woman, however good-looking she may be, has any excuse for breaking her marriage vows," said the elder lady uncompromisingly.

She felt that Major Biddell was not behaving very nicely to her. She had understood that he was a very useful man to know, but during the last two or three days it had begun to strike her that he was a selfish

little man. Of course he could have contrived a meeting between herself and Mrs. Maule if he really had a mind to do so! She also felt indignant with him for pretending to her and to her daughter that there was nothing specially scandalous in the behaviour of Mrs. Maule.

Why, everybody knew what Mrs. Maule was like! Even before she, Lady Barking, had become a part of Society, she had heard of the beautiful Mrs. Maule and her "goings on"; and in this part of the world the escapades of Mrs. Maule, the extraordinary things she had been known to do, were the standing gossip dish of the neighbourhood. Even now, everyone was talking of the way in which she had bewitched young Bayworth Kaye, the Redyford clergyman's son, during the last few months. It was absurd for Major Biddell to pretend that Mrs. Maule was just like everybody else!

Perhaps something of what she was feeling betrayed itself on her large, round face, for Major Biddell moved a little nearer to her. After all, Lady Barking was his hostess, and he desired to stay on at her comfortable, luxuriously appointed house for at least another ten days.

"I see you know a good bit about her," he said, grinning. "I can tell you one really funny story about her," and then he proceeded to tell it, the two hanging on his lips, though the elder of his listeners felt uncomfortable, half-ashamed at listening so eagerly to what in another mood she would probably have described as "garbage."

A hand was suddenly laid on Major Biddell's shoulder. He faced about quickly. A stranger of whose presence in the railway carriage he had scarcely been aware, was standing before him, tall, grim, formidable.

"I must ask you, sir," the stranger spoke very clearly, "to withdraw every word that you have said concerning Mrs. Richard Maule. As for the story you have just told, you and I heard it at Undulah a good many

years ago. It was told—I remember the fact, if you do not—of another lady, of, of—no matter—" he stopped himself abruptly.

Major Biddell jumped up. If no gentleman in the higher sense of the word, he was also no coward.

"I shall say exactly what I like," he said sharply, "and I question your right to interfere with me in any way. You say you met me at Undulah a good many years ago? If that's the case, you have the advantage of me!"

There was a moment's pause; then it was broken by a nervous laugh and a whisper from daughter to mother, "Poor man, I suppose he's another of Mrs. Maule's victims!"

"Perhaps I should add," said the stranger, his voice thick with anger and contempt, "that though I have never met Mrs. Maule, I know quite enough of her to be assured that this vile gossip, these—these foul allegations, are utterly, damnably untrue."

Major Biddell felt very much relieved. For a horrible moment he had supposed, not unnaturally, that the man who had just administered so sharp a rebuke to him was nearly related to Mrs. Maule. He had at once realized that the speaker was a member of the profession he had once adorned, nay more, he was uncomfortably aware that the man's dark face had been seen by him before. The unpleasant stranger was eccentric—to say the least of it. But of course there are such men in the world—Major Biddell thanked God he hadn't hitherto met many such—who go through life breaking lances for the sex.

The little scene was over in a very few moments, and, after one quick look round, the woman who sat in the furthest corner had apparently taken no interest in what was going on. Her face was turned away. She was staring out of the narrow window. Major Biddell, glancing at her apprehensively, could only see her slim, straight back, and the

veil twisted round her small hat hiding the dark shining coils of hair.

The train began to slow down. The two ladies got up with an air of rather ostentatious relief. Major Biddell opened the door and jumped out. He carefully helped his companions down the high steps. As all three moved away, Lady Barking's sonorous voice could be heard saying, "I should think that man was mad!"

"Oh no, he wasn't, mother," said her daughter loudly. "He's an adorer of the lady—that's what it is. I expect he's on his way to stay there now!"

"But they never have any visitors at Rede Place except that Miss Oglander."

The train moved on. To the woman sitting in the corner the atmosphere of the railway carriage was still charged with a not unpleasing electricity.

Very deliberately she raised her veil and subjected the man sitting opposite to a long, thoughtful scrutiny. She raked her memory in vain for the strongly-drawn dark face, the large, loosely-made figure.

Suddenly he raised his eyes and met her full, considering glance. No, they had never met before. No man who had ever known Athena Maule, even for only a brief space of time, would look into her lovely, mobile face, meet the peculiar glance of her large heavy-lidded violet eyes, as this stranger was now doing, coldly, unchallengingly.

Mrs. Maule reddened, and hurriedly pulled down her veil. She felt—and it was a disconcerting sensation—as if she had been snubbed.

CHAPTER III

"The world is oft to treason not unkind,
But ne'er the traitor can admirers find."

It was the evening of the same day.

Two men were sitting together in what was called the Greek Room by the household of Rede Place.

The elder of the two was close to the fireplace, his stiff, thin hands held out to the blue shooting flames of a wood fire. Although he was dressed for dinner, there was that about him which suggested invalidism. Cushions were piled behind him in the deep, capacious chair in which he seemed to crouch rather than to sit, and a light rug was thrown across his knees, although it was only the 1st of October.

This was Richard Maule, whose name was known to the cosmopolitan world of scholars as a Hellenist, an authority on classical archæology, on the slowly excavated story of long-buried civilizations. To those who dwelt in the present, and who only cared for the things of to-day, he was enviable as the owner of a delightful and, in its way, a famous estate in Surrey.

Rede Place! The enchanting, rather artificial pleasaunce created out of what had been a primeval stretch of woodland by an early Victorian millionaire! The banker *virtuoso*, Theophilus Joy, had committed what we should now consider the crime of pulling down a fine old Tudor manor-house in order to reproduce in the keener

English climate and alien English soil those Palladian harmonies of form which have their natural home only beneath southern skies.

There had been a time in the 'fifties and the 'sixties when Rede Place had been a synonym for all that was exquisite and perfect in art and life. But Richard Maule, though he shared many of the tastes, and had inherited all the wealth of his grandfather, was a recluse. Not even the possession of a singularly beautiful and attractive wife ever made him throw open Rede Place in the old, hospitable, magnificent way in which it had been thrown open during his own childhood and early youth.

As far as was possible, he lived alone—alone, that is, with the companionship of his wife, when she was willing to favour him with her companionship, and fortunate in the constant society of his kinsman, Dick Wantele, whom all the world knew to be Richard Maule's ultimate heir, that is, the future owner of Rede Place.

Each of the rooms of the long Italianate house was filled with curious, rare, and costly works of art, offering many points of interest to the collector and student, and this was specially true of the room in which now sat Richard Maule and Dick Wantele.

In 1843 Theophilus Joy, the friend rather than the patron of Turner, had persuaded that eccentric and secretive genius to accompany him from Italy to Greece. The enduring result of this journey was a remarkable series of water-colours forming the decoration of what was henceforth called the Greek Room of Rede Place. Over the mantelpiece was a copy, by the artist, of "Ulysses deriding Polyphemus." Below the Turner water-colours, and forming a latticed dado round the room, were a row of lacquered bookcases containing Richard Maule's unique collection of books and pamphlets, in every language, dealing with the Greece of the past and of the present.

Dick Wantele sat as far from the fire as was possible, close to a window which he would have preferred to have open. His long, angular figure was bent almost in two over his knee, on which there lay propped up a block of drawing paper. He was drawing busily sketching a small house, by the side of which was a rough plan of what was evidently to be the inside of the house. A heavily-shaded lamp left in shadow his pale, lantern-jawed face, only redeemed from real ugliness by its expression of alert intelligence.

The two, unlike most men living in the difficult juxtaposition of owner and heir, were on the most excellent terms the one with the other. Theirs indeed was the happy kind of intimacy which requires no words, no futile exchange of small talk, to prove kindness and understanding; and when at last Richard Maule spoke, he did not even turn round, for he was used to the other's instant comprehension and sympathy.

"Then the Paches are bringing over General Lingard to dinner next Tuesday?"

The younger man looked up quickly. "Yes, on Tuesday," he said. "Athena seems to think that will be the best day for them to come. You see, Jane Oglander will be here then."

"I'm glad of that," said Richard Maule.

"I hope their coming won't bore you, Richard. Athena couldn't get out of it. You see Pache practically asked her to ask them over. They want to show their lion, and they also want to entertain their lion! I confess I'm rather looking forward to seeing Lingard."

"I've seen so many lions." Mr. Maule spoke with a touch of weary irritation. And then he added, after a rather long pause, "I never cared

for soldiers, at any rate not for your modern man of war who goes out with a Gatling gun to kill a lot of poor niggers."

"Lingard has done more than that, Richard. He succeeded where three other men had failed, and what is really wonderful, he did it on the cheap."

"That I admit *is* wonderful," said Richard Maule dryly, "but I don't suppose the people who are now fêting him are doing it as a reward for his economy. However, no matter, we'll entertain the Pachian hero."

The mahogany door at the end of the long room opened, then it was closed quietly, and a woman came in, bringing with her a sudden impression of vitality, of youth, of buoyant strength into the shadowed, over-heated room.

Athena Maule advanced with easy, graceful steps till she stood, a radiant figure, in the circle of warring light cast by the fire and by the shaded lamps. Her cheeks were flushed, tinted to an exquisite carmine that seemed to leave more white her low forehead and now heaving bosom.

She stopped just between the two men, glancing quickly first at one and then at the other. And then at last, after a perceptible pause, she spoke, her clear accents, slightly foreign in their intonation, falling ominously on the ears of her small audience of two.

"I've just had a letter from Jane Oglander."

The younger of the two men wondered with a certain lazy amusement whether Athena was aware of how dramatic had been her announcement of a singularly insignificant fact. As to the older man—he who sat by the fireplace—he had turned and deliberately looked away as the door opened. But now it was he who spoke, and this to

Dick Wantele was significant, for Richard Maule very seldom spoke of his own accord, to his wife.

"Then isn't she coming to-morrow? It seems a long time since Jane left us—in August, wasn't it?"

"Jane Oglander," said Mrs. Maule, her left hand playing with the tassel terminating the Algerian scarf which slipped below her bare dimpled shoulders, "Jane Oglander wishes me to tell you both that—that she is going to be married."

Richard Maule fixed his stern, sunken eyes on his wife. It was a terrible look—a look of mingled contempt and hatred.

"Anyone we know?" asked Dick Wantele quietly.

Athena Maule looked at him with a grudging admiration. Dick was certainly what some of her English friends called "game," and her French friends "*crâne*." She had now lived in England for some eight years, but she did not yet understand Englishmen and their ways; and of all the strange Englishmen she had come across, there were few that struck her as so queer—queer was the word—as her husband's cousin, Dick Wantele. But he had long ceased really to interest her.

Walking slowly down the long gallery upstairs, Mrs. Maule had thought deeply how she should make her startling announcement, how reveal the news which had hurt her so shrewdly as to make her wish—such being her nature—that others should share her pain.

She had thought of coming in with Jane Oglander's letter open in her hand, but no, this she decided would be rather cheap, and would also in a measure prepare Dick—it was Dick whom she wished to hurt, whom she knew she would hurt. Richard Maule was incapable of being hurt by anything. But still it was very pleasant to know that even Richard would be irritated at the thought that Jane Oglander, who had

now been for so long the one healing, soothing presence in their sombre household, and whom he had stupidly believed would end by marrying Dick Wantele was now going to disappear into the morass of British matronhood.

"Anyone we know?" she repeated consideringly. "No, not exactly, but someone who is quite famous and whom we shall know very soon."

Dick Wantele shrugged his shoulders with a nervous movement. His cousin's wife was fond of talking in enigmas, especially to him, and especially when she knew he desired to be told a simple fact simply and quickly.

Then something unexpected happened. Richard Maule again spoke, and again addressed his wife.

"I suppose," he said, "you mean General Lingard?"

"How did you know? Has Jane written to you?" Mrs. Maule flashed the questions out.

The one who looked on was vividly aware that this was the first time, so far as he knew, for years, that Athena Maule had asked direct questions of her husband, questions demanding answers.

Even now Richard Maule did not vouchsafe his wife the courtesy of a reply. It seemed to him that her questions answered themselves, and in the negative.

But Dick Wantele got up. "Is this true, Athena?" he asked abruptly. "Is Jane engaged to General Lingard? What an extraordinary thing! Why, he hasn't been back from West Africa more than a fortnight."

She nodded. "Yes!—it's quite true. Apparently his parents were friends of her father ages ago. She knew him when she was a child. They met again quite by chance last time he was in England. Then he

began to write to her. It all seems to have been arranged by letter. At least she says they corresponded all the time he was away, and then he appears to have gone straight to her on the evening of the day he arrived in London. I suppose," she concluded not very pleasantly, "that she could not dash his triumph—and so she accepted him. It is very difficult," she continued, "for a woman to say no to a hero."

Dick Wantele smiled. His eyes met hers with a curious flash of rather cruel raillery. Her own dropped for a moment; then they seemed to dilate as she went on, "I really do know what I am talking about, for you see, Dick, Richard was a hero when I married him. In Greece we all looked upon the great, the noble, the famous Mr. Maule as quite a hero!"

For a moment she allowed her full glance to rest on the unheroic figure crouching by the fire, and Dick Wantele felt keenly vexed with himself. He was not often so foolish as to wage war with Richard Maule's wife in Richard Maule's presence.

All three hailed with relief the interruption caused by the announcement of dinner. Wantele got up with more alacrity than usual. He walked with a quick, sliding step to where Mrs. Maule was still standing. With a little bow he offered her his arm.

As they left the room Mr. Maule's valet came in by another door. Quickly, noiselessly, he brought forward an invalid table and placed on it a tray. There was soup, some whole-meal bread, a little very fine fruit, and a small decanter of claret. Then after the man had asked, "Is there anything else you require, sir?" and had noted the scarcely perceptible shake of the head with which Mr. Maule answered him, the master of Rede Place was left alone.

Richard Maule looked at the silver bowl containing his half-pint of soup—everything he ate was measured and weighed and prepared with the most scrupulous accuracy according to a great doctor's

ordinance—with a kind of fastidious distaste. Since his illness he had grown particular about his food, and yet as youth and man no one had been more indifferent than he to the kind of luxury by which most men set such store. During the years which had immediately preceded his marriage, it had been his boast that he could live for days and even weeks on the rough, unpalatable fare dear to the Greek peasant.

Steadying his right hand with his left, he ate a spoonful of soup, then pushed the bowl away. The news his wife had taken such malicious pleasure in telling had disturbed and pained him more than he thought anything could now disturb and pain him. He was attached to Jane Oglander; she was the only human being apart from Dick whose presence was, if not agreeable, at least not unpleasant to him. In the rare moments of kindly thought and musing on the future which sometimes visited him, he saw Jane mistress of Rede Place, bringing peace and, what is so much nearer the heart of life, love satisfied, to Dick Wantele. He had felt sure that Jane, with her tenderness, her simplicity of nature, would end where most women of her type end, by surrender.

That she would marry anyone excepting Dick Wantele had seemed impossible. But in this life, as Richard Maule had learnt far too late, it is what would have seemed impossible which happens.

Dick Wantele and Mrs. Maule sat opposite one another at a round table set at one end of the great tapestry-hung dining-room. A stranger seeing them would have thought the plain young man singularly blessed in having so lovely a table-mate sitting with him at so perfectly cooked and noiselessly served a meal as they were now enjoying.

But though there was a side of his nature peculiarly alive to certain sensuous forms of beauty, to-night Wantele only saw in Athena the malicious, almost the malignant, bearer of ill news.

But civilized man, if eating in company, must also talk, and so at last, "One sees now," he said reflectively, "why the worthy Paches have been so greatly honoured."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Maule. It was, she found, sometimes easier to ask Dick to explain himself than to try and guess what he meant.

"I mean," said Wantele, "that one can now understand why General Lingard accepted his dull relations' invitation. It was because he knew that his young woman would be in the neighbourhood, staying here with us."

"Your choice of phrase," said Athena sharply, "is not very refined."

"Isn't it?" he said mildly. "But then, Athena, I don't know that I ever set up to be a particularly refined person."

And then, as they sat sparring and jarring as they so often did at their quickly-served meals, Dick Wantele gradually became aware that Mrs. Maule was eating nothing, nay more, that her short upper lip was trembling—large tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Why!—Athena?" he exclaimed. "You mustn't allow this unexpected news to"—he hesitated for a word—"to upset you so much." He looked up across at her with a not very kind curiosity. His light observant eyes suddenly seized on what was to him an amazing sight, namely that a folded letter, covered with a fine clear handwriting he knew with a dear familiar knowledge, was working up out of Mrs. Maule's short bodice and forming a grey patch on her white neck. In spite of himself, Wantele was rather touched.

"Of course I have always known that Jane was devoted to you," he said musingly, "but I didn't realise that the feeling was reciprocated to such an extent as it seems to be!"

A flush of stormy anger reddened Mrs. Maule's face.

"With Jane often here it has been bad enough!" she said passionately. "But what will my life be like henceforth?—I mean when I shan't even have her to look forward to? Richard will force me to be here more than ever now."

"I think you will still manage to be a good deal away——"

He had been right after all. Athena was only thinking of Jane Oglander's marriage as it affected herself.

"Of course I shall stay away as much as I can!" she cried. "You and Richard much prefer my absence to my presence——" her look challenged a contradiction Wantele did not—could not utter.

"And then—and then that isn't all, Dick! I didn't mind being here when Jane was here too to make things go well——"

"Perhaps Jane will sometimes leave her hero during the very few weeks of the year that you are, as it were, in residence, Athena. He's going, it seems, to be given a home appointment. I suppose they will be married very soon?"

Wantele did not look at her as he spoke. He was tracing an imaginary pattern on the tablecloth. The numbness induced by the horrible blow she had dealt him was beginning to give way to stinging stabs of pain. He longed to know more—to know everything—to turn as it were a jagged knife in his heart-wound.

Mrs. Maule dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief, then she laughed.

"No, no, Dick," she cried, "there's no such luck in store for you—I mean for us! We're going to lose Jane—once for all. Jane has taken it rather badly. I never thought that dear saint would fall in love!" She suddenly became aware that his eyes were fixed on the letter she had thrust into the bodice of her gown when walking down the long gallery upstairs. She took it out of her warm and scented bodice, and held it out to him.

"I think you'd better read what she says."

Wantele looked at the pretty hand holding Jane Oglander's letter, but he made no attempt to take the folded paper. "I should *like* to read it—" he said lightly, "but I think I'd better not."

"Yes, do read it, Dick. Why shouldn't you?" She added slowly, "There's something about you in it too——"

Wantele hesitated, and then he fell. He leant over and took Jane Oglander's letter from her hand. His own was shaking, and that angered him. He turned his chair right round, and holding the two sheets of grey paper up close to his eyes deliberately read them slowly through.

As at last he handed them back to her, he said quietly, "You told me a lie just now, Athena. I am not mentioned in Jane's letter."

"Indeed you are!" She pointed to a thin line of writing across the top of the second sheet.

"'I hope Dick won't mind much'—" she read aloud.

"There's something else!" he cried quickly, and getting up strode round and took the letter again from her with a masterful hand. "'I hope Dick won't mind much'—" he read aloud, "'or dear Richard either.'"

Then he let the letter drop on the cloth beside her. The numbness had all gone, the pain he felt had become almost intolerable.

Mrs. Maule again tucked Jane Oglander's letter inside her bodice, then she got up. As he held the door open for her, Wantele put his hand, his cool, long-fingered, impersonal hand, on her arm.

"Athena," he said softly. "I wonder how it is that you have always had the gift of making me do things of which I knew I should live to feel ashamed. A unique gift, dear cousin——"

She turned and laughed mischievously up into his pale suffering face. "The woman tempted me, and so of course I ate!" she exclaimed. "You're not much of a man, Dick, but you have always been a thorough man in the matter of making excuses for yourself!"

CHAPTER IV

"He smarteth most who hides his smart
And sues for no compassion."

After he had closed the door behind his cousin, Dick Wantele did not go back to the little round table, its fruit and wine. Instead he began walking up and down the dining-room, his hands clasped behind his back. The reading of Jane Oglander's letter had brought with it sharp and instant punishment.

Even to her dearest woman friend Jane had said little of her inmost feelings, but the man who knew her with a far more intimate knowledge than any other human being would ever know her, understood. Jane loved Lingard. Loved him in a way he, Wantele, had not thought her capable of loving, and the revelation hurt him horribly. Why had he failed where another had succeeded with such apparent ease?

He felt a sudden hatred of the house he was in and of everything and everybody in it. Feeling pursued, accompanied by mocking demons, he hurried out of the dining-room and made his way into the square hall or atrium, as old Theophilus Joy had called it. Each of the marble figures there seemed alive to his humiliation and defeat.

Passing into a vestibule which led directly out of doors he put on a light coat, for he was delicate, Mrs. Maule would have said over-careful of himself—then he jammed a wide-brimmed soft hat on his head, and quietly let himself out of the house.

It was a still, warm night, but the moist fragrant air was heavy with the premonition of coming winter. Wantele walked a certain distance down the broad carriage way, then he cut sharply to the left, among the brambles and underwood, under high beech trees. Once there, he began to walk more slowly, keeping to the narrow path by a kind of instinct.

He welcomed the tangible fact of solitude. Even were he urgently sought for, it would be a long time before they could find him unless he himself raised his voice and gave a hullo. Richard, for once, must spend his evening solitary.

Could she have seen Wantele's long thin face as it was now, serious with the seriousness born of distress, Athena Maule would have been satisfied that the news she had been at the pains to tell in so dramatic a fashion had struck at the heart of at least one of her hearers.

Dick Wantele belonged to the type of man who achieves what he desires to achieve because his desire is generally well within the measure of his powers.

He had been confident that in time he would wear down Jane Oglander's gentle resistance, and lately—all the very time she had been corresponding with General Lingard, certainly receiving and perhaps even writing love-letters—he had believed that she was making up her mind to reward him for what had become his long fidelity. He had even gone so far as to think that only Athena Maule's watchful antagonism stood between Jane Oglander and himself.

To Wantele, the knowledge that he had been a fool stung intolerably. He had one poor consolation, the consolation of knowing that he had hidden successfully the various feelings provoked in him by the announcement, both from the cruel eyes and from the kind eyes

which had watched to see how he took news which meant so much to him. But that, after all, was but an ignoble consolation in his great bereavement.

Walking there in the darkness, with memory as his only companion, he realised all too shrewdly what the disappearance of Jane Oglander from his life would mean. Till to-night, Wantele had been wont to tell himself bitterly that the existence he was forced to lead was one by no means to be envied by other men of his age and standing. But he now looked back to yesterday with longing, for yesterday still held a future of which the major possibility was the fact that Jane might become his wife.

He had first met Miss Oglander at a moment when he had just come through a terrible secret crisis, one which had left him free of all the familiar moorings of his early life.

He had touched pitch, and to his own conscience and imagination he had been most vilely defiled. And yet circumstances had made it imperative that he should not only pretend to be clean, but also that he should affect complete ignorance of the pitch he had touched. Jane Oglander, then a young, clear-eyed girl, with a certain tender gaiety, a straightforward simplicity of nature which had strongly appealed to his own more complex character, had helped him and indeed made it possible for him to do this.

Then had come Jack Oglander's mad act and its awful consequences, and even this had helped Dick Wantele further to obliterate the memory of his own ignominious secret. He had thrown himself, with his cousin, Richard Maule's, full assent, into the whole terrible business, and Jane Oglander had found his dry sense and quiet, efficient help an untold comfort. No wonder the ties of confidence and friendship between them had grown ever closer and closer, seeming to justify the young man in the hope that the time

must come when Jane would become his wife.

To-night the news flung at him by Athena Maule wiped out the immediate peaceful past, and phantoms which he believed himself to have banished for ever sprang into being—dread reminders that no man can ever hope to escape wholly from his past.

At last, with a feeling of lassitude and relief he came to a broad low gate. The gate was locked, but he climbed over it, as he had often done before. The path went on still under trees and among underwood till it widened and became merged in a clearing, in the middle of which stood a long low building still called by its old name of the Small Farm, and now the home of one to whom Wantele often made his way in moments of depression and revolt.

When Dick Wantele had first made Mabel Digby's acquaintance, she had been a plain, observant, self-reliant little girl of nine, whose most striking features were bright brown eyes set in a fair freckled face, and masses of light yellow hair worn by her in two long pigtails. The only child of a certain Colonel Digby, whose death had taken place when she was sixteen, Mabel Digby had elected to go on living in the place where her father had brought her motherless, seven years before, and Dick Wantele had been largely instrumental in her settlement in the old farmhouse which was on the edge of the Rede Place estate.

At first the governess who had brought her up, and who had educated her in the old-fashioned, thorough, and perhaps rather limited way more usual forty years ago than now, had lived with her; but when Mabel was nineteen this lady had had to go back to her own people, and she had had no successor.

To the scandal rather than to the surprise of the neighbourhood, Miss Digby decided that henceforth she would live alone. She was well aware, though those about her were not, that her father's old soldier

servant and his wife were really more efficient and vigilant chaperons than the kind, gentle governess had been.

With Wantele the relations of Mabel Digby had always been of a singularly close and sexless nature. She had naturally begun by looking at him with her father's, the old Indian Mutiny veteran's eyes; that is, she had been gently tolerant of his fads, while neither understanding nor sharing them.

Then, as she grew older, as she read the books that he lent her and talked over with her, she had moved some way from her father's—the simple-minded soldier's—position, and she judged Dick Wantele rather hardly, half despising him for having so contentedly, or so she thought, sunk into the position of adopted son to his wealthy cousin. When she had become aware that he desired to marry Jane Oglander, a fact of which she had possessed herself by asking him the direct question, and receiving an equally direct answer, she had at once decided that he was not nearly good enough for the lady on whom he had fixed his affection, and time had in no sense modified her first view.

Still, without her knowing it, Dick Wantele counted for much in Mabel Digby's life. She was proud of his friendship and believed herself to be the recipient of all his secrets. When he was attacked, as he often was in her presence—for she was on the whole liked, and he was regarded by the neighbourhood as "superior" and "supercilious"—she always took his part.

Intimate as they were with one another, and with that comfortable intimacy which knows nothing of the doubts or recriminations which lead to what are significantly called "lovers' quarrels," there were subjects on which neither ever touched to the other. Never since the day on which Mabel Digby, at the time only fifteen, had asked him the indiscreet question which she was now ashamed to remember, had

either made any allusion to Wantele's feeling for Jane Oglander. The other subject which was taboo between them was Mabel Digby's relation to young Kaye.

Wantele was no schemer, but there was something in him which made him aware of the schemes of others, even against his own will and desire. He had become aware that Mrs. Kaye regarded Mabel Digby as a suitable daughter-in-law elect, almost on the day that the thought had first presented itself to the clergyman's wife and on Mabel's behalf he had at once said to himself, "Why not?" But during the last year he had been glad to believe that Mabel had so little suspected or assented to Mrs. Kaye's wishes as to ignore her one-time playfellow's infatuation for Athena.

His eyes had become accustomed to the star-lit darkness, and he could see the straight stone-flagged path which led to the porch of the Small Farm. As he walked up it a dog rushed out from its kennel and began barking. "Be quiet," said Wantele harshly. "Be quiet, old dog! Keep that sort of thing for your enemies and the enemies of your mistress—not for me."

Then he walked on, the dog at his heels, till he got to the porch. There he waited for a moment, for it had suddenly occurred to him that Mabel Digby might not be alone; one of the tiresome people who lived in Redyford—the village which had now grown into a town—might be spending the evening with her. Before knocking at her door he must assure himself that she was alone. Old friends as he and she were, he had never come there before so late as this.

He walked on past the porch, till he stood opposite the uncurtained window of the curious hall dining-room of the person he had come to

see. He remembered that Colonel Digby had hated curtains, and that his daughter shared the prejudice.

Mabel Digby was dressed in the rather old-fashioned looking high white muslin dress she generally wore in the evening when at home by herself. Her fair hair was drawn back very plainly from her forehead, and coiled in innumerable plaits. Colonel Digby had desired his girl to do her hair in that way when she had first turned it up, and by a queer little bit of sentiment in a nature which prided itself on its lack of sentiment, Mabel had always remained faithful to her father's fancy.

Sitting on a low chair between the deep fireplace and the long narrow oak table which ran down the middle of the room, Mabel Digby was now engaged in burning packets of letters, and she was going through the disagreeable task in the rather precise way which made her do well whatever she took in hand. Her long and not very easy task was nearly at an end, and Wantele saw clearly the few letters that remained scattered on the table. He recognised the bold black handwriting, the large square envelopes, the blue Indian stamps.

"How odd," he told himself, "that the child should have waited till to-night to burn these old letters of Bayworth Kaye!"

Mabel had never made any secret of her correspondence with the young soldier. Still, when one came to think of it, it was odd that she had troubled to keep Bayworth's letters—odder still that now to-night, the day of Bayworth Kaye's departure, she should be burning them....

After all, why should he go in and see her now? People have to bear certain troubles alone. Mabel Digby had set him, in this matter, a good example.

Wantele turned on his heel. He walked on to the grass and plunged into the herbaceous border which still formed a fragrant autumn

hedge to the little lawn. His object was to get away without being seen or heard, by the gate which gave on to the country road and which formed the proper, orthodox entrance to the Small Farm. But as he was making his way to the gate the front door opened, and Mabel Digby came out into the darkness.

"Aren't you coming in, Dick?" she called out. "I couldn't think what had happened to you! I saw you at the window, and then you disappeared suddenly. Why didn't you let yourself in? The door isn't locked, but the gate is." Mabel Digby had a loud, rather childish voice, but now Wantele was glad enough to turn and follow her into the low-pitched living room of the old farmhouse.

As he walked through into the curious and charming room, at once so like and so unlike the living-rooms of the smaller farms on his cousin's estate, he saw that Mabel Digby had thrown a large, brightly-coloured Italian handkerchief over those of the letters which still remained on the table.

"The women in the cottages do that," she said, following the direction of his eyes. "When they hear the step of a visitor at the door, they throw a dishcloth over whatever it is they want to hide, the little drop of comfort or what not, but it doesn't deceive the visitor—at least it never deceives me! I always know what there is under the dishcloth. And you know—I mean you saw, Dick, what there is under my dishcloth."

She spoke quickly, a little defiantly. Her cheeks were burning, her brown eyes very bright. She also felt unhappy, moved out of her usual self to-night.

Wantele walked over to the fireplace. He sat down in the ingle nook and held out his hands. He was a chilly creature, and though he had been walking fast he felt curiously cold.

Poor little Mabel! This was interesting and—and rather sad. He

wondered uncomfortably how much she had seen, guessed, of Bayworth's infatuation for Athena Maule. She must have seen something....

"Yes," he said at last. "It's never much use trying to prevent one's neighbours knowing what one's got under one's dishcloth. But there have never been any letters under mine. As a matter of principle I always burn any letters I receive, however temporarily precious they may be."

"There's a great deal to be said for your plan," she said. Then she began tearing up each of the few letters which remained on the long oak table, and threw the pieces, one by one, into the heart of the fire.

He watched her in uncomfortable silence. At last she came and sat down opposite Wantele.

"I suppose you have heard the great news," he said abruptly. "I mean, the piece of good fortune which has befallen the Paches?"

The girl looked up. Wantele was still staring into the fire, but his expression told her nothing.

"No," she said indifferently, "what is it?"

"They've got General Lingard staying with them, and they're bringing him over to dinner on Tuesday. Athena is going to ask you to meet him."

"Lingard?" cried the girl. "Not Lingard of the Amadawa Expedition! D'you really mean that I'm going to meet him?"

A ring of genuine pleasure had come into the young voice which a few moments before had only too plainly told a tale of dejection and bitterness.

Wantele turned and looked at her. For the first time that evening he

smiled broadly, and there came into his eyes the humorous light which generally dwelt there.

"I suppose you know all about him," he said dryly. "I suppose you followed every step of the Expedition?"

"Of course I did!" she exclaimed. "How father would have loved to meet General Lingard"—there came a touch of keen regret into her voice.

"I expect you'll meet your hero very often before you've done with him, Mabel"—as he said the words he struck a match and lit a cigarette—"for he and Jane Oglander are going to be married."

"General Lingard and Jane Oglander?" Mabel could not keep a measure of extreme surprise and excitement out of her voice, but she was, what her dead father's old soldier servant always described her as being, "a thorough little lady," and after hearing Wantele's quiet word of assent to her involuntary question, she refrained, without any seeming effort, from pursuing the subject.

At last Wantele got up. "Well," he said. "Well, Mabel? This is a queer, 'unked' kind of world, isn't it?"

She nodded her head, and without offering him her hand she unlatched the door.

When she knew him to be well away, she came back and, laying her head on the table, burst into tears. She loved Jane Oglander—she rejoiced in Jane's good fortune—but the contrast was too great between Jane's fate and hers.

But for Athena Maule, but for the spell Athena had cast over Bayworth Kaye, she, Mabel, would probably by now have been Bayworth's wife, on the way to India—India the land of her childish, of her girlish dreams.

CHAPTER V

"Nay, but the maddest gambler throws his heart."

Richard Maule waited a while to see if his cousin would come to him, and then he went up to his bedroom.

He soon dismissed his man-servant, and the book he had meant to read in the night—a book on the newly-revealed treasures of Cretan art—lay ready to his feeble hand on the table by the wide, low bed which was the only new piece of furniture placed there since the room had been the nursery of his happy childhood. But he felt unwontedly restless, and soon he began moving about the low-ceilinged, square room with dragging, heavy footsteps.

When they had brought him back ill to death, as he had hoped, from Italy eight years before, it was here that he had insisted on being put; and there were good reasons for his choice, for the room communicated by easy shallow stairs with that part of the house where were the Greek Room, and the library which had been arranged for him by his grandfather as a delightful surprise on his seventeenth birthday.

Mr. Maule's bedchamber was in odd contrast to the rest of Rede Place. The furnishings were frankly ugly, substantial veneered furniture had been chosen by the sensible, middle-aged woman to whom Theophilus Joy, after anxious consultation with the leading doctor of the day, had confided his precious orphan grandson. His old nurse's clean, self-respecting presence haunted, not unpleasantly,

the room at times when Richard Maule only asked to forget the present in the past.

His wife, Athena, had never been in this room. Even when he was lying helpless, scarcely able to make himself understood by his nurses, the stricken man had been able to convey his strong wish concerning this matter of his wife's banishment from his sick room to Dick Wantele, and Athena had quietly acquiesced....

As time had gone on, Richard Maule had become in a very real sense master of this one room; here at least none had the right to disturb him or to spy on his infirmities unless he gave them leave.

He went across to the window which commanded a side view of the door by which the inmates of Rede Place generally let themselves in and out. Dick, so he felt sure, was out of doors—no doubt walking off, as the young and hale are able to do, his anger and his pain.

A great yearning for his kinsman came over Richard Maule. Drawing the folds of his luxurious dressing-gown round his shrunken limbs, he painfully pushed a chair to a window and sat down there. And as he looked out into the October night, waiting for the sound which would tell him that Dick had come in, he allowed himself to do what he very seldom did—he thought of the past and surveyed, dispassionately, the present.

To the majority of people there is something repugnant in the sight of an old man married to a lovely young woman, and this feeling is naturally intensified when the husband happens to be in any way infirm. Richard Maule was aware that these were the feelings with which he and his wife had long been regarded, both by their immediate neighbours and by the larger circle of the outer world where Mrs. Maule enjoyed the popularity so easily accorded to any woman who contributes beauty and a measure of agreeable animation to the common stock.

But this knowledge, painful as it might have been to a proud and sensitive man, found Richard Maule almost indifferent. Had he been compelled to define his feeling in words, he would probably have observed that, after having brought his life to such utter shipwreck as he had done, this added mortification was not of a nature to trouble him greatly.

Richard Maule, in his day, and still by courtesy, a noted Hellenist, had come to a sure if secret conclusion concerning human life. He believed that the old Greeks were right in thinking that Fate dogs the steps of the fortunate, and lies in ambush eager to deal those who are too happy stinging, and sometimes deadly, blows. How else account for that which had befallen himself?

Till he had been forty-four, that is, till only ten years ago—for Richard Maule was by no means old as age counts now—his life had been, so he was now tempted to think looking back, ideal from every point of view.

True, he had lost both his parents in childhood, but he had been adored and tenderly cherished by his mother's father, the cultivated, benignant Theophilus Joy, of whom he often thought with a vivid affection and gratitude seldom vouchsafed to the dead. He trusted that the old man in the Elysian Fields was ignorant of the strange gloom which now enwrapped Rede Place.

The Fate in which Richard Maule believed had only dealt two backward blows at the cultivated hedonist whom Richard Maule now knew his grandfather to have been. One had been the premature death, by consumption, of the wife so carefully chosen, to whom there had never been a successor; and then, twenty-two years later, the death of his only child, Richard Maule's mother.

But these two offerings had satisfied grim Nemesis, and perhaps it

was open to question whether the creator of Rede Place had not spent a really happier old age in moulding and fashioning his grandson, as far as possible, to his own image, than if the beloved wife and only daughter had lived.

In these latter days, when Richard Maule was enduring, not enjoying, life, he was apt to find a certain consolation in going back to the days of his delightful childhood. His grandfather had been the King, he the Heir Apparent, of a kingdom full of infinite delights and happy surprises to an imaginative and highly-strung little boy.

Each of the ornate rooms of Rede Place, each of the grassy glades outside, was to him peopled with groups of agreeable ghosts—the ghosts of the clever men and witty women whom his grandfather delighted to bring there at certain times of each year, especially during the three summer months, when the beautiful pleasaunce he had created out of an equally exquisite wilderness was in glowing perfection.

The only dark period of the boy's life—and that he would now have been unwilling to admit—was the two years spent at Eton—the Eton of the 'sixties. His grandfather, though worldly-wise enough not to wish the lad to grow up too singular a human being, had not realized that the life he had made his grandson lead up to the age of fourteen was not a fit preliminary to a public school. At the end of two years the boy was withdrawn from Eton and once more entrusted, as he had been before, to the care of an intelligent tutor, and to teachers of foreign tongues.

Oxford proved more successful, but with Balliol, with which he had many pleasant memories, Richard Maule had one sad association. It was while he was sitting there in Hall that he had received the news of his grandfather's death.

Then had begun for Richard Maule the second happy period of his

life.

He had become a wanderer, but a wanderer possessed of the carpet of Fortunatus, and with a youth, a vigour, a zest for life sharpened to finer issues than had been the nature of Theophilus Joy.

Very soon Richard Maule made a real place for himself among the band of thinkers and lovers of the best which may always be found at the apex of every civilised society. His enthusiasm for the Greece of the past translated itself into an ardent love of modern Attica. He built a villa on Pentelicus, and there, within sight of the Ægean waters, he dreamed dreams with the Greek patriots to whose aspirations he showed himself willing to sacrifice, if need be, both blood and treasure. There also he would bring together each winter bands of young Englishmen, dowered with more romance than pence. The very brigands respected the rose-red marble villa and its English owner, and Greece for many years was his true country and his favourite dwelling-place.

This being so, it was perhaps not so very strange that in time Richard Maule should have chosen an Ionian wife. His large circle—for in those days the owner of Rede Place was a man with admiring friends in every rank and condition of life, almost, it might be said, in every country and capital of Europe—were much interested to learn that if Mrs. Maule had borne before her marriage the respectable English name of Durdon, she was through her Greek mother a Messala, the representative of a house whose ancestors had borne titles transmitted to them from the days when Venice held sway over the seven islands.

As was meet, the philo-Hellenist had met his future wife during a stay in Athens, and to him there had been something at once fragrant and austere in a courtship conducted in a rather humble villa reared on the cliff at Phaleron, from whose cramped verandah there lay unrolled

the marvellous panorama of the plain of Athens, and eastwards, across the bay, Hymettus.

It was there that Athena Durdon, her beauty made the more nymph-like and ethereal by the opalescent light of a May moon, consented to exchange the meagre life which had been led by her in the past as daughter of the British Vice-Consul at Athens, for the life she had only known—but known how well!—in dreams, that of the wife of an Englishman possessed of a limitless purse and the key to every world.

Now, to-night, looking back on it all, stirred out of his usual apathetic endurance by the knowledge of what Dick Wantele was feeling, Richard Maule smiled, a grim inward smile, when he remembered how, even during their brief honeymoon, spent at his ardent desire at Corinth, Athena had made it quite clear that what she longed for was Paris, London, or perhaps it would be more true to say the Champs Elysées and Mayfair! They had been standing—he looking far younger than his forty-five years, she in one of the white gowns in which he loved to see her, but the simplicity of which she even then deplored—close to the Pierian spring, when she had, by a few playful, but very eager, words shown him what was in her heart.

And yet, whatever he might now believe, during the first two years which had followed his marriage Richard Maule had been a happy man—happier, he had been then wont to assure himself, than in the days before he had married his enchanting, wayward, and often tantalisingly mysterious Athena. In those days none had ever seemed to regard Richard Maule as unreasonably older than Athena, for he had retained an amazing look, as also an amazing feeling, of youth.

Then in a day, an hour, nay a moment, he had been struck down.

Not even his cousin, the young man whom he now trusted and loved as men only trust and love an only son, had ever received any explanation of what had happened. To that stroke—that act of the malicious gods, as Richard Maule believed—neither he nor his wife ever made any allusion; indeed, when Dick Wantele had once spoken of the matter to Athena she had shrunk from the subject with shuddering annoyance.

The facts were briefly these. Richard Maule, walking in the garden of a villa he had taken close to Naples, had suddenly been seized with some kind of physical attack. He had lain in the hot sun till by a fortunate chance there had come up to where he was lying his wife, Athena herself. She had been accompanied by a young man, an Italian protégé of the Maules, who had discovered well-born musical genius starving in a garret of the paternal palace he had had to let out in suites of apartments to pay debts contracted not only by himself but by his brothers.

This youth had been treated with the kindest, most delicate generosity by the man whom he was wont to describe as his English saviour. The two, Mrs. Maule and the young Italian count, had been in a summer-house not many yards from where Mr. Maule must have fallen, but so absorbed had they been in a score on which the count was working that they had heard and seen nothing of what was happening in the garden outside.

One curious effect of the change in Mr. Maule's physical condition was the sudden dislike, almost horror, he betrayed for the genius to whom he had been so kind. So it had finally been arranged by Mrs. Maule, with, it was understood, the full assent of her husband, that the young man whose friendship with his benefactor had been so strangely and sadly interrupted, should continue his musical studies

at the latter's expense, the only stipulation being that he should never come to England when the Maules happened to be there.

Since that time, that is eight years ago, Richard Maule had practically recovered, not his health, but what he was inclined to style with a twisted smile, his wits.

Suddenly Dick Wantele's dark figure emerged into the moonlight from under the trees which in the daytime now formed a ruddy wall round the formal gardens of Rede Place. Mr. Maule moved back from his window. He did not wish Dick to think he had been waiting, watching for him.

And then the sight of the dark figure in the moonlight had recalled to the owner of Rede Place other vigils kept by him during the last year.

Sometimes, very often of late, Bayworth Kaye, unthinking of the honour of the woman he loved, had tried to lengthen the precious moments he was to spend with her by striking across that piece of moonlit sward which could be seen so clearly from Richard Maule's window.

But the young soldier had always left the house by a more secret way—Athena had seen to that—a way that led almost straight from her boudoir on the ground floor of the house into the Arboretum and so into the wider stretches of the wooded park.

CHAPTER VI

"Friendship, I fancy, means one heart between two."

Dick Wantele opened the door of the drawing-room. Lined with panels of cedar-wood and sparsely furnished with fine examples of early French Empire furniture, the great room looked, as did so many of the apartments of Rede Place, foreign rather than English, and it was only used by Mr. and Mrs. Maule on the rare occasions when they gave a dinner-party.

The master and mistress of Rede Place were awaiting their guests. Richard Maule, his figure looking thinner, more attenuated than ever, leant heavily with his right hand on a stick, his left lay on the mantelpiece. Dick noticed that he looked more alive than usual; there were two spots of red on his cheeks. Mrs. Maule was moving restlessly about the room: she disliked exceedingly finding herself alone with her husband, and she seldom allowed so untoward an accident to befall her.

Wantele looked at her curiously. His cousin's wife had the power of ever surprising him anew. To-night it was her dress which surprised him. It was deep purple in tint, of a diaphanous material, and rendered opalescent, shot with gleams of pale blue and pale yellow, by some cunning arrangement of silk underneath. Made, as even he could see, with but slight regard to the fashion of the moment, Wantele realised that this gown, beautiful, even magnificent as was its effect, would not appear a proper evening dress to the

conventional eye of Mrs. Pache and of Mrs. Pache's daughter.

A fold of the thin shimmering stuff veiled Athena's dimpled shoulders, and swept up almost to her throat, and her arms gleamed whitely through cunningly arranged twists of the same transparent stuff carried down to the wrist.

Her dark, naturally curling hair, instead of being puffed out stiffly as was the ugly fashion of the moment, was braided closely to her head, and on her head was placed a wreath made of bunches of small deep purple grapes unrelieved by leaves. The only ornament worn by her was a large burnt topaz—that stone which fire turns a rose red tint—attached to a seed pearl chain.

Wantele told himself with rueful amusement that Mrs. Pache would probably take the opportunity of wearing this evening her ancient diamond tiara and her most *décolleté* gown.

"I suppose you'll come back here after dinner?" he addressed Athena, and as he spoke he could not help telling himself that she was really enchantingly lovely. Mrs. Maule looked to-night as if she had stepped down from one of the friezes of the Parthenon, or perhaps had leapt from a slender vase garlanded with nymphs dancing to the strains of celestial music.

The Frenchman who had designed her dress was evidently, as are so many modern Parisians, a lover and a student of Greek art.

"Yes, I suppose we must. It would be cruel to inflict Mrs. Pache and Patty on Richard."

But she did not look at her husband while she spoke. She often conveyed messages, and even asked questions of him, by the oblique medium of Dick Wantele.

Richard Maule gave no sign of having heard her words.

"I suppose you will like to have a talk with General Lingard?" The young man turned to the silent, frail-looking figure standing by the mantelpiece. He was himself unaware of how much his tone changed and softened when he addressed his cousin.

"Yes, I'd like a few words with General Lingard. I wonder if Jane has told him that I'm her trustee. Perhaps he won't mind coming in alone to me for a few moments."

"Miss Digby."

The girl advanced into the room a little timidly. She had put on her best evening gown in honour of the famous soldier who was Jane Oglander's betrothed. It was a pale blue satin dress, touched here and there with pink. Wantele told himself regretfully that Mabel Digby's gown looked stiff, commonplace, in fact positively ugly, by contrast with Athena's beautiful costume. He liked Mabel best in the plain coats and skirts, the simple flannel or linen shirts, she always wore in the daytime.

The door was again flung open, and a small crowd of people came into the room. Mrs. Pache was wearing, as Wantele noticed with concern, her tiara, and a mauve velvet dress which had done duty at one of the last of Queen Victoria's Drawing-rooms. Hard on her mother followed Patty Pache, looking as her type of young English womanhood so often looks, younger than twenty-seven, which was her age; and then Mr. Pache and his son Tom, the latter a neat young man with a pleasant job in the Board of Trade, whom his mother fondly believed to be one of the governing forces of the Empire. Lagging behind the others was a tall lean man wearing old-fashioned, not very well-cut evening clothes. This must of course be

General Lingard, the guest of the evening.

Richard Maule steadied himself on his stick and took a step forward. There was a moment of confused talking and of hand-shaking. Dick Wantele and Mabel Digby drew a little to one side. Mrs. Pache's face broke into a nervous smile. She was wondering whether high dresses were about to become the fashion, or whether Mrs. Maule had a cold.

"May I introduce you," she said, "I mean may I introduce to you my husband's cousin, General Lingard? I think you must have heard us speak of him——"

Athena Maule held out her little hand; it lay for a moment grasped in the strong fingers of her guest. She smiled up into his face, and instantly Lingard knew her for the woman in the railway carriage, the woman he had—snubbed; the woman he had—defended. "I have often heard of General Lingard—not only from you"—she hesitated a moment—"but also from others, dear Mrs. Pache."

Tom Pache gave a sudden laugh, as if his hostess had made an extraordinarily witty joke, and Athena nodded at him gaily. He and she were excellent friends, though Tom had never, strange to say, fallen in love with her.

For a moment the five men stood together on the hearthrug.

No formal introduction had taken place between Wantele and Lingard, but each man looked at the other with a keen, measuring look. "My cousin never dines with us," Dick said in a low voice, "but we shall join him after dinner. He is looking forward to a talk with you." Then he turned to young Pache. "I'm afraid, Tom, you'll have to take in your sister. There's no way out of it!"

Tom Pache made a little face of mock resignation.

"Isn't Miss Oglander here?" he whispered. "Why isn't Miss Oglander here?" Then he drew the other aside. "I say, Dick, isn't this a *go*?"

Wantele nodded his head; a wry smile came over his thin lips. "Yes, it *is* rather a *go*," he answered dryly.

"We didn't even know Hew Lingard knew Miss Oglander!"

"And we only knew quite lately that you were related to General Lingard."

Tom Pache grinned. "Father was his guardian, and would go on guardianing him after he was grown up. He and my father had a row—years ago. But of course we made it up with him when he blossomed out into a famous character. Mother wrote and asked him to stay with us last time he was in England. He wouldn't come then. But the other day he wrote her quite a decent letter telling her of his engagement. They don't want it announced—I can't think why——"

"I suppose they both hate fuss," said Wantele briefly. "We tried to get Jane here before to-night—but she's nursing a sick friend, and she can't come for another week. By the way, I've forgotten to ask how you like your motor?"

"Ripping!" said young Pache briefly. "Unluckily Patty insists on driving it, and father weakly lets her do it."

Dinner was announced, and the four curiously assorted couples went into the dining-room.

While avoiding looking at him across the round table, Wantele was intently conscious of the presence of the man who was to become Jane Oglander's husband.

Hew Lingard was absolutely unlike what he had expected him to be. Wantele had never cared for soldiers, while admitting unwillingly that

there must be in the great leaders qualities very different from those which adorned his few military acquaintances. He had thought to see a trim, well-groomed—hateful but expressive phrase!—good-looking man. He saw before him a loosely-built, powerful figure and a dark, clean-shaven face, of which the dominant features were the strong jaw and secretive-looking mouth, which seemed rather to recall the wild soldier of fortune of another epoch than the shrewd strategist and coldly able organiser Lingard had shown himself to be.

Newspaper readers had been told how extraordinary was Lingard's personal influence over his men. An influence exerted not only over his own soldiers, but over the friendly native tribesmen.

Wantele, who read widely and who remembered what he read, recalled a phrase which had caught his fancy, a phrase invented to meet a very different case:

"They grow, like hounds, fond of the man who shows them sport, and by whose hallo they are wont to be encouraged."

Lingard looked a man who could show sport....

Almost against his will, he could not help liking the look of Jane Oglander's lover. There was humour as well as keen intelligence in Hew Lingard's ugly face. When he smiled, his large mouth had generous curves which belied the strong, stern jaw. Wantele divined that he was half amused, half ashamed, at the honours which were now being heaped upon him, and certainly he was doing his best to make all those about him forget that he was in any sense unlike themselves.

Wantele also became aware, with a satisfaction he would have found it hard to analyse, that General Lingard was paying no special attention to his hostess; or rather, while paying Mrs. Maule all the attention that was her due, there was quite wanting in his manner any

touch of the ardent interest, the involuntary emotion, which most men showed when brought in contact for the first time with Athena. And yet how beautiful she looked to-night! How full of that subdued, eloquent radiance which is the dangerous attribute of a certain type of rare feminine loveliness!

Mrs. Maule was making herself charming—charming, not only to the famous soldier who was her guest, but also to the dull old man who sat on her other side, and to his tiresome, pompous wife. She was also showing surprising knowledge of those local interests which she was supposed to despise.

Wantele's mind travelled back to the last time a dinner-party had been given at Rede Place.

Jane Oglander had been there, and on that occasion Athena had been in one of her ill moods, proclaiming with rather haughty irony her contempt for the dull neighbourhood in which she had perforce to live during certain portions of each year. Wantele remembered how he had watched her with a certain lazy annoyance, too content to feel really angry, for Jane Oglander had been divinely kind to him that day, and he had thought—poor fool that he had been!—that at last he was adventuring further than she had yet allowed him to do into her reserved, sensitive nature.

How little we poor humans know of what the future holds for us! Till a few days ago Dick had always thought of himself as a young man. To-night he felt that youth lay behind him—so far behind as to be almost forgotten—as the three young people talked and laughed across him to one another.

Athena was now talking to Mr. Pache, inclining her graceful head towards him with an air of amiable, placid interest; and, as Wantele noted with satirical amusement, Mr. Pache had the foolish, happy look that even the most sensible of elderly men assume when talking

to a very pretty woman.

Mrs. Pache did not look either happy or at ease. Even to a nimble mind it is difficult entirely to readjust one's views of a human being. Till a short time ago, in fact till his name began to be frequently mentioned in the *Morning Post*, the worthy lady had considered Hew Lingard the black sheep of her husband's highly respectable family.

There had once been a great trouble about him. That was a good many years ago—perhaps as much as seventeen years ago, just at the time that dear Tom had had the measles. She had tried to pump her husband about it last night, but he had refused to say anything, which was very tiresome, and she couldn't remember much about it.

Hew Lingard had got into a scrape with a woman; that static, dreadful fact of course Mrs. Pache remembered. Such things are never forgotten by the Mrs. Paches of this world. It was worse than a scrape, for Hew had nearly *married* a most unsuitable person—in fact he would have married her if the person hadn't at the last moment made up her mind that he wasn't good enough.

That was pretty well all Mrs. Pache could remember about it. She hadn't forgotten that rather vulgar phrase "not good enough," because her husband had come back from London to Norfolk, where they were then living, and had walked into the room with the words: "Well, it's all over and done with! She's gone and married another young fool whom she has had up her sleeve the whole time! She didn't think Hew Lingard good enough!"

Hew had taken the business very hard, instead of rejoicing as he ought to have done at his lucky escape. And they, the Paches, had seen nothing of him for many years.

Three years ago, however, dear Tom had made her write to Hew Lingard, and though Hew had refused her kind invitation, he had

written quite a nice letter.

This time both she and her husband had written to him, reminding him—strangely enough, they had both used the same phrase in their letters—that "blood is thicker than water," and urging their now creditable relative to pay them a *long* visit.

In accepting the invitation, Hew Lingard had announced his engagement to Jane Oglander—the Miss Oglander whom they all knew so well, the Jane Oglander who was often, for weeks at a time, one of their nearest neighbours, and who, everybody had thought, would end by marrying Dick Wantele!

Still, to-night Mrs. Pache told herself that Hew Lingard's engagement to Miss Oglander was odd—odd was the word which Mrs. Pache had used in this connection, not once but many times, when discussing the matter with her sleepy husband on the night Hew Lingard's letter had come, and when eagerly talking it over with her daughter the next morning.

It was so *odd* that Jane Oglander had never spoken of General Lingard. Surely she must have known that they, the Paches, were closely related to him? It was to be hoped that now Hew Lingard had become a great man, he was not going to be ashamed of the relations who had always been so kind to him, and who in the past, when he was an unsatisfactory, eccentric young man, had always advised him for his good.

What a pity it was that Hew had been in such a hurry! From what they could make out he must have gone and proposed to Miss Oglander the very day of his arrival in London.

And then there was that disgraceful story about Miss Oglander's brother. It was indeed a pity Hew Lingard hadn't waited a bit! He might marry anybody now—a girl, for instance, whose people were

connected with the Government, someone who could help on dear Tom, and get him promotion. Jane Oglander was very nice, thoroughly nice, but she would never be of any use to the Pache family.

Such were the troubled and disconnected thoughts which hurried through Mrs. Pache's mind while she listened with apparent attention to her odd, but now celebrated kinsman. General Lingard was trying to make himself pleasant to his cousin Annie by telling her of a missionary expedition to Tibet.

Mrs. Pache had always been interested in missionaries; she was a subscriber to the S.P.C.K. The Society's publications satisfied that passion for romance which sometimes survives in the most commonplace human being, especially if that human being be a woman.

Just now General Lingard was speaking with kindling enthusiasm of a certain medical missionary's fine work in West Africa. But Mrs. Pache's face clouded distrustfully. She had suddenly remembered a scene in her school-room, her children, Tom and his sister, together with two little friends, sitting round Hew Lingard listening with breathless interest to the adventures of another missionary.

This divine had sent home as relics the clothes he had worn when he had succeeded in converting a whole village in Africa, and Mrs. Pache vividly recalled the foolish verses which Lingard had declaimed to her young people with solemn face and twinkling eyes—verses which cruelly misinterpreted the missionary's intention.

Against her will the jingling lines ran in her head—

"He preached—and did not bore them;
Their chief, a hoary man,
Replied, 'We are converted,
But, to turn to other topics,
Betrousered and beshirted,
You're *outré* in the Tropics.'

The preacher is convinced in turn
And dresses—like his flock...."

She remembered with irritation how the children had insisted on making a copy of these absurd, most unbecoming, rhymes, and how they had continually sung them to the beautiful old tune of "She Wore a Wreath of Roses."

Mrs. Pache allowed her eyes to wander round the table. How wizened and old Dick Wantele was beginning to look! If poor Mr. Maule lasted much longer, Wantele would be quite middle-aged before he came into this fine property.

At one time—oh, long ago now, ten years ago, when they first moved into the neighbourhood, when Patty was only sixteen—Mrs. Pache had had a vague hope that Dick Wantele and her Patty might take a liking to one another. Oddly enough, quite the opposite had happened! Though thrown into the conventional intimacy induced by propinquity, Patty had disliked Dick from the first; she thought him priggish and affected, and he was never more than coldly civil; how odd now to think that till the other day, they had all vaguely supposed that he would end by marrying Miss Oglander....

Mrs. Pache looked fondly at her daughter. Patty didn't look as well as usual to-night—her gown showed too much red arm. No doubt high evening dresses were "coming in," for Mrs. Maule was generally in

advance of the fashion.

Patty was leaning forward trying to join in the conversation of Mrs. Maule and of her father. Mrs. Pache wished pettishly that Hew Lingard would stop talking. She wanted to hear what Patty was saying, and her wish became at last painted very legibly on her face.

"The Barkings? Oh, Mrs. Maule, they're such nice people! I do hope you will call on them"—Patty's voice was raised in unusual animation. And then her father's gruff voice broke in: "They were out when my wife called on them; but Lady Barking wrote a note asking Patty over to dinner. They have four men staying in the house just now, and only their married daughter to entertain them."

"Wasn't it lucky? And I enjoyed myself so much!" Everyone looked at the fortunate Patty. Even Wantele felt a thrill of lazy interest. Newcomers in a country neighbourhood count for much, and rightly so, to the old inhabitants.

"You remember what Halnaver House used to look like in the days of poor dear old Lady Morell? Well, now it's quite different! You remember the staircase, the famous old carved oak staircase?"

Patty looked round the table eagerly, and Wantele nodded assent.

"Well, they've taken the staircase away! They're building a most delightful house in town, right in the middle of London, and yet it's to be exactly like a country house! So they're going to put that oak staircase there, and they've installed a lift at Halnaver instead! You press a button and the lift takes you up to any floor—even right to the very top of the house, where the garrets have been turned into the most delightful bachelors' rooms——"

"Oh Patty, you didn't tell me that," cried her mother. "What an extraordinary thing! Then where are the servants' quarters to be?"

"I did tell you, mother—I know I did! Where the old stables used to be, of course! They've built a wing out there. It really has become a wonderful house," said Patty happily. It was not often that she was listened to with such respectful attention. "By simply pressing a button as you lie in bed you can lock and unlock the door of your room!"

"The house must be all buttons"—observed Wantele thoughtfully.

But Patty went on: "One of the men staying there, a Major Biddell, said he had never stayed in such a comfortable house! In fact he said—and he seems to know everybody and go everywhere—that it was as comfortable as the Paris Ritz Hotel. Indeed, he went further, and declared that not even the Ritz Hotel has a quarter of the clever contrivances that Lady Barking has managed to put into that poor old place!"

"There can be no doubt at all," said Mrs. Pache, "that the Barkings will prove a most delightful addition to the neighbourhood." She looked insistently at Athena Maule. "I do hope you are going to call on them," she said.

Athena looked down. Mrs. Pache noticed with some irritation that her hostess had extraordinarily long and silken eyelashes. She almost wondered if they could be real.

"I think not," Mrs. Maule at last answered, very quietly.

Lingard was struck by the purity of her enunciation. To Mrs. Maule her father's tongue was an acquired language. As a child she had only spoken modern Greek and French.

"I have seen the Barkings. Dick and I passed them once when we were driving. And then last week I found myself, for a few minutes, in

a railway carriage with Lady Barking and her daughter——"

For a swift moment Athena, raising her eyes, looked straight at General Lingard; then her violet, dark fringed eyes dropped, and she added, "I dare say they are excellent people."

"They're much—much more than that!" cried Patty, offended.

"But surely a little noisy? I did not feel them to be of our sort—I mean Richard's and mine," said Athena. "We are very quiet folk. No," she threw her head back with the proud, graceful little gesture most of those present were familiar with—"I do not think it likely that we shall know the Barkings."

"Oh, but, Mrs. Maule, do stretch a point"—Patty's voice was full of earnest entreaty. "They are so anxious to know you! They have heard so much about Rede Place!" She turned appealingly to Wantele, but he looked, as those about him so often saw him look, irritatingly indifferent, almost bored.

Again Mrs. Maule smilingly shook her head.

"If they entertain as much as they are going to do, I'm sure that friends of yours will often be staying with them," Patty said defiantly.

"I do not think that very likely." Mrs. Maule spoke with a touch of scorn in her voice, and Patty Pache felt a wave of anger sweep through her. She had *promised* her new friends that Mrs. Maule should call at Halnaver House.

"Then you'll be rather surprised to hear that even now there is a man there, that Major Biddell—such an amusing, delightful man—who *does* know you! Lady Barking wanted to send him over to call. He seemed rather shy about it, but I told him that you and Dick were always pleased to see people, even when Mr. Maule did not feel up to the exertion."

"I hope, Miss Patty, that you do not often take my name in vain"—there was a touch of severity in Dick Wantele's voice.

She blushed uncomfortably. "Oh, but it's true!" she cried. "You and Mrs. Maule often see people when Mr. Maule isn't well!"

As the ladies walked out of the room, Athena lingered a moment at the door. "Please bring them all back to the drawing-room," she whispered hurriedly to Wantele. "I wish to take General Lingard in to Richard myself. Jane asked me to do so in her last letter."

Wantele looked at her musingly. He felt certain Jane had done nothing of the kind. Athena was fond of telling little useful lies. It was a matter of no importance.

Twenty minutes later Athena Maule and Hew Lingard passed slowly across the square atrium, which formed the centre of Rede Place.

Save for the white marble presences about them they were alone, alone for the first time since that brief moment of dual solitude in the railway carriage when Lingard had looked at her in cold, mute apology for the scene he had provoked, and which she had performed witnessed.

The door of the room they were approaching opened, and a manservant came out with a covered dish in his hand.

"My husband is not quite ready for us," Athena spoke a little breathlessly. She felt excited, wrought up to a high pitch of emotion. For once Chance, the fickle goddess, was on her side. "Shall we wait here a few moments?" She led him aside into a deep recess.

Then, when the servant's footsteps had died away, she turned her face up to him and Lingard saw that her beautiful mouth was quivering with feeling, her eyes suffused with tears. So might Andromeda have stood before Perseus when at last unloosened from the cruel rock, the living, eloquent embodiment of passionate and innocent shame.

"I want to thank you——" she whispered. "And—and—let me tell you this. Simply to know that there is in this base, hateful world a man who could do what you did for a woman unknown to him, has altered my life, given me courage to go on!"

Mrs. Maule spoke the truth as far as the truth was in her to speak. The incident in the railway carriage had powerfully moved and excited her; she had thought of little else even after Jane Oglander's letter announcing her engagement had come to divert the current of her life. Nay, the news conveyed in Jane's letter had brought with it the explanation of what had happened. Athena had leapt instinctively on the truth. Her unknown friend—her noble defender—could have been no other than General Lingard himself, on his way to stay with the Paches.

It was Athena Maule, in her character of Jane Oglander's dearest friend, who had made the quixotic stranger's sword spring from its scabbard. The knowledge had stung; but she was now engaged in drawing the venom out of the sting. It was surely her right to make this remarkable, this famous man value and respect her for herself—not simply for Jane's sake.

"I wish I could have killed the cur!" Lingard's voice was low, but his face had become fierce, tense—the face of a fighter in the thick of battle.

Mrs. Maule was filled with a feeling of exquisite satisfaction. Once more she found life worth living....

But General Lingard must not be allowed to forget Jane Oglander, Athena's friend—Athena's almost sister—the one woman who loved and admired her whole-heartedly, unquestioningly.

"Because of what you did the other day, and—and because of Jane"—her voice shook with excitement—"we must be friends General Lingard." She held out her hand, and Lingard, taking the slender fingers in his, wrung Athena's hand, and then with a sudden, rather awkward movement he raised it to his lips.

"And now we must go on," she said quietly. "Richard is waiting for us."

All emotion has a common denominator. The last time Lingard had been as moved as he was now was when he had parted from Jane Oglander in the little sitting-room in that shabby house on the south side of the Thames.

There was in Jane a certain austerity, a delicate reserve of manner, which had made him feel that she was a creature to be worshipped from afar, rather than a woman responsive to the man she loves.

Each happy day of the week they had spent together practically alone in London, Lingard had had to woo her afresh. But that, to a man of the great soldier's temperament, had been no matter for complaining. Her scruples and delicacies had been met by him with infinite indulgence and tenderness.

Then on the last day, they had had their first lovers' quarrel. He had entreated her to come away with him, to accept, that is, the Maules' eager invitation. Was he not going to the Paches' simply because they lived near Rede Place? But Jane had promised to stay a week with a friend who was ill—and she would not break her word. Lingard had become suddenly angry, and in his anger had turned cold.

For the first time in his knowledge of her, tears had sprung to Jane's eyes. Where is the man who does not early make the woman who loves him weep? But these tears, or so it had seemed to him, had unlocked a deep spring of poignant feeling in her heart, or perchance had made it possible for her to allow her lover to know that it was there.

He had moved away from her side, and then, in a moment, had come from her a smothered cry, a calling of her whole being for and to him. She had thrown out her hands with the instinctive gesture of a child who wishes to turn one who has been unkind, kind. And when she was in his arms, there had come to her that sense of spiritual and physical response which had brought to him the moment of exultant triumph he had thought would never be his.

How strange that after that she should still have held out, still have kept her word to the sick woman who needed her! It was of Jane Oglander—of Jane as she had been, all tenderness and fire, on that day when they had parted, that Lingard thought as he followed the woman whom he now called friend into the room where Richard Maule sat waiting for him.

The Paches' horseless carriage was proceeding through the park at a pace which two of the five sitting in it felt to be, if delightful, then rather dangerous.

"Athena grows more beautiful every time I see her," said Tom Pache suddenly. He and Hew Lingard were sitting side by side opposite Mr. and Mrs. Pache. Patty was wedged in between her parents.

"I thought her gown very odd and unsuitable," said his mother sharply. "It isn't as if she had a cold. I suppose she keeps her smart evening

gowns for her smart visits."

"Yes, I thought it a pity she should hide anything so good as her shoulders," answered her son thoughtfully.

The man by his side made a restless movement, and increased the distance between himself and his young cousin.

"I told you the Barkings had heard all about Athena Maule and Bayworth Kaye, mother," said Patty eagerly.

"They probably know a great deal more than there is to know," said her father gruffly. "People talk of London as the home of scandal. I say I never heard as much scandal in my life as since we came to live in this neighbourhood."

"But, father, you must admit Bayworth Kaye was quite cracked about Athena? I don't think anyone could deny that who ever saw them together. Why it made one feel quite uncomfortable!"

Lingard felt as if he must get out, away from these horrible people. When he had last seen the Paches, Patty had been a pretty little girl, pert perhaps, but not too much so in the eyes of the young, indulgent soldier. He now judged her with scant mercy.

"I don't think Athena could very well help what happened," said Tom Pache judicially. He and his father generally took the same side. "Bayworth Kaye had the run of Rede Place since he was born. And so—well, I don't suppose it took very long for the mischief to be done—so far as he was concerned, I mean."

"Oh, but, Tom, it was much more than that! Athena could have helped it—of course she could!" Patty's voice rose. "Why, she got him asked to a lot of houses where she was staying herself, and they say in the village that she gave him her key of the Garden Room. He used to stay there fearfully late—long after Mr. Maule and Dick Wantele had

gone to bed!"

"It was very hard on Mabel Digby," said Mrs. Pache irrelevantly. She had a tepid liking for her young neighbour.

"I don't think Mabel really cared for him, mother." There was a streak of thin loyalty in Patty Pache's nature. "You know she was almost a child when Bayworth Kaye first went to India."

"She was seventeen," said Mrs. Pache, "very nearly eighteen. And I know they wrote to one another by every mail—his mother told me so."

"It's rather hard on the women of the neighbourhood, when one comes to think of it," said Tom Pache, smiling in the darkness. "Athena's a formidable rival." His mother and his sister felt that he spoke more truly than he knew.

"There's only one person," cried Patty suddenly, "who's never been in love with Athena! And it's so odd, because he's always with her—I mean Dick Wantele."

"My dear child, how you let your tongue run on," said her mother reprovingly. "You seem to forget that Athena is a married woman!" In another, a more natural, tone she added: "And then Dick Wantele, as you know perfectly well, has always been attached to——"

Her husband gave her a violent shove and she did not finish her sentence. They had all forgotten the large, silent, alien presence of Hew Lingard.

CHAPTER VII

"Who ever rigged fair ships to lie in harbours?"

Dick Wantele was driving back to Rede Place from Selford Junction. He had been away for four days, and now he was very glad to be home again. He very seldom left Rede Place unless Jane Oglander was there,—in fact, this was the first time he had gone away leaving Richard Maule and Athena alone together since they had returned, eight years before, from what had proved so disastrous a winter in Italy.

Wantele had grown accustomed to his servitude, but there came moments when the strain of the life he was leading became intolerable, and then, suddenly, he would go away for a few days, sometimes to an old friend, sometimes alone.

This time both Richard and Athena had pressed him to keep an engagement he had made some weeks before. He had known Richard's motive—Jane was to arrive during his absence, and Richard had wished him to be spared certain difficult moments—those of bidding Jane welcome, of wishing Jane joy.

As to Athena's motive in wishing him away, he had been less clear. None the less had he been sure that she had a motive.

And so he had gone, this time to an old college friend, and he had enjoyed the desultory talking, the indifferent shooting, and the lazy reading, he had managed to cram into his short holiday. He had now

come back, as he always did, after a thorough change of scene and of atmosphere, feeling, if not a new man, then patched in places, and once more facing life in his usual philosophical, slightly satirical, spirit.

Now their old coachman was telling him all sorts of bits of news that amused him; for a great deal can happen, in fact a great deal always does happen, during four days, in a country neighbourhood.

The most exciting bit of news was that of an accident to the Paches' new motor. The coachman told the tale with natural relish.

"The hind wheel just sank down in that deep rut by that there Windy Common corner—you know, sir. The machine went over as gentle as a baby! But they had a rare job getting the queer thing righted again, so I'm told, sir."

"I hope no one was hurt, Jupp?"

"Miss Patty—she as caused all the mischief—escaped scot free. But Squire Pache, so they say, was shook something dreadful! And as for Mrs. Pache, why, her arm was quite twisted. There's some people as says she'll never get it right again."

"Oh, but that's a dreadful thing!" exclaimed Wantele, rousing himself. He felt suddenly ashamed of his long and deep-seated dislike of Mrs. Pache and of poor Patty. He and Jane Oglander might drive over there this afternoon to enquire how they all were.

Then the young man's fair, lined face became overcast. He reminded himself bitterly that Jane's time and thoughts now belonged to someone else. Lingard would naturally spend every moment he could escape from the afflicted Paches at Rede Place; and when he, her lover, was not there, Jane would be closeted with Athena, or occupied in amusing Richard.

They do say, sir, that Mrs. Pache is so bad that she says she'll never ride in that dratted motor-car again."

"That's bad, Jupp, very bad! I'll go over and enquire to-morrow morning——By the way, when did the accident happen?"

"The very day after you left, sir."

They were now within the boundaries of Rede Place. The rather fantastic foreign-looking house lay before them, its whiteness softened by the ruddy autumn tints of the trees.

Wantele, for the first time in his life, felt a sudden dislike of the place and of its artificial beauty sweep over him. His existence there had only been rendered tolerable, kept warmly human, by the coming and going of Jane Oglander.

No doubt she would now be in the hall, waiting for him alone—she always did instinctively the kind, the tactful thing. But for the moment he had no wish to see her. There ran a tremor through him, and the young horse he was driving swerved violently. He flicked the horse sharply on the under side. How—how stupid, how absurd of him to feel like this!

While he had been away he had tried to forget Jane, but whenever he was alone, and during the long wakeful hours of each night, his thoughts had enwrapped her more closely than ever. It seemed so strange that she would no longer be free to console him, to chide him, to laugh at and with him.

From to-day everything in their relationship would be changed. Even now, Jane was probably with her lover. Wantele averted his thoughts quickly from the vision his morbid imagination forced upon him. Lingard looked the man to be a masterful, a happy wooer.

In two or three days the famous soldier would be an inmate of Rede

Place—his visit had been arranged just before Wantele had gone away. Richard Maule had himself suggested it. In fact, as Athena had observed on the day following their first acquaintance with Lingard, it seemed absurd that such a man should be staying with the Paches....

They were now close to the house, and the thought of an immediate meeting with Jane became suddenly intolerable to Wantele.

"I'll get out here," he said hurriedly, throwing the reins to Jupp. "You can take my bag round while I walk up through the arboretum and let myself in by the Garden Room."

In '51, when crystal houses, as they were called for a brief span, became a fashion, Theophilus Joy had built a large conservatory on to one end of his country house. Ugly though it was, the Garden Room, as it soon became called, had greatly added to the amenities of Rede Place. Fragrant and cool in summer, warm and scented in winter, it was considered a delightful novelty by the old banker's guests.

Those had been the days when the boy Richard, moving among the amusing and amused worldlings who formed his grandfather's large circle of acquaintances, had not known that there were such things as disease, tragedy, and passion in the world. Let us eat and be merry—so much of his grandfather's philosophy young Richard had imbibed, and no more.

The Garden Room was still a delightful place, with its marble fountain brought forty years before from Naples, its flowering creepers, and the rare plants which still made it the pride of the head-gardener of Rede Place.

Yet it was but little used. Now and again on a rainy day Richard Maule would drag his feeble limbs along the warm moist stone pavement for the little gentle exercise recommended by his old friend

and neighbour, Dr. Mannet. But he never did this when his wife was at Rede Place, for Athena's boudoir, the sitting-room which she had herself chosen and arranged to her fancy soon after her first coming to England, was the end room on the ground floor of the house, and so next to the Garden Room.

Some years before, when a neighbouring country house had been burgled, new locks had been fitted to the various doors giving access to the gardens and the park, and now the door of the Garden Room was always kept locked. There were three keys—Wantele and Athena each had one, and the head-gardener kept the third.

As Wantele passed through into the house, he heard the murmur of voices in the boudoir; Athena's clear voice dominated by a man's deep, vibrating tones.

Yes, instinct born of jealous pain had served him truly—Lingard was now at Rede Place. They were there—Jane and Lingard—behind that door....

He hurried the quicker to escape from the sound of voices. The broad corridor which had been a concession to English taste was very airless, for in deference to Richard Maule's state of health the house was always over-heated. Athena, too, had a dread, a hatred of cold; in all essentials she was a southerner.

Dick Wantele loved wild weather and chill winter. He hated the languor and heat in which he was condemned to spend so much of each day.

At last, when in the hall, Wantele stayed his steps.

During his brief absences from home letters were not sent on to him, for he was always glad to escape for a few days from his usual correspondence, letters connected with his cousin's affairs and with the estate, important to the senders if not to the recipient. But there

was always a moment of reckoning when he came back, and now he knew that there must be many little matters waiting to be dealt with. He might as well find out what there was before going on to see Richard in the Greek Room.

Then, while walking across to the marble table where his letters were always placed, the young man was astonished to see on the floor a large half-filled postman's sack. The label on it bore General Lingard's name; the Paches' address had been crossed out, and that of Rede Place substituted.

Really, it was rather cool of Lingard to have his correspondence sent on in this fashion! It was also a proof that he must be spending the major part of each day at Rede Place. Heavens! what a correspondence the man must have. That was a privilege of fame he could well spare his successful rival.

He turned to his own letters. There were many more than usual. And then, as he tore the envelopes rapidly open, it seemed to him that most of his acquaintances within a certain radius had written to him during the four days he had been away!

Each letter he opened—and this both diverted and angered Wantele—ran on the same theme and contained the same request.

"Dear Mr. Wantele—I am writing to you because Mrs. Maule may be away. We hear that General Lingard is staying with you for a few days. It would give us such pleasure if you would bring him over, either to lunch or dinner, whichever suits you best. It will be an honour as well as a pleasure to make General Lingard's acquaintance. If you will send me a line by return, we could manage to make any day convenient that would suit you and General Lingard."

Old friends, new friends, people whom he had never met and whom he had no intention of meeting—were each and all in full cry.

The last letter he opened was in Tom Pache's handwriting. The young man had written at his mother's dictation, and the note contained a long list of the people whom she had promised to invite, or had actually invited, to meet her famous relative.

There was a postscript from Tom himself.

"It is most awfully good of Mr. and Mrs. Maule to have asked Hew Lingard over a few days before they expected him. As you see, mother's plans are all upset, and she is dreadfully worried about it all."

Then Lingard was already here? Wantele wondered how he was to answer those absurd letters—how to put off these people. He made a point of being on good, if not on very cordial, terms with his neighbours. He and Richard both acknowledged a certain duty to the neighbourhood. In spite of Mr. Maule's physical condition, Rede Place did its fair share of quiet, very quiet, entertaining, generally when Mrs. Maule happened to be away and when Jane Oglander happened to be there.

Athena had long ago decided that her neighbours were the dullest set of people to be found in an English countryside, and that the receiving of them at lunch or dinner bored her to tears.

Well! There was nothing for it now but to go and consult Athena as to what should be done. After all, she was the mistress of Rede Place, and Richard was in no state to be asked tiresome questions or required to make tiresome decisions.

Holding the letters which had so perturbed him in his hand, Wantele slowly retraced his steps. He might as well meet Jane now as at any other time or in any other way.

Wantele knocked at the door of the boudoir. Since her arrival at

Rede Place, eight years ago, he had remained on very formal terms with his cousin's wife.

There fell a sudden silence on the occupants of the room, and then, after a perceptible pause, Athena called out in her clear, exquisitely modulated voice, "Come in. Who is it?"

Dick Wantele slowly turned the handle of the door, and in a flash he saw that Jane Oglander was not there.

There were but two people in the room. One was Mrs. Maule; she was sitting on a low seat close to the fire, her lovely head bent over an embroidery frame; the other, General Lingard, was standing, looking down at her with an eager, absorbed expression on his face.

Athena was wearing a white gown, fashioned rather like a monk's habit. It left the slender, rounded column of her neck bare.

The intruder, feeling at once relieved and disappointed, stared doubtfully at the famous soldier. General Lingard looked a younger man than he had done the other night—younger and somehow different, far, far more vividly alive. Perhaps it was his clothes; rough morning clothes are more becoming to the type of man Wantele now took Lingard to be than is evening dress. Both he and Mrs. Maule looked most happily and intimately at ease.

Wantele felt a pang of angry irritation. How like Athena to take General Lingard away from Jane! And to keep him with her while her friend was doubtless engaged in doing what should have been her own job—that is, in looking after Richard.

But many years had gone by since Athena had even made a pretence of looking after Richard. Had Wantele been just, which he was at this moment incapable of being, he would have admitted to himself that Richard would have given Athena small thanks for her company.

"Dick! Is that you? Why, I thought you weren't coming back till the afternoon! Have you seen Richard?"

Athena had a subtle way with her of making a man feel an intruder.

But Wantele held his ground.

"I always meant to come back in the morning," he said shortly. "No, I haven't seen Richard."

"I'm glad you've come, for Richard's worried about some tiresome letters he's had this morning."

"Is Jane with Richard?" he asked abruptly.

It was odd of General Lingard not to have come forward and shaken hands. The soldier had just nodded—that was all. He also seemed to feel the young man's presence an intrusion.

"Jane hasn't come. Didn't you know? I thought she would have written to you. She is staying a week longer with that tiresome friend of hers. There's to be an operation now, it seems, and the woman's implored Jane to stay with her till it's over. Oh, but ever so many things have happened——"

Athena put aside her work and got up. "The poor Paches have had a motor accident, and so we—I mean Richard and I—asked General Lingard to come here at once instead of waiting till the end of the week. I'm afraid he's had rather a dull time, though the Paches have very kindly allowed us to use their motor car—the car wasn't hurt in any way—" she turned to her guest and smiled. "But now that you're back, Dick, it will be all right."

She sat down again, and again bent over the embroidery frame. Each of the men looking down at her felt himself dismissed.

Together they left the room, and Dick Wantele could have laughed aloud to see General Lingard's air of discomfiture.

He thought he could reconstitute the events of the last three days. No doubt Richard had insisted on Jane's lover being asked over to stay, and Athena, as was her way, had resented the trouble of entertaining Richard's guest.

Mrs. Maule had no liking for a man on half terms. With her it must be all or nothing—too often it was all that she received; seldom, as in this case—nothing. Wantele felt a malicious pleasure in the knowledge that for once Athena's spells would be powerless, that in this unique instance there was stretched before her a gateless barrier. Hew Lingard was the lover of her friend, and Athena, so Wantele acknowledged, loved Jane Oglander with whatever truth was in her.

Such were his disconnected thoughts as he walked silently by the other's side. Yes, Lingard seemed strangely unlike the man who had dined there a week ago. Dick Wantele possessed an almost feminine power of observation, of intuition. He would have been a happier man had he lacked it.

"I must go and find my cousin," he said at last. "I haven't seen him yet. But he won't keep me long."

"Please don't trouble about me. I've a lot of letters to write. Mrs. Maule has been good enough to give me a sitting-room."

Lingard spoke with a touch of rather curt impatience. He had no wish to be entertained by this odd, idle young man. Mr. Maule's heir did not attract him; Dick Wantele took too much upon himself.

Lingard was already on excellent terms with his host—his poor, feeble, afflicted host. As for Mrs. Maule—he thought of her as Athena, had she not already asked him to call her Athena?—she was, if only

as Jane Oglander's intimate friend, already set apart on a pedestal. And then Athena had said a word—only a word—of the painful position she occupied in her husband's house, that of an occasional and not very welcome guest. It had made Lingard seethe with unspoken, but the more deeply felt, indignation.

There is something moving, to a generous masculine mind something very pathetic, in the sight of a beautiful woman hardly used by fate. Lingard already suspected that in this case Dick Wantele played the ugly part of fate. True, Jane seemed very fond of the young man, and he had been good to her in the terrible affair of her brother; but the taste of women in the matter of men is not always to be trusted.

General Lingard, in spite of the qualities which made him a successful leader of fighting men, had not troubled himself, indeed he had not had the time, to probe or question certain accepted axioms.

As the two came into the hall, Lingard stepped aside and took up the heavy mail bag.

"Please don't do that! It must be awfully heavy!" The host in Dick Wantele was roused. "It ought to have been put in your sitting-room long ago."

Lingard gave a short, not very pleasant, laugh. He was very strong and Wantele looked delicate, languid—not the sort of man Lingard liked or was accustomed to meet. It was a pity Wantele had come back so soon. The three days alone with Richard Maule—and with Athena—had been very pleasant....

Dick went on, with his quick, light steps, into the Greek Room. He had again shouldered his burden, and it was pressing on him even more hardly than usual. If only Jane had been there! He now longed for her presence as a man longs for a lamp in dark subterranean

places from which he knows no issue.

With a shock of surprise he realised that the letters he had meant to show Athena were still in his hand, and that he had said nothing to her of their contents.

He found Richard Maule sitting, as he always did sit in any but the hottest summer weather, crouched up in front of the fire; but when Dick came in Mr. Maule smiled as a man smiles at his own son, and the other saw that his cousin looked more vigorous, more alive, than usual. There was even a little colour in his white drawn cheeks.

It was a long time since they had had any visitor, any man that is, staying at Rede Place; and Wantele now asked himself whether they were wise in leading so quiet a life. Richard was evidently enjoying General Lingard's visit.

"He's a good fellow, Dick. He grows on one with acquaintance. I don't know but that Jane——" He stopped abruptly. The thought in his mind to which he had all but given utterance was that Jane Oglander, after all, had done well for herself. "He's not a bit spoilt. And yet there must be a lot of people running after him! Just look at these letters! We shall have to do something about them. Eh? Some of these people will have to be asked here to meet him, I suppose?"

And Wantele, again with mingled annoyance and amusement, saw another pile of notes—far smaller, it was true, than his own—lying on the reading-desk which was always close to his cousin's hand.

"The duke has written to me. They want to have him over there for a couple of nights—if we can spare him."

Mr. Maule smiled, not unkindly.

"It's evident we can't hope to keep the hero all to ourselves. It's lucky Jane Oglander isn't here! I thought it such a pity yesterday, but now

I'm glad. We may be able to ask a few people over before she arrives—when she's here, Lingard won't want a crowd about. We might begin with the Sumners—you see they ask themselves, it's very good of them, for to-morrow!" he laughed outright, a thin, satirical and yet again not an unkindly laugh.

Dick had never seen his cousin so animated, so interested, in a word, so amused, for years. He was rather surprised.

"It'll be an awful bore," he said slowly, "and Richard—are you sure that you wish it? I think I could manage to put off most of these people—I mean without giving offence."

"No, no, Dick! I know it'll give you a certain amount of trouble"—the older man looked attentively at the younger—"but I've felt lately that we didn't see enough people. I don't see why my state and Athena's selfishness"—he uttered the word very deliberately—"should force you to live such an unnatural life as you've now been leading for so long——" He waited a moment and then said, more lightly, "I'm afraid that we both, you and I, have grown to believe that Jane Oglander's the only young woman in the world."

Wantele gave him a swift look.

"She's the only woman in the world for me," he muttered. "Lingard may be a good fellow, Richard, but I wish—I would give a good deal to know what Jane sees in him." He also was trying to speak lightly.

"Ah, one always feels that!" Richard Maule lay back in his chair. The short discussion had tired him. "Then will you see about it all, Dick?"

"Yes," cried Wantele hastily, "of course I will! I agree that we've been too much shut up."

He went back to Athena, and this time she welcomed him graciously. She also had received letters asking for a peep of their hero.

Wantele looked at his cousin's wife with reluctant admiration. He had not seen her looking as animated, as radiant as—as seductive as she looked now for a very long time.

"Don't you see the change in Richard?" she asked eagerly. "He's become quite another creature since General Lingard came here. I've always thought you kept Richard far too much shut up, Dick——"

"You never said so before," he said sharply.

She shrugged her shoulders. "It was none of my business."

Her face clouded, and with hasty accord they changed the subject, and with exactly the same words: "Who had we better ask first?" And then they stopped, and laughed. For the moment these two, Richard Maule's heir and Richard Maule's wife, were on more cordial terms than they had been for years.

"You have now got all the letters," she cried gaily—"Richard's, mine, and yours! Look them over, and make out a list—I'm sure you're much better at that sort of thing than I am!"

He left her to carry out her behest.

If there was anything like real entertaining to be done at Rede Place, all kinds of arrangements would have to be made, and the making of them must fall on Dick Wantele. Athena had told the truth when she had described herself to General Lingard as only a guest in her husband's house. But she had omitted to add that it was an arrangement which had hitherto suited her perfectly, and the only one she would have tolerated.

CHAPTER VIII

"To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance."

During the days that followed Dick Wantele's return home, it seemed to him as though a magic wand had been waved over Rede Place.

Mrs. Maule had no wish to keep her famous guest to herself. Even to the two men who watched her with a rather cruel scrutiny so much was clear. She seemed, indeed, to delight in exhibiting General Lingard to the neighbourhood, and the neighbourhood were only too willing to fall in with her pleasure.

The gatherings were small, when one came to think of it—eight or ten people to lunch, ten or twelve people to dinner.

How accustomed Dick grew to the formula which had at first so much surprised him! "Dear Mrs. Maule," or "Dear Mr. Wantele" (as the case might be) "We hear that General Lingard is staying at Rede Place. It would give us very great pleasure if you would bring him over to lunch or dinner, whichever suits you best."

But there Athena wisely drew the line. No, she would not take General Lingard, or allow him to be taken, here and there and everywhere! He was at Rede Place for rest. But the agreeable people, the people who would amuse and interest him, and the people who if dull had, as it were, a right to meet the lion, were asked in their turn to come.

They would arrive about half-past one, filling the beautiful rooms generally so empty of human sounds, with a pleasant bustle of talk

and laughter. They would lunch in the tapestry dining-room, none too young or too old to enjoy the far-famed skill of Richard Maule's Corsican chef; and then, according to their fancy, or according to Athena's whim, they would wander about the house, looking at the pictures and fingering the curios which enjoyed an almost legendary reputation; or better still stream out into the formal gardens, now brilliant with strangely tinted autumn flowers, and fantastically peopled with the marble fauns and stone dryads brought from Italy and Greece by old Theophilus Joy.

Finally they would go away, thanking Athena earnestly for the delightful time they had had and telling themselves and each other that Mrs. Maule was, after all, a very charming person, and that the stories of her heartless conduct to her husband, of her long absences from home, of her—well—her flirtations, were probably all quite untrue!

The dinner-parties were slightly more formal affairs, but they also, thanks to all those concerned—and especially to Mrs. Maule—were quite successful, and very pleasant.

For the first time for many years, Athena Maule and Dick Wantele were thrown into a curious kind of intimacy. They had constantly to consult each other, and to confer together. "You see, I want to get all this sort of thing over before Jane arrives!" she once exclaimed; and Wantele had looked at her musingly. After all, perhaps she spoke the truth.

Strange ten days! No wonder that Dick Wantele was surprised, almost bewildered, by Athena in her new rôle—by Athena, that is, in the part of good-humoured, graceful, tactful hostess of Rede Place. Hitherto his imagination had never followed his cousin's wife on the long visits she paid to other people's houses. Now, with astonishment he realised that she must be, even apart from her singular beauty,

and what had become to him her perverse, and most dangerous charm, an agreeable guest.

She thought of everything, she thought of everybody, even of Mabel Digby. Mabel Digby was allowed to have her full share in the festivities, in the glorifications—for they were nothing else—of General Lingard, and that although Athena had never liked Mabel, and thought her a tiresome, priggish girl. Yes, all that fell to Mrs. Maule's share was managed with infinite tact, good humour, and good taste. The guests were not allowed to bother Richard, or to interfere with Richard's comfort and love of ease. Occasionally one or two old friends, who perchance had hardly seen him for years, would be taken into the Greek Room to talk to him for ten minutes....

Not the least strange thing was that General Lingard apparently enjoyed it all. Sometimes, nay often, he said a deprecating word or two to one or other of his hosts—a word or two implying that he saw the humour of the whole thing. But within the next hour he would be accepting rather shame-facedly the flattery lavished on him by some pretty, silly girl, or, what was more to his credit, listening patiently to an older woman's account of a son who was in "the service," and for whom the great man she was speaking to might "do something."

To the amateur soldier who in any capacity forms part of an army on active service, the most extraordinary thing, that which at once strikes his imagination and goes on doing so repeatedly until the campaign is over, is the fact that for most of the weary time, he and his fellows are fighting an invisible enemy.

During each of these long, unreal days when he had scarce a moment to himself, for it fell to his share to see that everything ran

smoothly, Dick Wantele found himself engaged in close watchful combat with an invisible foe. He would have given much to be convinced that he was pursuing a phantom bred of his own evil imagination, and sometimes he was so convinced.

Then the mists with which he was surrounded would part, suddenly, and the fearsome thing was there, before him.

Mabel Digby was the first lantern which lighted up the dark recess into which Wantele's mind was already glancing with such foreboding.

It was the third day after his return home, and with the aid of telegrams and messengers a considerable party had been gathered together for what had been a really amusing and successful luncheon party. When the last guest—with the exception of Mabel, who hardly counted as a guest—had been duly sped, Mrs. Maule and General Lingard slipped away together; and Wantele offered to walk back with Mabel to the Small Farm.

They were already some way from the house, when she told him a piece of news that was weighing very heavily on her heart.

"Have you been told," she asked, "about Bayworth Kaye? He's at Aden, it seems, and seriously ill. They think it's typhoid. His parents only heard yesterday. They're awfully worried about him. Mrs. Kaye can't make up her mind whether she ought to go out to him or not."

And then, as he turned to her, startled, genuinely sorry, he saw a look on her young face he had never seen there before; it was a terrible expression—one of aversion and of passionate contempt.

Mrs. Maule and General Lingard were walking together, pacing slowly side by side. Though a turn of the path brought them very near, Lingard was so absorbed in what Athena was saying that he did not see Wantele and Miss Digby. But Athena saw them, and with a

quick, skilful movement she guided her own and her companion's steps in a direction that made it impossible for the four to meet.

Mabel Digby remained silent for some moments, and then she turned abruptly to Wantele.

"Why isn't Jane Oglander here?" she asked. "I thought you expected her last week. Her friend must be a very selfish woman!"

"I don't think Jane would care for the sort of thing we had to-day," Wantele said reflectively. Why had Mabel looked at Athena with so strange—so—so contemptuous a look? "Still, she'll have to get used to seeing him lionized."

"Write and ask her to come as soon as she can, Dick. It's—it's stupid of her to stay away like that!"

Wantele glanced round at the speaker; and then, to his concern and surprise, he saw that her face was flushed, her brown eyes soft with tears. "I was thinking of Bayworth," she faltered. "He looked so dreadfully unhappy when he went away, Dick, and—and I can't help knowing why."

The hours and the days wore themselves away quickly—all too quickly for Athena Maule and Hew Lingard, slowly and full of acute discomfort and suspicion for Dick Wantele.

Occasionally the young man tried to tell himself that perhaps the real reason of his discontent was their guest's attitude to himself. It was clear that the famous soldier did not like the younger of his hosts, in fact he hardly made any attempt to conceal his prejudice, and the two men, though of course forced into a kind of intimacy, saw as little as they could of one another.

It was with his hostess that General Lingard spent every odd moment,—every moment that he could spare from the work on which he was

engaged—a book he had promised to write by a certain date. And after a very few days Wantele discovered with amusement, discomfiture, amazement that Lingard was actually consulting Athena about his book, reading her passages as he wrote them.

And then Wantele told himself with shame that the doing of this was not so foolish or so strange, after all,—for the book was to appeal to the general public, and Mrs. Maule might reasonably be supposed to belong to that public.

But not even Wantele in his darkest, most suspicious moods suspected the depth, the reality of Lingard's peril.

The exciting, exhilarating experiences which were now befalling him produced on one who was essentially a man of action, not a philosopher and thinker, an extraordinary mental and even physical effect.

The absurd homage, the crude flattery, to which Lingard found himself subjected by the young and the foolish among Mrs. Maule's guests annoyed rather than pleased him, but he would be moved to the soul when a word said—often an awkward, shy word—showed how great was the place he had conquered in the estimation of those of his fellow-countrymen and countrywomen who were jealous for their country's glory.

He had instinctively discounted the newspaper fame showered so freely upon him on his immediate arrival in England; he was humorously conscious that he owed it in a great measure to the absence of any other competing lion of the moment.

True, he had at once received a number of invitations from hostesses of the kind who make it their business to secure the latest celebrity, and he had grudged the time he spent over the writing of coldly civil refusals. Lingard had also been plagued with innumerable letters

from people who vaguely hoped he would be able to do something which would contribute in some way to their advancement, or that of their near relations. And then there had come absurd and painful communications from lunatics, begging-letter writers, and autograph hunters.

Not till he came to Rede Place did the position he had won become really clear to him, though pride and good breeding made him appear to take his triumph lightly.

And Athena Maule shared it all with him! The very letters he received were, at her entreaty, shown to, and discussed with her in a way which gave each of them a special value and importance. Athena was much more impressed with his triumph than he allowed himself to be; and when alone with her,—and they were very often alone together,—Lingard unconsciously moved in a delightful atmosphere of subtle, wordless sympathy and flattery.

Jane Oglander, absorbed in the physical crisis through which was passing the friend with whom she was staying, became even to her lover infinitely remote; though Lingard liked to remind himself, now and again, that it was Jane who had given him his new, enchanting comrade and friend.

Athena Maule appeared to Hew Lingard the most selfless human being he had ever known. And yet, each day, when the guests, the people she so kindly asked to meet him, were all gone, and when he and she were enjoying an hour of rest and solitude together, to which he had now learnt to look forward so eagerly, she was always ready to talk to him about herself. Soon there was no subject of conversation between them which held for Lingard so potent, so entrancing a lure.

There came a day when the soldier, more moved, more secretly excited, more exhilarated than usual, was able to express to her

something of what he felt.

Among those who had been bidden to Rede Place was an old man, a Crimean veteran who in his day had enjoyed, though of course on a smaller scale, much the same kind of experience Hew Lingard was now passing through. The two had been allowed, by tacit consent, to have a considerable amount of talk together, and Lingard had been greatly touched and moved by the other's words of understanding praise, and appreciation, of the difficult, perilous task he had accomplished.

Sure of her sympathy and understanding, he told Mrs. Maule all that the veteran's words had meant to him, and at once, as was her wont,—though he remained quite unconscious of it,—she brought the subject round to the personal, the intimate standpoint: "You don't know," she said softly, "what it means to me to know that you met that dear old man here."

And that had given him his chance of saying what he felt each day more and more, namely that he owed everything, *everything* to her,—to her thoughtful kindness and to her instinctive knowledge of what would at once please and move him.

How amazed he would have been could he have seen into Athena's heart! She had thought it rather absurd that Lingard should care so much for praise uttered by such an unimportant person as the poor, broken old officer who led a quiet and rather eccentric existence on the edge of a lonely common some way from Rede Place. He had originally come into the neighbourhood in order to be near Mabel Digby's father, and Athena had never thought him to be of the slightest consequence,—indeed, she had only assented to his being asked to meet General Lingard because Mabel had earnestly begged that he might be.

Conscious hypocrisy is far rarer than the world is apt to believe, and only succeeds in its designs with those who are mentally ill-equipped. The women who work the most mischief in civilized communities are supreme egoists, and an egoist is never a conscious hypocrite.

When dealing with a being of the opposite sex to her own, Athena Maule always held up to his enraptured gaze a magic mirror in which was reflected the beautiful and pathetic figure of a deeply injured woman: one who had made a gallant fight against the harsh fate which had married her to such a man as Richard Maule, and which placed her in subjection to so cruel and contemptible a creature as was Richard's kinsman and heir, Dick Wantele.

Mrs. Maule was also affected, and very powerfully so, by all that took place during the ten days which elapsed between Dick Wantele's return and Jane Oglander's arrival.

The people among whom she habitually lived knew nothing of such men as Hew Lingard. Rich and idle always, vicious or virtuous according to their temperament and the measure of their temptations, they had no use for the great workers of the world, unless indeed those workers' struggles, victories, and defeats lay in the world of finance.

Thus it was that General Lingard presented to Athena Maule the attractive human bait of something new, untasted, unrehearsed.

She did not mean to act ill by Jane Oglander; on the contrary, as the days went on, Lingard's betrothed became in Mrs. Maule's imagination a cruel, almost a pitiless rival. She could not help contrasting her own life with that which was now opening before her friend. Jane was about to be lifted, through no merit, no effort of her own, into a delightful, a passionately interesting and shifting

atmosphere, that which surrounds a commanding officer's wife in one of the great military centres of the Empire at home or abroad.

Athena longed to try her power—the power she knew to be almost limitless in one direction—on the type of man with whom Jane would henceforth be surrounded, a type of whose very presence Jane, she knew well, would scarcely be aware! It was strange, it—it was horrible to think that Jane would be leading a delightful and stimulating existence while she, Athena, would be going the same dreary round among the same selfish, stupid people of whom she had grown so tired.

During those days when she was acting, for the first time, as the real mistress of Rede Place, and as hostess to a man whom all the world wished at that moment to meet and entertain, Mrs. Maule told herself again and again, with deep, wordless anger, that life was indeed using her hardly.

How ironic the stroke of fate which made a Jane Oglander be chosen by a Hew Lingard! There was one consolation—but Athena was in no mood for finding consolation—in the thought that both General Lingard and Jane would ever regard Mrs. Richard Maule as the most welcome, the most honoured of their guests. Thanks to that fact, she would enter and doubtless achieve the social conquest of that official section of the English world into which her incursions had been few and seldom repeated.

CHAPTER IX

"Ferdinand.—I have this night dugged up a mandrake.

Cardinal.—Say you?

Ferdinand.—And I am grown mad with it."

And now the evening of the last of their delightful days had come,—so at least Athena Maule thought of it, for Jane Oglander was arriving the next morning.

Wantele and Athena had had a sharp difference that afternoon. She wished that the gay, the amusing doings of the last few days should continue, and she had made out a further list—a short list, so she assured herself,—of people who had been forgotten, and who might as well be asked now. To her anger and surprise, Dick Wantele had refused her reasonable request backing up his refusal with the authority of her husband, of Richard himself.

"Richard thinks we've had enough of it, and that Jane would so hate it all," he said, having reminded her half jokingly that they had arranged everything of the kind should end with Jane Oglander's arrival. "I think we owe Jane some consideration. She would be miserable married to a man who was always being lionised in this absurd fashion——"

He stopped, then added lightly, "You don't know England, my dear cousin: there will be a new lion soon, then our friend will have to take a back place. To do him justice I think he's already getting rather sick of it all!"

Mrs. Maule remained silent for a moment, and then she exclaimed, with a rather curious look on her lovely face, "I don't agree! I think that he enjoys it, Dick, and surely it is good for his career that he should

do so. Jane should understand that!"

Wantele lifted his eyebrows. It was a trick of his when surprised or amused. "He will go on having plenty of that sort of thing after he's married—if Jane lets him!"

Athena turned pettishly away. Thanks to Dick Wantele she was never allowed to forget the fact that her delightful, her famous guest was going to be married—and to her own dearest friend. Dick never spared her. He seemed to delight in "rubbing it in." It was the more irritating inasmuch as Hew Lingard never spoke to her of Jane.

During those pleasant, exciting days Mrs. Maule had sometimes asked herself whether Lingard ever thought of Jane when—when he was with her, with Athena. She had taken the trouble to find out, by means not wholly creditable, that Lingard wrote to Jane every day; and there was always one letter from the many that reached him each morning which he picked out first and put in his pocket. The sight of his doing this gave Athena a little pang of jealous pain. It annoyed her that any man when with her should concern himself with another woman.

And then something else on this last day added to Mrs. Maule's depression. Her husband was not well. He was feeling the effects of the excitement of the last few days. Just after her unpleasant little discussion with Dick, Richard Maule had addressed her directly—a thing he scarcely ever did. "Aren't you going away?" he asked ungraciously. "I thought you were going away as soon as Jane Oglander arrived."

She had answered briefly that her plans were changed, that she would not be leaving Rede Place for nearly another month. But as, a moment later, she had swept out of the room, she had told herself with rage that her present life was intolerable,—that no woman had ever to put up with such insults as she had to put up with, from Dick

on the one hand, and Richard on the other!

Within an hour her feelings were assuaged. Lingard, seeking her as he had now fallen into the way of doing, had found her quivering with anger, and what he took to be bitter pain.

She had told him of her husband's desire that she should leave Rede Place on her friend's arrival, and he had received her confidences with burning indignation and passionate sympathy. Nay more, the atmosphere between them became electric, almost oppressive. Then, to Athena's sharp surprise and annoyance, Lingard suddenly turned on his heel and left the room, muttering something about having work to do.

That evening, for the first time for many days, Athena, General Lingard, and Dick Wantele dined without the restraining presence of strangers. Dick, unlike the other two, was in good spirits, nay more, lively and, in his own rather caustic way, amusing.

Jane Oglander would be here to-morrow! He dwelt on the thought with satisfaction and an almost malicious pleasure. Ten days ago the thought of seeing Jane at Rede Place had been painful, but now he would welcome her presence. It was time, high time, she were here.

Now and again, while talking to Athena,—he could always compel her attention,—he stole a glance at Jane Oglander's lover. Lingard did not look as looks the man who is going to see his love on the morrow. His expression was one of deep gravity, almost of suffering. There was a strained look about his eyes, his mouth was set in grim lines, and unless directly addressed he remained silent.

Mrs. Maule soon finished her more than usually frugal evening meal.

She got up and left the table, and as she did so Lingard sprang to the door. He seemed to delight in rendering her the smallest personal service.

Before leaving the room, she turned round and addressed Wantele: "Don't hurry," she said softly. "We won't go into the drawing-room to-night. I've got to write some notes. Quite a batch of letters came this afternoon. There were just one or two people I should have liked to have asked next week—" she looked at him pleadingly, reproachfully....

Wantele stared at her coldly. "Of course you can ask one or two people," he said, and, with a slight smile, "Don't make yourself out more of a martyr than you must, Athena!"

Hew Lingard, standing aside, his hand still on the handle of the door, felt an overmastering impulse to go back to the table and strike Dick Wantele's sneering face across the mouth. How awful to think, to see, that such a woman as Athena Maule, so kind, so gentle, so generous, so—so lovely and so defenceless, was subject to this young man's insolence.

But he could do nothing—nothing; and Jane, amazing thought, was actually fond of Wantele!

He shut the door behind his hostess and walked slowly back to the table. There was a moment of awkward silence, and then Wantele broke it by speaking of Jane. It was the first time her name had passed his lips in Lingard's presence.

"Since Miss Oglander lost her brother in the strange and terrible way you know," he said, "she has shrunk very much from seeing people, I mean from mixing in ordinary society. That is one reason why she has always enjoyed her visits here. The state of my cousin, Richard Maule's, health compels us to lead a very quiet life." He forced

himself to go on: "Mrs. Maule, as you know, is a good deal away. She naturally does not care for the extreme dulness, the solitariness, of the life——"

Lingard muttered a word of assent, but he made no other comment on the other man's words. He took them to mean that Dick Wantele felt rather ashamed of himself, as indeed he ought to do. Was it not pitifully clear that Mrs. Maule, poor beautiful Athena, had no part or place in her husband's house? All invalids tend to become self-absorbed and selfish; but he judged Wantele hardly for encouraging, nay for fostering, Mr. Maule's egoistic unkindness to his wife.

Both men were glad when the time came for them to part. Dick, as always, went off to Richard, and Lingard, after a few unquiet moments in the smoking-room, made his way slowly to Athena's boudoir, the charming, restful room which, alone of the many rooms in the big quiet house, seemed to be in a real sense her territory, and where he and she had spent so many delightful hours together.

But to-night he was met there with something very like a rebuff.

Athena had been standing thinking, doing nothing, but when she heard Lingard's now familiar steps in the corridor she moved swiftly to her writing-table, and bent over it.

As he came in she lifted her head: "I really must finish these notes," she said deprecatingly. "You see, I had hoped to soften, if not Richard's, then Dick's heart! Well, I failed, as I generally do fail with him. And I feel"—her voice quivered—"very much as poor Cinderella must have felt when the clock was about to strike twelve."

As he stood, irresolute, before her, she added, "Take a book and sit down. I'll be as quick as I can." She got up with a swift movement and put a box of cigarettes and matches close to his hand.

It was such a little thing, and yet, in the emotional state in which he

was now, Lingard felt touched, inexpressibly touched. How extraordinarily kind and thoughtful she was! No wonder Jane was so fond of her.

Mrs. Maule went back to her writing-table, intensely conscious that Lingard's ardent, melancholy gaze was fixed on her. Now and again, perhaps three or four times, she looked up for a moment and smiled, her glance full of confident friendliness. But she did not speak, and thus was spent one of the shortest and most poignant half-hours of Lingard's life.

At last there came harsh, unwelcome interruption in the person of Dick Wantele. For a moment he stood between them, his back to Lingard, facing Athena.

"I've only come to tell you," he exclaimed, rather breathlessly, "that Richard agrees that there are two or three more people we ought to ask. I suggested the Dight-Suttons."

"I've just written, this moment, to say we can't have them," said Athena slowly.

Dick shrugged his shoulders with what seemed to the man watching him an unmannerly gesture of irritation. "I'm sorry," he said curtly. "I had no idea that you would be writing to them to-night, or indeed to anyone to-night. Surely to-morrow morning will be time enough. However, there are one or two other people——"

Lingard got up. "I think I'll go out of doors for a bit," he said abruptly. "I haven't walked enough to-day." It was horrible to him to stand by and see Mrs. Maule insulted in her own house, in her own room. He felt afraid that if he stayed there he would lose control of himself and say something he would regret having said to Dick Wantele.

And Athena, moving to one side, saw his lowering face, and she felt

a thrill of possessive pride. What a man Lingard seemed by the side of Dick Wantele! How well he must look in uniform. She wondered, jealously, if Jane had ever seen him in uniform....

"Yes—do go out. And take the key—you know—the key of the Garden Room off the mantelpiece. But you must get a coat. It's cold to-night."

He shook hands with them both, and went out. Dick only stayed a very few moments,—long enough, however, to be told very plainly the names of the people whom Athena wished to be invited. He went off to Richard with her message.

Mrs. Maule began moving about the boudoir aimlessly. It was tiresome of Lingard to stay out so long. She was used to another type of man,—one more civilised, who would have understood in a moment what her quick glance at him had tried to convey. That sort of man would have hung about in the Garden Room till Dick Wantele had left her, and then he would have come back at once.

But the great soldier—and the fact, it must be admitted, was part of his attraction for Athena Maule—was not in the least like that.

Lingard knew nothing of flirtation, as the word was understood in Mrs. Maule's circle. She supposed him, rightly, to be a man with but little knowledge of the world in which the pursuit of the tenderer emotions is carried to a fine art; she judged him, erroneously, to be a man strangely lacking in certain primitive instincts. But that made the state of bondage to which she had already reduced him the greater triumph.

To a thinking mind there is something sombre, disturbing, in the thought that the attraction of a man to a woman, whatever be the quality of that attraction, manifests itself in much the same way.

Athena knew the signs. To-night every omen pointed one way. She

put the thought—the slightly insistent memory—of Jane away from her. Jane should have known how to guard what had perhaps never been really hers.

She set her door ajar. It would be very annoying if General Lingard were to come in and, as she knew he had done some nights ago, creep up silently through the house....

At last there came the sounds of footfalls across the flags of the Garden Room. Athena began to experience that curious sensation which goes by the name of a beating heart. In other words, she felt strung up to a high pitch of emotion.

Bayworth Kaye had given her some delicious moments, but she had never felt with him what she felt now. For the first time Athena—skilful huntress of men—had found a quarry worthy of pursuit. Was it possible that to-night her quarry would elude her? Was it conceivable that Lingard would push his scruples, his sense of absurd delicacy, as far as that?

Athena had not yet learnt to reckon with Hew Lingard's conscience,—the conscience, perhaps it would be more true to say the honour, he had already deliberately thrust aside to-night, during those few unquiet moments in the smoking-room.

She remained, however, absolutely still.

Lingard advanced a few steps nearer to the partly open door. He was evidently hesitating, and Athena felt she could bear the suspense no longer.

"Is anyone there?" she called out in a low voice. "Is it Hew?" She only called him by that name when they were alone together.

He opened the door and came in.

"You must be cold," she said tremulously. "Do come nearer the fire."

Lingard came towards her. No, he was not cold. He had been walking, covering miles in the hour he had spent trying to tire, to deaden, himself out. It had been a terrible time of self-communion, self-reproach, self-abasement.

The state he found himself in to-night recalled with piteous vividness that episode of his stormy youth which had led to his long break with the Paches.

It was horrible that he should couple, even in thought, Athena Maule and that—that creature, over whom he had wasted, squandered, such treasures of adoring love. Rosie had been one of those young ladies who, to use a technical term, "walk on"; and because she was extraordinarily pretty, she was always placed in the front row of the foolish musical comedy of which he could still recall, not only every tune, but almost every word, so often had he been to the theatre after that first meeting.

At the end of ten days,—he had known Athena Maule ten days, what a strange coincidence!—at the end of ten days he had asked Rosie to marry him. She had shilly-shallied for a while, and then, to his rapturous surprise, she had said "Yes." How angry, how scandalised, how shocked his relations had been!

Tommy Pache—in those days old Mr. Pache had been "Tommy" to his relations—had hurried up to London and said all the usual things that one does say to a young fool on such an occasion, but even he had been struck by the girl's beauty, though of course Tommy had been careful not to let this out to the others when he had got back to them.

How it all came back to him to-night! Lingard remembered the letters he had received, the letters he had written. It had gone on for some

weeks—he couldn't quite remember how long now,—that time of anger, of impatience, of longing, of rapture. And then, within a very few days of that fixed for the quiet wedding which was to take place in a city church,—he had always avoided that part of London ever since,—Rosie had become the wife of another man, of a young idiot with a vacuous face and an enormous fortune, of whom he had not even troubled to be jealous, although his presence in the flat Rosie shared with another girl had often made him impatient.

Now Lingard felt desperately tired—tired in body, tired in spirit. But he was glad—glad that he had disregarded the promptings of his conscience, of his honour. It was delicious to be here indoors, with this kind, this enchanting, this angelically beautiful woman close, very close, to him.

Athena held out her foot to the fire, and Lingard, staring down, saw that she was wearing a curious kind of slipper, one unlike any that he had ever noticed on a woman's foot before. A sandal rather than a shoe, it left visible the lovely lines of the arched instep and slender ankle.

"You were out a long time," she said, and fixed her eyes on the clock. It was one of the curious costly toys of which Rede Place was full, and for which old Theophilus Joy had had a marked predilection. Fashioned like a tiny wall sundial, across its face was written in faded gold letters, "I only mark the sunny hours." The hands now pointed to three minutes to midnight.

Lingard said no word. He went on staring down at Athena's little foot. He was wondering if she knew how exquisitely perfect she was physically, how unlike all other women.

"Isn't it odd to think," she whispered, "that in a few moments another day will begin? I feel more like Cinderella than ever—now. You have given me such a good time," her voice trembled, and he looked up and stared at her strangely. "You've almost made me in love again with life," and she was sincere in what she said.

"I?" said Lingard hoarsely. "I?"

"Yes, you! You don't know—how could you know?—what it's been to me, what it would have been to any woman, to have a man for a friend, to feel at last that there is someone to whom one can say everything——"

He looked away from her. At all costs he must prevent himself from showing what he felt—the violent, the primitive emotion her simple, touching words had called forth.

How utterly she would despise him if she knew! He swore to himself she should never know that she had made him all unwittingly traitor to the woman she loved,—the woman alas! whom they both loved. Lingard, and that was part of the punishment he already had to endure, never left off loving Jane Oglander. Jane was always, in a spiritual sense, very near to him; it was her physical self which was remote.

The tiny gong behind the little clock began to strike, quick precipitate strokes.

"Isn't it in a hurry?" said Athena plaintively, "in such a hurry to end the last of my happy days." Her voice broke into a sob, and Lingard, at last looking straight into her face, saw that tears were rolling down her cheeks.

He gave a hoarse inarticulate cry. Athena thought he said "My God!" She was filled with a sense of intoxicating happiness and triumph. Each of the wild, broken words—words of self-abasement, self-

blame, self-rebuke, which Lingard uttered, holding both her hands in his firm grasp,—meant to her what fluttering white flags of surrender mean to besiegers.

With downcast eyes, with beating heart she listened while Lingard, abasing himself and exalting her, took all the blame—and shame—on himself. His words fell very sweetly and comfortingly on her ears. Athena had no wish to act treacherously by Jane.

Any other man but this strange man would have had her long ago in his arms, but Lingard, though he held her hands so tightly that his grasp hurt, made no other movement towards her, not even when with a sobbing sigh she admitted—and as she did so there came across her a slight feeling of shame—that she, too, had been a traitor, an unwilling, an unwitting traitor, to Jane these last few days.

At last they made a compact—how often are such compacts made, and broken?—that Jane should never, never, know the strange madness which had seized them both.

Lingard spoke of leaving the next day. Nothing would be easier than to urge important business in London. But again the tears sprang to Athena's eyes.

"Don't go away," she murmured brokenly. "I couldn't bear it! I promise you that Jane shall never know. Don't leave me with Dick and Richard—they've both been kinder—indeed, indeed they have—since you've been here, Hew——"

He eagerly assured her that he would stay. Flight was a cowardly expedient at best, and the feeling he intended henceforth to cherish for Athena Maule was nothing of which he need be ashamed. It was a high, a noble feeling of compassion and respect. It was well, nay most fortunate, that they had had this explanation; henceforth they would be friends. The very touch of her cool hands resting so

confidingly in his, had driven forth certain black devils from his heart—made him indeed once more true to Jane,—Jane who, if she knew all, would understand. For there were things Athena had told him of her life with Richard which Jane did not know,—things which it was not desirable Jane should ever know, and which had filled him with an infinite compassion for Richard's young, beautiful wife.

When Lingard bade her good-night, he resisted the temptation, the curiously strong temptation, of asking Mrs. Maule if she would allow him to kiss her feet.

CHAPTER X

"The passion of love has a danger for very sensitive, reserved and concentrated minds unknown to creatures of more volatile, expansive and unreflective dispositions."

Dick Wantele walked with swinging nervous strides up and down the short platform of the little country station of Redyford. He had already been there some time, for the local train run in connection with the London express was late. But he was in no hurry—there would always be time to tell Jane that she would not see her lover for some hours.

Mrs. Maule had taken General Lingard over to the Paches to lunch. It was a small matter, an altogether unimportant matter, and it was certainly no business of Wantele's to care about it one way or the other. And yet he did care. He was jealous for Jane in a way she never would be for herself. And then—and then Lingard had allowed himself to be bamboozled—no other word so well expressed it—as to the time of Jane's arrival.

It had happened at breakfast. "Mrs. Pache is expecting us—you and me—over to lunch," Athena said to Lingard.

And Wantele had cut in—"Jane is coming this morning."

"No, indeed she isn't! We shall be back long before she arrives," and then Athena had gone on, addressing no one in particular, "Jane is the most casual person in the world——"

Lingard, throwing back his head with a quizzical look on his face, had exclaimed, "Yes, that's one of the good things about her." He had shot out the words as a sword leaps from its scabbard.

There had followed a moment of silence. And then Athena had broken out into eager praise of Jane—eager, inconsequent praise. But for once Hew Lingard had seemed indifferent, hardly aware of the sound of her voice.

Instead he looked across to Wantele: "I wonder if you remember that curious phrase of George Herbert? 'There is an hour wherein a man might be happy all his life could he but find it—'"

Athena had stared at Lingard—what did he mean by saying such an odd thing?

Then she had reminded Dick that the last time Jane had been coming to Rede Place she had changed her mind not once but three times, and what Athena said had irritated Wantele the more because she spoke the truth.

Jane was curiously uncertain and casual—women of her temperament often are. She only made an effort to be mindful of her engagements when dealing with those concerning whom most people would have said punctuality did not matter—with those forlorn men and women adrift on the dark sea of South London, to whose service she had given herself since her brother's death.

For a moment he, Dick Wantele, and Hew Lingard, had been in that wordless sympathy which between men means friendship. Wantele was eager to be convinced that his suspicions were both base and baseless. If only Athena would remove her disturbing presence from Rede Place! But he knew her too well to hope that she would go—yet.

Here was the train at last, but where was Jane Oglander? Dick looked before and behind him. No, she was not there. She hadn't come after all. She had, as usual, changed her plans at the last moment. Athena was right, Jane was really too casual! When he reached home he would find a telegram from her explaining——

And then suddenly he saw her walking towards him from the extreme end of the platform. And the mere sight of her dispelled, not only the irritation of which he was now ashamed, but the anxieties, the suspicions of the last ten days.

He had vaguely supposed that Jane would look unlike herself, that the fact that she was going to be Lingard's wife would have produced in her some outward change. But she looked as she always looked—set apart from the women about her, especially from those of her own age, by the greater simplicity, the almost austerity of her dress. An old cottage woman had once said to Wantele, "Grey is Miss Oglander's colour, and if she was 'appy perhaps light blue."

And as she came up to him, smiling, he remembered what the old woman had said, for Miss Oglander was wearing a long grey cloak; it was open at the neck, and showed some kind of white vest with a touch of blue underneath. On her fair hair, framing her face, rested a Quakerish little cap-like hat with strings tied under her soft chin.

"Dick," she said, "how kind of you to come and meet me! I'm so glad to see you!"

And he saw with a queer feeling of mingled pleasure and jealous pain that she did indeed look glad; also that there had in very truth come a change over her face. Jane Oglander possessed that which is not always the attribute of beauty, a great and varying charm of expression, but Wantele had never seen her eyes filled, as they were

to-day, with gladness.

"I nearly came by the later train," she said. "For I had to see a child off to the country, to a convalescent home, and its train went at the same time as mine. But I found a kind, understanding porter, and so it was all right. Working people are so good to one another, Dick. The porter wouldn't take the sixpence I offered him for looking after the little boy——" And in her voice there was still that under-current of joyousness which was so new, and, to Wantele, so unexpected.

Jane Oglander looked as if the six last years had been blotted out,—as if she were again a happy girl, pathetically, confidently ignorant of the ugly realities of life.

They walked out of the station together, and with a simultaneous movement they turned into the field path which formed a short cut to Rede Place. Soon they fell into the easy, desultory talk of those who have many interests and occupations in common. The young man had saved up many little things to tell her—things that he thought would amuse Jane, things about which he wished to consult her.

And as they walked side by side, Wantele kept reminding himself, with deep, voiceless melancholy, that this was the last time—the last time that Jane Oglander would be what she had been for so long, his chief friend and favourite companion. Lingard—happy Lingard had been right. More fortunate than Wantele, he had found that hour most men seek and never find, the hour wherein a man may be happy all his life.

They were now close to the house, and as yet neither had spoken the name of Jane's lover. "Shall we go in by the Garden Room?" asked Wantele.

Now had come the moment when he must tell her of Athena's and Lingard's absence; also, when he must, if he could bring himself to

do so, wish her joy.

"You'll have to put up with me for a bit longer, Jane. Athena has taken General Lingard to lunch at the Paches'. Of course you heard of the accident?"

"Yes," she said. "Poor Patty!" And then, with a rather quizzical expression in her kind eyes, "It's odd, isn't it, Dick, that Hew should be related to the Paches——"

With no answering smile on his face, he exclaimed, "Amazing!"

He put the key in the lock, and turning it pushed open the glass door. Then he fell back so that she should pass in before him.

"Jane," he muttered hoarsely, "Jane, you know what I would say to you—how truly I wish you joy——"

She looked up, and then quickly cast down her eyes. Wantele had grown very pale, across his plain face was written suffering and renunciation.

"I knew," she said in a low voice, "I knew that you would wish me joy."

Neither spoke again till they reached the Greek Room.

There Wantele left her, and then Richard Maule also said his word, his dry word, of congratulation.

"I like your soldier, Jane! You know what I had hoped would happen—but things that I hope for never do happen——"

But apart from these two interludes, the first afternoon of Jane Oglander's stay at Rede Place passed exactly as had passed innumerable other afternoons spent by her there in recent years. She took a walk with Dick round the walled gardens which were his special interest and pleasure; she read aloud for a while to Richard.

Nothing was changed, and yet everything was different. Last time Miss Oglander had stayed at Rede Place, she had been almost daughter to Richard Maule, almost wife to Dick Wantele. Now she was about to pass for ever out of their lives, and on all three of them the knowledge lay heavy.

At four o'clock the Paches' motor returned with a message that Mrs. Maule and General Lingard were walking back and would not be home before five.

Miss Oglander's first meeting with her lover at Rede Place took place in the Greek Room. It was six o'clock, she had given the two men their tea, and then, voicing what they were all thinking, "They're very late," said Richard Maule, and as he uttered the words the door opened and the truants walked in.

Wantele, sitting in his favourite place, away from the fire, close under one of the high windows, noted with reluctant approval that Athena did not overdo her surprise. "Why, Jane, I didn't expect you till the six-twenty train!"—that was all she said as she came forward and warmly greeted her friend.

Wantele went on looking dispassionately at his cousin's wife. To-day Athena had chosen the plainest of out-of-door costumes. A girl of seventeen might have worn the very short skirt and simple little coat, but like everything she wore, they made her, at the moment, look her best. The long walk, and the companionship in which she had taken the walk, had exhilarated her—intensified her superb vitality. She looked like some wild, lovely thing out of the woods, a nymph on whom Time would never dare lay his disfiguring touch.

Lingard, hanging back behind her, showed himself no actor. He

looked moody, preoccupied, almost sullen.

"Has anything happened to-day?" asked Mrs. Maule. "Apart, I mean, from the happy fact of Jane's arrival——" she smiled radiantly at the other woman.

Her husband's voice unexpectedly answered her, and as he spoke he cast on her a look of hate, and then his eyes rested with an air of rather malignant, speculative curiosity on Lingard's dark, gloomy face and restless eyes.

"Yes, something did happen during your short absence. I had a call this morning from Mr. Kaye——" In an aside he muttered for Lingard's benefit, "Mr. Kaye is our excellent clergyman," and then he went on, "I'm sorry to say he brought bad news of his son."

All the caressing glow died from Athena's face; it became suddenly watchful, wary.

Mr. Maule went on, "Bayworth Kaye, it seems, is lying very ill at Aden."

Mrs. Maule gave a slight sigh of relief. That was not what she had thought, with a sudden overwhelming fear, to hear Richard say.

"The Kayes are thinking of going out to him, and they thought that I should be able to tell them something about the place—how to get there, and so on. But I advised them to wait a day or two for further news.

"I heard about Bayworth Kaye's illness some days ago," said Wantele slowly. "But I forgot to tell you. I did, however, enquire about him yesterday. They seemed to know very little then——"

"I have been longing, longing, *longing* to see you, Jane! Now, at last we can have a talk——"

Putting both her hands on Jane's unresisting shoulders, Mrs. Maule gently pushed her friend down into a low chair, and then knelt down by her.

They were in Jane's bedroom, and it still wanted three-quarters of an hour to dinner.

Jane's eyes filled with happy tears. She was moved to the heart. How good they all were to her!

She could still feel the clinging, the convulsive, grasp of Lingard's hand. She had not seen him alone, even for a moment, but now, at last, they were under the same roof, and each of his letters from Rede Place had been a cry of longing for her.

"We ought not to have gone to the Paches'," cried Athena remorsefully. "But honestly it never occurred to me that you would come till the evening train, Jane."

Jane laughed through her tears. "I'm very glad you went! I enjoyed my quiet day here. And oh I am so glad to see you, Athena! I was afraid that you might be away."

"Do you really think I should leave Rede Place—now?" Athena looked searchingly into Jane's face. "I know we are none of us conventional, but still the proprieties have to be respected—sometimes!"

Jane reddened uncomfortably. She had not thought of it in that way. She and Hew had been so happy together alone in London. But no doubt Athena was right.

Athena rose slowly, gracefully, from her knees, and stood looking

down at her friend with a rather inscrutable smile. Jane moved uneasily, she felt as if the other woman was gently, remorselessly stripping her soul of its wrappings....

"You look just the same," said Mrs. Maule, still smiling that probing, mysterious smile, "just as much a white and grey nun as you did before, Jane. But I think this is the first time I ever saw you blush. Go on blushing, dear—it makes you look quite pretty and worldly!"

Jane flinched beneath the intent questioning gaze. She felt suddenly defenceless against a form of attack she had not expected from her friend. She could not bear the lightest touch of raillery, still less any laughing comment, on what was so deep and sacred a thing to herself as her relation to Lingard.

She got up, walked over to a window, and pulled back the curtain.

Athena moved swiftly after her, and with a gentle violence put her soft arms round Jane and pillowed the girl's head on her breast.

"Jane!" she whispered, "do forgive me—I understand, indeed I do! But—but the sight of your happiness makes me a little bitter. Richard has been worse than ever this time. And Dick has been—well, Dick at his very worst. I can't think why he dislikes me so—but to be sure I have never liked him either!"

Jane heard her in troubled silence. Her feelings of restful happiness, of exquisite content, had gone.

"I'm sure that General Lingard must have noticed Richard's extraordinary manner to me," Athena spoke musingly. "Has he said anything about it in any of his letters to you?"

"No, never." Jane released herself from Mrs. Maule's circling arms.

"I like your man so much," went on Athena, stroking Jane's hair, "so

very, very much! I think I like him more than I ever thought to like a man again. But then he's so unlike most men, Jane."

Jane did not need Athena's words to convince her that Hew Lingard was unlike other men. But still her friend's words touched and pleased her.

"He's been so awful good to me these last ten days! He's made everything easier. Fortunately Richard took a great fancy to him. And he and I—I know you won't be jealous, Jane—have become true friends. When Dick isn't looking, we call each other Hew and Athena!"

"I am so glad," said Jane in a low voice; and indeed she was glad that the two had "made friends."

But again she was touched with vague discomfort, again she shrank, when Mrs. Maule, leading her back into the room, rained eager, insistent questions on her——

"Do tell me all about it! How did it all begin? How did you ever come to know each other so well before he went away? What made him first write to you? Were they love letters, Jane? Come, of course you must know whether they were love letters or not! You're not so simple as all that comes to—no woman ever is!"

But at last, driven at bay, her heart bruised by the other's indelicate curiosity, Jane said slowly, "I dare say I'm foolish—but I would rather not talk about it, Athena."

A look of deep offence passed over Mrs. Maule's face. Later on—much later on—Jane wondered whether she had been wrong in saying those few words—words said feelingly, apologetically.

"Of course we won't speak of your engagement if you would rather not. I'm sorry. I had no idea you would mind. I must go and dress now.

But just one word more, Jane. Of course you and General Lingard will like to be a good deal alone together—I'll give Dick a hint."

"No, no!" cried Jane. "Please don't do that, Athena. I don't want anything of the sort said to Dick."

But Mrs. Maule went on as if she had not heard the other's words, "And you can always sit together in my boudoir. Mrs. Pache was saying to-day that it was a pity I didn't use the drawing-room more than I do. She thought—it was so like an Englishwoman to say so—that it smelt damp!"

"As if we should think of turning you out of your own room! How can you imagine such a thing? I don't want you to make the slightest difference while I'm here. Hew and I will have plenty of opportunities of seeing one another when we get back to London. Please don't speak to Dick—I should be very, very sorry if you spoke to Dick, Athena."

CHAPTER XI

"Tu peux connaître le monde, tu peux lire à livre ouvert dans les plus caverneuses consciences, mais tu ne liras jamais, oh! pauvre femme, le cœur de ton ami."

And then there came a short sequence of days, full of deep calm without, full of strife and disturbance within.

Jane was ailing, and each day she fought with the knowledge of what ailed her as certain strong natures fight, and even for a while keep at bay, physical disease.

But there came a moment when she had to face the truth; when she had to tell herself that the new, the agonising pain which racked her soul night and day, leaving her no moment of peace, was that base passion, jealousy.

It was horrible to feel that it was of Athena she was jealous—Athena who seemed to be always there, between Lingard and herself. She could not think so ill of her friend as to suppose that this was Mrs. Maule's fault; still less would she accuse Lingard.

Gradually the knowledge had come to her that when they three were together—Athena, Jane, and Lingard—it was as if she, Jane, was not, so entirely was Lingard absorbed in, possessed by, Athena.

Jane Oglander could not fight with the weapons another woman in her place might have used. She could not, that is, make the most of such odd moments, of such scanty opportunities as she might have

snatched from Athena Maule. How could the trifling events which made up the sum of five or six days have brought about such a change?

She had thought to be so happy at Rede Place. She had come there filled with a sense of tremulous and yet certain gladness; in the mood to be sought by, rather than in that which seeks, the beloved. Athena, Richard, and Dick, if they did not love each other, surely each loved her sufficiently to understand, to respect her joy.

The circumstances of her brother's death which had fallen like a pall on her young life had set Jane Oglander apart from happy, normal women. To her the world had only contained one lover—Hew Lingard; and those days they had spent together in a peopled solitude had taught her all she knew of the ways of love.

It was instinct which had made her shrink, that first night of her stay at Rede Place, from Athena's insistent questioning; natural delicacy which had made her refuse, almost with disgust, the suggestion that she and Lingard should be set apart in an artificial solitude. As yet their engagement was secret from the world which seemed to take so great, so—so impertinent an interest in Hew Lingard, and she wished to keep it so as long as possible.

Then there was another reason, one which she now told herself Athena should have divined, why Jane wished little notice to be taken of her engagement. She had no wish to flaunt her happiness before Dick Wantele.

But now there was no happiness to flaunt—in its place only a dumb misery and a jealousy of which she felt an agonising shame.

To Jane Oglander it was as if another entity had entered Hew Lingard's bodily shape—the bodily shape that was alas! so terribly dear to her.

Lingard was not unkind, he was ever careful of her comfort in all little ways, but when they were alone together—and this happened strangely seldom—he would fall into long silences, as if unaware that she, his love, was there.

From these abstracted moods Jane soon learnt that she could rouse him only in one way. He was ever ready to talk of Athena,—of their noble, lovely, and ill-used friend; and Jane, assenting, would tell herself that it was all true, and that only long familiarity with the strange conditions of existence at Rede Place had made her take as calmly as she did the tragedy of Athena Maule's life—that tragedy which now weighed so heavily on Lingard that it blotted out for him everything and everybody else.

"I have told her she can always come and stay with us when things get intolerable here," he had exclaimed during one such talk, looking at Jane with eager, ardent eyes; and she had bent her head.

Then it was with Athena he discussed their future, his and Jane's—the future in which Mrs. Maule was, it seemed, to have so great a share.

It was on the seventh day of Jane's stay at Rede Place that her lover for the first time, or so it seemed to her sore heart, sought her company.

It fell about in this wise. Athena had been caught by Mrs. Pache, who, taking a drive in her old safe brougham for the first time since the motor accident, had naturally chosen Rede Place. Lingard and Dick Wantele at last escaped, leaving Mrs. Maule prisoned by her guest. They had gone out of doors, and chance had led them across Jane—Jane on her way back from the Small Farm where Mabel Digby, for

the first time in her young life, lay ill in bed, unwilling to see anyone, excepting Jane.

On hearing who had called, Miss Oglander had wished to hurry in, but Lingard had cried imperiously, "No! you shan't be made to endure Cousin Annie's congratulations! Come instead for a walk with me!" He had said the words in his old voice—the voice Jane knew, loved, obeyed.

Dick Wantele looked quickly at them both. Was it possible that Lingard was working himself free of the fetters of which he was—Dick wished to think it possible—still unaware? "Take him to the Oakhanger," he said to Jane. "You can get there and back in an hour ____"

Side by side they hastened, walking not as lovers walk, but as do those who feel themselves to be escaping from some danger which lies close behind them. Jane was taking Lingard the shortest way out of the park.

At last, at last she and Lingard would be alone, away from Athena as they had never yet been away from her during these long, to Jane these most miserable, days.

For a while neither spoke to the other, then, as they turned into one of the narrow streets of the little country town, Lingard broke into hurried, disconnected speech, only to fall into moody silence as they again emerged into the lonely country lane leading to the large, enclosed piece of ground for which they were bound.

The Hanger, as it was familiarly called in the neighbourhood of Redyford, was a huge natural mound rising from a low, undulating stretch of wild furze-covered common. Through the eighteenth century it had formed part of the estate of Rede Place, or rather it had been enclosed and appropriated, together with other common land.

Thanks to the generosity, perhaps it should be said the sense of justice, of Theophilus Joy, The Hanger now belonged to the little town of Redyford. In warm weather it was used by the town folk as a picnic resort, though the nature and formation of the ground, and of the mountainous height which gave the place its name, made the playing of games there impossible. This was as well, for the huge mound remained unspoilt, and in its stark way beautiful.

Sharply the two breasted the rising ground. The wind swept athwart them in short, strong gusts. Now and then there fell a spot of rain.

There was something in Jane Oglander's nature, something hidden from those about her, which responded to wild weather. She now welcomed the battle against wind and rain, and mounted with secret exhilaration the steep slippery path winding its way through and under the oak-trees which clothed the right flank of The Hanger.

Once she tripped, and Lingard for a moment put his arm round her, but she sprang forward, away from its strong shelter; surprised, and a little piqued, he kept behind her, letting her lead the now darkling way, for twilight was falling.

On they climbed, till at last, emerging from under the low oak branches, they stood, solitary figures, on a grassy ridge, bare save for a clump of high twisted fir-trees which swayed gauntly against the vast grey expanse of sky.

Owing to its peculiar formation, The Hanger presented, especially at this time of the early evening, an impression of almost monstrous height and loneliness.

Sheer down on the right from whence they had come lay the little town

of Redyford, the grey and red roofs partly hidden by the thick-set oaks. On the left the ground sloped away more gently; but it looked to-night as if a leap over the edge would fling one down, down into the valley of meadowlands now white with curling mists.

Slowly they turned and walked along the ridge, their feet sinking into the short soft turf growing in patches of pale green among the mauve-grey and brown heather. The path led up to a summer house, a curious circular building crowning the apex of the hill, and so wide open to wind, rain, and view that only the deep-eaved roof afforded any shelter to those under it.

It was there that Lingard, after a moment of hesitation, led the way. "Jane," he said, "let us come and sit down for a moment. I have something to ask you." And she followed him into the poor shelter the summer house afforded. It had stopped raining; the high wind reigned alone, victorious.

The bench on which they sat down was heavily scored with the initials of generations of Redyford lovers; for the little round building had ever been a temple of innocent courtship, and in the spring and summer evenings never lacked couples sitting in silent, inarticulate happiness.

Lingard's bare hand involuntarily rested on the dented figures, the interlaced initials....

Three weeks ago he would have prayed Jane's leave to add a J. and an H. to these rude scores, for three weeks ago he had been one of the great company of the world's lovers, understanding and sympathising with all the absurdities of love.

And now—even now, though he knew himself for a traitor to the woman sitting silent by his side, he yet felt in a strange way that the link between them was eternal—that in no way could it be broken.

Each, so he assured himself fiercely, had a call on the other.

He was about to put this belief, this instinctive certainty, to the test.

"As I said just now, I've something to ask you, Jane——" His words came haltingly; to his listener they sounded very cold.

"Yes, Hew?" She looked round at him. He was staring at the ground as if something lay there he alone could see.

"I asked you to come out with me to-night, because——because"——and then in a voice so low, so hoarse, that she had to bend forward to catch the words—"I want to ask you, to implore you, Jane—to marry me at once."

"At once?" she repeated. "When do you mean by at once, Hew?" She also spoke in a still, low voice. They seemed to be hatching a conspiracy of which one, if not both, should feel ashamed.

And more than ever it seemed to Jane Oglander as if another man, a stranger, had taken possession of Hew Lingard's shape.

"I mean at once!" he answered harshly. "To-morrow—or the day after to-morrow. There's no necessity why we should ever go back to Rede Place! Why shouldn't we walk down to the station now, from here? We should be in London in an hour and a half. People have often done stranger things than that. We could send a message from the station to——" His voice wavered, his lips refused to form Mrs. Maule's name.

He thrust the thought of Athena violently from him; and with the muttered words, "Can't you understand? I love you—I want you, Jane——" he turned and gathered the woman sitting so stilly by his side into his arms.

She gave a stifled cry of surprise; and then, as he kissed her fiercely

once, twice, and then again, there broke from her a low, bitter sigh—the sigh of a woman who feels herself debased by the caresses for which she has longed, of which she has been starved.

To Jane Oglander a kiss, so light, so willing a loan on the part of many women, was so intimate a gift as to be the forerunner of complete surrender. And to-night each of Hew Lingard's kisses was to her a profaned sacrament. Not so had they kissed on that day in London. Now his kisses told her, as no words could have done, of a divided allegiance.

She lay unresponsive, trembling in his arms, her eyes full of a wild, piteous questioning....

With a sudden sense of self-loathing and shame he released her from his arms.

"Well?" he said sullenly. "Well, Jane?" but he knew what her answer would and must be.

"I can't do what you wish, Hew. I don't think that either of us would be happy now—if we did that." She spoke in a quiet, restrained voice. She was too miserable, too deeply humiliated, for tears.

Together they walked out of the summer house and retraced their steps along the ridge.

"As I cannot do what you wish, would you like me to end our engagement?"

He turned on her fiercely. "I did not think," he cried, "that there lived a woman in the world who could be as cruel as you have been to me to-night!"

"I did not mean to be cruel," she said mournfully.

"Unless you wish to drive me to the devil, don't speak like that again,"

he said violently. "Promise me, I mean, that you won't think of breaking our engagement."

She made no answer, and a few moments later in a gentler tone he asked, "Can't you understand, Jane?"

She said humbly, "I try to understand."

A great and a healing flood of tenderness filled her heart, and as if the spiritual tie between them was indeed of so close a nature that Lingard felt her softening for the first time put his hand in hers.

"Jane," he said huskily, "forgive me. Try to forget to-night."

So they walked in silence, hand in hand, through the solitary lane and the now lighted streets of Redyford, uncaring of the few passers-by.

But when they came to the park gates Lingard withdrew his hand from hers, and at the door of the Garden Room he left her. "I won't come in yet," he said abruptly, and turning on his heel he disappeared into the night.

And with Jane's going something good and noble in Lingard went too, and as he walked into the darkness he lashed himself into a sea of deep injury and pain. His heart filled with anger rather than with shame when he evoked the look almost of aversion, of protesting anguish, which had come into her face while his lips had sought and found unresponsive her sweet, tremulous mouth.

He had been longing, craving, for that which he had now only the right to demand from her, and she had cruelly repulsed him.

How amazing that a fortnight—or was it three weeks?—could have

so altered a woman!

Even now the memory of those days they had spent together immediately on his return home was dear and sacred to him.

Could he have been mistaken,—such was the question he asked himself to-night,—in his belief that Jane Oglander had been exquisitely sensitive, responsive as are few human beings to every high demand of love?

Was it that his unspoken, unconfessed treachery had killed, obliterated in her the power of response? Nay, it was far more likely that he had made a mistake,—that the woman he loved was cold, as many tender women are cold, temperamentally incapable of that fusion of soul and body which is the essence of love between a man and a woman.

Had he not discovered this lack in Jane through his contact with a very different nature—with one who was full of quick, warm-blooded, generous impulses? Athena Maule might do foolish things,—she had admitted to him that more than once she had been tempted to do wild, reckless things,—but it was only her heart that would lead her astray.

The man in Lingard, knowing as he thought the hidden truth which underlay her story, felt full of burning sympathy.

As he at last walked back to the house, it was pleasant to him to feel that he would be able to forget the painful, the humiliating hour he had gone through with the woman who was to be his wife, in the company of Athena Maule.

Athena was in her boudoir. She had been there alone for two hours,

and they had been hours filled with impatient revolt and anxiety.

After Mrs. Pache had gone Athena had tried to find first Jane, and then Lingard. Then Dick Wantele, meeting her, had casually observed that the two others had gone out for a long walk.

Jane and Lingard out together beyond her ken and pursuit? The knowledge stabbed her. Athena was convinced, aye quite honestly convinced, that these two, her friends both of them, were ill-suited the one to the other.

She felt the breach between herself and Jane, and it hurt her the more because she had done nothing—nothing to deserve that Jane should avoid her as she sometimes felt sure Jane was doing.

It was not her fault if General Lingard was gradually coming to see the terrible mistake he had made. But to-night, while waiting, too excited, too impatient to do anything but sit and stare into the fire, she told herself that she was also disappointed in Lingard.

What a strange, peculiar man he was! Since the night before Jane Oglander's arrival he had said nothing—nothing that is, that all the world might not have heard. And yet she could not mistake his thralldom. If nothing else had proved it, Dick Wantele's behaviour would have done so. Twice in the last few days Dick had made a strong, a meaning, appeal to Athena to leave Rede Place. Her heart swelled at the thought of Dick's discourtesy and unkindness. She even wondered if he had dared to say anything to Lingard. During the last two days Lingard had certainly avoided finding himself alone with her....

The only one of them all who seemed perfectly at ease, and who was as usual absorbed in his own selfish ills and in his dull books, was Richard. Fortunately he took up a great deal of Jane's time.

At last, when it was nearly seven o'clock, the door opened, and Lingard came in. He had instinctively made his way to her, without stopping to think whether he were wise or no in what he was doing. During the last two days, putting a strong restraint on himself, he had avoided Athena, and his strange request to Jane, his pleading for an immediate marriage, had been the outcome of the state in which he found himself.

But now everything was changed. Jane had denied him, and he felt an imperative need of the kind, comfortable words Athena would lavish on him. He was sick of lies—of the lies he had told himself. He hungered for Athena's presence. What an unmannerly brute she must have thought him, to have avoided her as he had done, all that day and all the day before!

Very gently she bade him sit down, and in some subtle fashion she ministered to Lingard in a way that restored to a certain extent his feeling of self-respect. And then at last, when secure that there would be no interruptions, for the dinner bell had rung some moments before, she leant forward and said slowly, "Is something the matter? Is anything troubling you, Hew? Is it a matter in which I can help?"

She desired above all things that he should speak to her of Jane Oglander. But her wish was not to be gratified.

"Everything is troubling me," he said sombrely. "Everything!"

She moved a little nearer to him. Her hand lay close to his. Suddenly he took her hand and held it. "I loathe myself," he said in a low voice. "I needn't tell you the reason why, Athena,—you know, you understand ____"

"Ah! Yes—I understand," there was a thrill in her voice. "How often I

have felt ashamed of my own longing—of my longing to be free!"

It was a bow at a venture. He looked at her with dazed eyes. That was not what he had meant. Then suddenly he caught fire from her thin flame. "If you were free?" he repeated thickly. "I wish to God, Athena, that you were free——"

She withdrew her hand from his, and got up. "It's nearly eight o'clock," she said quietly. "We must go up and dress now."

CHAPTER XII

"There's not a crime
But takes its proper change still out in crime
If once rung on the counter of this world."

All that night Athena lay awake. Her brain was extraordinarily alive. She had not had so bad a bout of wakefulness for years.

If only she were free!

She lay wondering what Lingard had meant by those words—words which she had put into his mouth, and which he had uttered in the thick tones of a man who has lost control of himself, and who speaks scarce knowing what he says.

In the world in which Mrs. Maule lived when she was not at Rede Place, it was a firmly-established belief that those unhappily or unsuitably married could, by making a determined effort, strike off their fetters. And in this connection it had been gradually borne in upon her that the good old proverb which declares that where there's a will there's a way is, in the England of to-day, peculiarly true of everything that pertains to the marital relations of men and women.

The question had never before touched her nearly, and Athena as a rule only concerned herself with what did touch her nearly.

However much she chafed against the bonds which bound her to Richard Maule, the thought that she, Mrs. Maule of Rede Place, should join the crowd of ambiguous women who are neither maids, nor wives, nor widows, was unthinkable. Her day, so she often secretly reasoned with herself, would come later—after Richard's death. At the time of their marriage he had made magnificent,

absurdly magnificent settlements. He could do nothing to alter that fact; so much she had been at some pains to ascertain. Meanwhile, she made the best she could of life.

But now, with a dramatic suddenness which strongly appealed to her calculating and yet undisciplined nature—an unlooked for piece of good fortune had come her way. Were she free, or within reasonable sight of freedom, the kind of life for which she now longed passionately was almost certainly within her grasp.

Lingard the man roused in Athena Maule none of that indescribable sensation, part physical, part mental, which she had at first thought, nay hoped, he would do. But that, so she told herself with unconscious cynicism, was a fortunate thing. She had now set her whole heart on being Lingard's wife,—only to secure that end would she be Lingard's lover. Her wild oats were sown. Never more would she allow herself to become the prey of passion,—that "creature of poignant thirst and exquisite hunger...."

She gave but a very fleeting thought to Lingard's engagement to Jane Oglander. Engagements are perpetually made and broken, and fortunately this particular engagement had not even been publicly announced.

No; what deeply troubled her, what stood in the way of the fruition of her desire was—Richard, the man who had so slight a hold on life, and yet who seemed so tenacious of that which had surely lost all savour.

In the darkness of the night, the pallid face of Athena's husband rose before her,—cruel, watchful, streaked, as it so often was when Richard looked her way, with contempt as well as hatred.

How amazingly Richard had altered in the ten years she had known him, and in nothing more than in the expression of his face, which she

now visioned with such horrible vividness!

In old days Richard Maule had had a handsome, dreamy, placid face,—the kind of profile which looks to great advantage on a cameo or medal. Now, as Athena often told herself, it was the face of a suffering devil, and of a devil, alas! who looked as if he would never die.

But the days when she had measured anxiously the span of Richard's life were past. Athena, now, could not afford to wait for her husband's death; she must find some other way to freedom.

There was a story which had remained imprinted for two years—or was it three?—on the tablets of Mrs. Maule's memory, and this was the more strange, the more significant, because she had not come across the case in any direct way.

All she could remember of the affair—luckily she had a very good memory for such things—had been told her by a certain Mrs. Stanwood, who was noted for her extraordinary knowledge of other people's business, and for whom Athena had never had any particular liking.

But now the idle words of this casual acquaintance became tremendously significant, pregnant with vital issues.

She sat up in the darkness and pressed her hands against her face in her effort to recapture every word of what had been at the time so unimportant a piece of gossip.

The story had been told her at Ranelagh. She could still see the low-ceilinged entrance hall where the eagerly whispered words had been uttered.

They were standing together, Athena and Maud Stanwood, waiting for the rest of their party, when there had swept by them a pretty, well-

ressed, tired-looking woman. Suddenly, a man had come forward and the two for a moment met face to face. Then, with a muttered word of apology, the man passed on.

Mrs. Stanwood clutched Athena's arm. "Do look at them!" she whispered. "How very dramatic! I wonder if this is the first time they have met since the case!" And Athena obediently stared at the pretty, tired-looking woman; the man had disappeared.

"Who is she? Who are they? What case do you mean?" she asked.

And the other answered provokingly, "Surely you remember all about it?"

"But I don't remember. Please tell me? Was it a divorce case?" Athena spoke a little pettishly.

"Divorce? Oh, *no*! Something quite different. Why, if she had been divorced she would not be here. No, no; their marriage was annulled. The case made quite a talk because they had been married so long—I believe fourteen years. I was at the wedding. She was such a pretty bride. Of course she married again—the other man. But it's rather bad taste of her to come here now, for she used to be here a good deal with him—I mean with her first husband."

Athena, amused with the tale, had pressed the other to tell her all about it, and Mrs. Stanwood, nothing loth, had proceeded to do so, quoting similar cases, and intimating, with the shrewdness which always distinguished her, how odd it was that more childless women didn't have recourse to so easy, so reputable a way of ridding themselves of dull and undesirable husbands!

A sensation of intense relief, nay more, of triumphant satisfaction, stole into Athena's heart. What that woman, that nervous, pretty, faded-looking woman, had done after fourteen years of marriage,

Athena could certainly do now. No one looking at Richard—at that poor, miserable wreck of a man—could doubt that Mrs. Maule had a right to her freedom.

"If only you were free!" She was not quite sure in what sense Lingard had uttered those memorable words, but it was enough for her that he could, if necessary, be reminded of having said them. Once she were indeed free, Lingard, so Athena felt comfortably sure, would not need to be so reminded.

Nature, so unkind to woman, has given her one great advantage over man. She can, while herself remaining calm, rouse in him a whirlwind of tempestuous emotion.

Many a time in the last few years Mrs. Maule had heard the cry, "If only you were free!" but, while listening with downcast eyes to the hopeless wish, she had known well that the speaker did not really mean what he said, or if he meant it—poor Bayworth Kaye had meant it—then he was, like Bayworth, ineligible, or if eligible as a lover, absurdly ineligible as a husband.

Her acute, subtle mind, trained from childhood only to concentrate itself on those problems which affected, or might affect, herself, turned to the lesser problem of Jane Oglander.

Jane Oglander was an obstacle. Far less an one than Richard, but still likely to be a formidable obstacle owing to Lingard's strained sense of honour.

So much must be frankly admitted. But it would be a mistake to make too much of Jane. Once Jane realised how unsuited she was to become Hew Lingard's wife, she would draw back—of that Athena felt assured.

But how could Jane be brought to understand? Would Lingard himself ever allow her to see the truth, or would the task fall to her—to

Athena?

If what the world now thought were true, Hew Lingard might hope to rise to almost any eminence in the delightful, the glorious career of arms. But for that, and again Athena was quite sincere with herself, he would need to have by his side a clever and brilliant woman, without whose help he might find himself shelved as many another man of action has been. It was this fact that someone ought to convey to poor Jane Oglander.

Within the last few months, by merely saying a word to a distinguished personage at the War Office, Mrs. Maule had been able, so she quite believed, to advance Bayworth Kaye materially—to procure him, that is, a post on which he had set his heart, and for which he was eminently fitted.

The official in question had been extremely cautious, not to say cold, during their little conversation, but a week or two later Athena had been gratified to receive from the great man a pretty little note in which he had informed her that her protégé—as he called poor Bayworth—was going, after all, to be given the post for which he was so admirably qualified.

Athena had no reason to under-estimate her powers. The average man always, and the exceptional man generally, capitulated at once. Even politicians were indulgent to her ignorance, nay more, amused by her lack of knowledge of British public affairs. But Athena was now coming to see the value of such knowledge.

Since the arrival of General Lingard, she had realised that there were all sorts of things which ordinary women—such women as Jane Oglander and Mabel Digby—know, but which she had never taken the trouble to learn. Lingard had already taught her a good deal. She had early adopted the excellent principle, when with a man, of allowing him to talk, especially when the subject was one about which

she knew little or nothing.

Lingard would have been amazed indeed had he known that a fortnight ago Athena Maule had scarcely heard of these subjects—so vitally interesting to those concerned with the expansion of our Empire in Africa—about which she now questioned him so intelligently.

The next day opened with very ill news—the news that Bayworth Kaye was dead.

As is the way in the country, the servants heard the bare fact some time before it reached their betters. It formed the subject of discussion in the servants' hall on the previous evening, for the fatal telegram had reached the rectory at seven o'clock, and its contents had made their way, first to the stables of Rede Place, and from thence to the house half an hour later, at the very time Lingard was echoing Athena's words, "If only you were free!"

"You'll 'ave to tell her when you go in with the cup of tea," observed Mr. Maule's valet to Mrs. Maule's French maid, Félicie. But the woman shrugged her shoulders, with a "Ma foi, non!"

They had all wondered, with sighs and mysterious winks, how Mrs. Maule would take the news. The Corsican chef expressed great concern. "Ce pauvre jeune homme est mort d'amour!" he exclaimed to Félicie, and she nodded solemnly, explaining and expanding his remark to the others.

"Gammon! An Englishman—an officer and a gentleman—don't die of such a thing as love," the butler said scornfully, and Félicie again had shrugged her shoulders. What did these unimaginative barbarians

know of the tender passion?—nothing, save when it touched their own sluggish souls and bodies. Poor Monsieur Bayworth—so young, so gallant, always kindly and civil to Félicie herself. So unlike that prude, his mamma! Félicie had but one regret—that she had never seen Monsieur Bayworth in uniform.

Wantele was told the next morning. Bayworth Kaye—Bayworth, whom he had known with an affectionate, kindly knowledge from his birth upwards—dead? He felt a sharp pang remembering how coldly he and the young man had said good-bye less than a month ago. After all, it was not Bayworth who had been to blame for all that had happened during the last year....

He came down to breakfast hoping that the news which he had himself learnt but a few moments before was already known to Athena. If that were the case, she would probably stay upstairs. Breakfast in bed is one of the many agreeable privileges civilised life offers woman.

Only since General Lingard had been staying at Rede Place had Mrs. Maule come down each morning. She had evidently begun doing so during those three days which had laid so solid a foundation to her friendship with Lingard.

But if Athena were still in ignorance of young Kaye's death, then to him, Wantele, must fall the painful, the odious, task of telling her. He could not be so cruel as to allow her to discover the fact from the morning papers. Of late—and again Dick traced a connection between the fact and Lingard's presence at Rede Place—Mrs. Maule generally glanced over one of the papers before opening her letters.

Lingard came into the dining-room, and then, a moment after, Mrs. Maule and Jane Oglander together.

Wantele glanced quickly at his cousin's wife. With relief he told

himself that Athena had heard the melancholy news. She looked ill and tired, her eyelids were red, her beauty curiously obscured.

She came up languidly to the breakfast table, and Lingard looked at her solicitously. She put out her hand and let it rest for a moment in his grasp. Her hand was cold, and he muttered a word of concern.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "I shall have to take chloral again—it's the only vice Richard and I ever had in common!"

Lingard turned abruptly away. It had become disagreeable to him to hear her utter Richard Maule's name. And Athena felt suddenly discomfited. The plans she had made in the night became remote from reality.

She sat down and her eyes began following Lingard. He was waiting on Jane, taking trouble to get Jane what he supposed she liked to eat—and leaving her, Athena, his hostess, to Dick Wantele's care.

So far, she had never had the power to make Lingard neglect Jane in those small material things which mean so much to some women and so little to others. Personal service meant a great deal to Athena Maule. The sight of Lingard and Jane Oglander together was becoming unendurable to her.

"D'ye know, Dick, if there's any more news of Bayworth Kaye?"

It was Jane who spoke. She also felt ill and tired; she also had not slept that night; but Lingard's anxious look and muttered word of concern had not been for her. True, he was "looking after her" now, bringing her food she had no wish to eat, making her—and what a mockery it was—his special care.

But what was this that Dick was saying in so hushed a voice, in answer to her idle question?

"Yes, I'm sorry to say there is news—bad news."

The speaker was intensely conscious of Athena's presence. Did she know, or did she not know, what he was about to say? He added slowly, "Poor Bayworth Kaye is dead."

Jane uttered an exclamation of horror and concern. Athena said nothing; but she took a piece of toast out of the tiny rack in front of her plate, and began crumbling it in her hand.

"Yes, it's a terrible thing"—Wantele was now speaking to Lingard. "The poor fellow was an only son—indeed, an only child. We've known him all his life. It will be a shock to Richard——" He talked on, and still Athena remained silent.

But when at last Jane turned to her with, "I suppose you will be going down to the rectory this morning?" Mrs. Maule threw back her head and spoke with a touch of angry excitement in her voice:—

"Why did you tell me now, Dick, before breakfast? You've made me miserable—miserable! You know I hate being told of anyone's death. I hate death! No, I shan't go to the rectory—you can go, Jane, and say all that should be said from Richard and from me."

Lingard looked severely at Wantele. How stupid, how heartless, the young man was always showing himself! Why had he hastened to tell sad news which he must have known would so much distress Athena and Jane Oglander?

"I'm so sorry! I was afraid you would see it in one of the papers," Wantele spoke as if he did indeed repent of his cruel lack of thought.

Athena accepted his apology in silence. After a while she turned to her guest:—

"I wish you had met poor Bayworth Kaye," she said musingly, "he

was just the sort of man you would have liked. He was tremendously keen——" Then she stopped short; looking up she had met Dick Wantele's light-coloured eyes fixed on her face with an expression of——was it extreme surprise or angry disgust?

She looked straight at him: "Don't you agree, Dick?"

"Yes, yes," he said hastily, "I certainly agree," and his eyes wavered and fell before her frank, questioning gaze.

CHAPTER XIII

"L'amour et la douleur sont parallèles
Ces deux lignes-là vont à jamais ensemble."

Owing to the peculiar conditions of his life, a life led almost entirely apart from the rest of his household, Richard Maule seldom had occasion to see Hew Lingard and Athena together. But the owner of Rede Place always realised a great deal more of what was going on than those about him credited him with doing, and on his wife he kept a constant, secret watch of which she alone became sometimes uncomfortably aware.

As the fine autumn days—to the stricken man the pleasantest time of the year—wore themselves away, Richard Maule grew particularly kind and considerate to Jane Oglander.

He was very susceptible to the physical condition of those about him, and he noticed that she had altered strangely during the short time she had been at Rede Place. She was pale and listless; and often when with him she sat doing nothing, saying nothing.

Every time they were alone together—and that now was very often—the past came back to Richard Maule, especially that time of his life when he lay ill to death eight years ago in Italy.

Looking furtively at her strained, unhappy face, he would recall the agony of rage and despair in which he had lain at a time when he had been supposed by those about him to be absorbed in his physical

condition—if indeed conscious of anything at all.

In those days Athena had still preserved a simulacrum of regard, of affection for her husband, and when she came into his room, when she stood at the bottom of his bed looking with mingled repugnance and pity at his distorted face, he longed to rise and destroy the wanton who had been so adoringly loved and so wholly trusted.

They were sitting together now, Jane Oglander and Richard Maule, on the afternoon of the day which had opened with the news of Bayworth Kaye's death. It was warm and sunny, and the three others had gone out of doors after luncheon—for Dick Wantele, Athena was well aware of it, had fallen into the way of never leaving the other two alone together if he could possibly prevent it.

Wantele could not understand Jane's attitude. Did she suspect her friend's treachery? He found it impossible to make up his mind one way or the other. In any case Jane and Lingard were not like normal lovers—but Wantele had lived long enough in the world to know that there is every variety of lover. Sometimes he thought Jane trusted Lingard so implicitly as to be still blind.

A letter addressed to Miss Oglander was brought in to her.

"It's from Mrs. Kaye," she said quickly. "May I open it, Richard?"

She glanced through it:—

"Dear Miss Oglander" (it ran), "My husband and myself thank you sincerely for your kind words of sympathy. Had I known you were the bearer of your letter I would have seen you. I am writing to ask if you will do me a kindness. I know that General Lingard is staying at Rede Place, and I write to ask if it would be possible for me to see him on a

matter of business connected with my son. I venture to ask if he will kindly come at eleven o'clock on Thursday. I cannot fix any time before that day. I should have written to Mr. Wantele, but as I had to answer your note, I thought I would ask you to arrange this for me."

She told herself with quivering lip that of course Hew should go and see poor Mrs. Kaye. Hew was always kind. He would be patient and understanding with the unhappy woman.

Jane got up. Perhaps she could go and settle the matter at once. She looked at Richard Maule. He was turning over the leaves of a book. Richard would not miss her. There came over her a despairing feeling that no one now needed her, in any dear and intimate sense....

Once she had asked her small vicarious favour of Hew, she could write to Mrs. Kaye, and take the note to the rectory herself. It would give her something to do, and just now Jane Oglander was in desperate need of things to do.

Athena had said something of showing General Lingard the walled gardens which were all that remained of the old Tudor manor house from which Rede Place took its name, and which had been left by Theophilus Joy as a concession to English taste.

It was there, some way from the house, that Jane made her way, and there that she at last found those she sought.

Mrs. Maule had suddenly become alive to the many and varied outdoor beauties of her country home. All the nice women she knew were fond of gardening. It was the feminine fad of the moment, and one with which she had hitherto had very little sympathy.

Athena sincerely believed herself to be devoted to flowers, but she preferred those varieties that look best cut and in water. Still, to be

interested in her garden, and in what grew there, belonged to the part which was, for the moment, so much herself that she was scarcely conscious of playing it.

Perhaps one reason why Mrs. Maule had never cared for gardening was because her husband's cousin was so exceedingly fond of it. The old gardens of Rede Place were to Wantele an ever-recurring pleasure, and, what counted far more in the life he had to lead, an infinitely various, as well as a congenial occupation.

As Jane walked through an arch leading to the pear orchard, she saw that Dick was giving instructions to one of the gardeners; a small sack of bulbs lay at their feet.

Hew Lingard and Athena Maule stood a little back, and as Jane came down the path, Mrs. Maule, instead of coming forward, moved further away. Instinct told her that Jane was seeking Hew Lingard with some definite purpose in her mind—and she determined to thwart the other woman. To allow Hew Lingard to continue his anxious deference to Jane were but cruel kindness to them both.

She put out her gloveless hand and laid a finger on Lingard's arm—it was the merest touch, but it produced an instant, a magical effect. He turned, and in a moment gave her his entire, his ardently entire, attention.

Wantele welcomed Jane with an eager, "What would you think, Jane, of putting a mass of starch hyacinths over in that corner?"

She tried obediently to give her mind to the question, but it was of no use, and she shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I—I can't remember what was there before——"

And then she called out, "Hew!"

But Lingard did not hear the call.

She moved a little nearer to where he and Athena were standing. Again she said her lover's name; but this time she uttered it in so low, so faltering a tone that Lingard might indeed have been excused for not hearing it.

She waited a moment for the answer that did not come, and then she turned and walked slowly away, down to and through the arch in the wall.

To Wantele, witness of the little scene, what had just happened seemed full of a profound and sinister significance.

As he had heard Jane Oglander utter Lingard's name, he had told himself that he would have heard her voice—had it been calling "Dick"—across the world. But Lingard was deaf to everything, to everybody, but Athena. He had become her thrall.

With a last muttered word of instruction to the gardener, Wantele turned and hurried out of the orchard. He glanced anxiously down each of the straight walks, and peered through the leafless fruit-trees. It was clear that Jane had already passed out of the walled gardens, and that she had taken the shortest way of escape.

He started in pursuit, his one desire being—in some ways Wantele was very like a woman in his dealings with his beloved—to assuage her pain, to lighten her humiliation....

Suddenly he saw her. She was standing on a little pier which jutted rather far out into the lake. Her slight figure was reflected into the water, now dotted with yellow leaves, and she was staring down into the blue, golden-flecked depths. Wantele felt afraid to call out, so perilously near was she to the unguarded edge.

He began walking quickly along the path which, circling round the oval piece of water, led to the pier, and Jane, looking up, became

aware that he was there.

Without speaking, she turned and made her way along the rough boards.

Nothing was changed since yesterday, since this morning, and yet in a sense Wantele felt that everything was changed. Till now he had been doubtful as to what she knew—almost of what there was to know. He distrusted, with reason, his sharp, intolerable jealousy of Lingard.

He had spent a miserable hour after he had himself speeded the two to the Oakhanger. There are no relations so difficult to probe as the relations of lovers—even of those who have been and are no longer lovers.

Jane put out her hand as if they had not met before that day, and Dick took the poor cold hand in his and held it tightly for a moment before he dropped it.

"D'you know what to-day is?" she asked abruptly. "I hadn't meant to remind you of it, Dick—dear, kind Dick. To-day is the twenty-fifth of October, the day my brother died."

He uttered an exclamation of dismay, self-rebuke. How could he have forgotten? So well had he remembered the date last year that he had written and urged Jane to come to Rede Place, and on her refusal to do so he had gone up to London for two or three days; together they had made the long, the interminable, journey to the suburban churchyard where Jack Oglander had been buried.

Wantele's mind went back six years to that melancholy, that sordid, scene in the prison infirmary. They had sent the sister away, reassured her, told her there was a change for the better. And then suddenly young Oglander had sunk—but he, Wantele, had been there, with him....

She was speaking again, in a low musing tone:—

"It's so strange——" she said, and then amended her words—"Isn't it strange that death is so material, so horribly real a thing? It seems so hard that there has to be so much fuss. If only one could slip away into nothingness how much better it would be, Dick—wouldn't it?"

Her mind swung back to her brother. There came a gentler, a softer tone in her sad voice.

"I wonder if you remember that you were the only one who did not bid me rejoice that Jack was dead. I have never forgotten that. And you were right, Dick. It was a great misfortune for me that he died. He would have been out of prison by now—and we should have been together, abroad——He was so clever, I think we should have been able to make some kind of life—and you would have come and stayed with us sometimes——But it's no use talking like that, is it? I know I'm foolish, unreasonable, to-day, and you are the only person to whom I ever talk of Jack."

She was putting up her dead brother as a shield between herself and her distress, and Wantele respected the poor subterfuge.

"I know, I know," he said feelingly.

They walked on in silence for a while, then. "I think, Dick, that I had better go away."

"No, no!" he cried. "Don't do that, Jane! Believe me, that would be a very unwise thing to do. I take it that you and General Lingard"—he brought out the name of her betrothed with an effort—"have other joint visits to pay?"

She shook her head. "I haven't told anybody. Only the Paches know. He thought he ought to tell them."

"If you go away, Jane, he will almost certainly stay on here. It would be a pity for him to do that," Wantele spoke with studied calmness.

"Yes, I suppose it would," the colour rushed into her face. "I want to tell you something, Dick. Hew was very noble about my brother. I told him about it very soon after we first met one another. You see we became friends so soon——" She sighed. "Just friends, you know."

Wantele turned and looked into her face with an indefinable expression of shamed curiosity—an expression that seemed to ask a thousand questions he had no right to ask.

"And then he began to write to me," she went on rather breathlessly, as if answering some inward questioning of her own rather than of his. "I was amazed when I received his first letter—it seemed such a strange thing for him to write to me, and then he asked if he might come and see me before he went away."

She waited a moment, and went on, "I was the only person to whom he wrote while he was away. He's had a very lonely life, Dick,—no brothers, no sisters, and his mother died when he was a little child."

There was a world of anxious apology, of excuse, underlying her confidences.

When, at last, they went back into the house, they found General Lingard sitting with his host, and it was in Richard Maule's presence that Jane made her request—a request to which Lingard gave eager assent.

Of course he would go and see Mrs. Kaye, and bestir himself concerning her son's affairs! He had been very much struck by Mrs. Maule's account of Bayworth Kaye that morning. She had said other things of him to Lingard, but he naturally made no allusion to these when discussing his coming interview with Mrs. Kaye.

Athena had told Lingard, with angry scorn, of the way certain people in the neighbourhood had talked of her friendship with the young soldier, and he had felt that inarticulate rage and disgust which any decent man would have felt on receiving Athena's confidences. Lingard's opinion of the world had altered, and greatly for the worse, since he had made Mrs. Maule's acquaintance.

CHAPTER XIV

"Opportunity creates a sinner: at least it calls him into action, and like the warming sun invites the sleeping serpent from its hole."

The dramas of love, of jealousy, of hatred, which play so awful a part in human existence, only form eddies, perhaps it would be more true to say whirlpools, on the vast placid current of life.

The owners of Rede Place were not allowed to forget for long that in General Lingard they were entertaining a guest who belonged to the world at large, rather than to them or to himself.

It had been arranged that the next day, the twenty-sixth of October, Wantele was to take Lingard to a big shoot. Athena, when reminded of the fact by a casual word the night before, felt curiously pleased. The absence of the two men for a long day would relieve the strain, and make it possible for her to have a serious talk with Jane Oglander. Somehow, it seemed almost impossible to do so with Wantele and Lingard always about.

Athena was no coward, and the time had come when she felt she must discover what her friend knew, or rather, what her friend suspected—for as yet there was very little to know. And if Jane suspected the truth—the little, that is, there was to suspect—she must discover what Jane meant to do.

The men made an early start, and from one of her bedroom windows Mrs. Maule watched the dogcart spinning down the broad road

through the park. Dick Wantele was driving; Hew Lingard sitting stiffly, with folded arms, by his side.

At last they turned the corner at the end of the avenue, and Athena went back to bed with the feeling that it was pleasant to know that she need not get up for another two hours, and also that, after her talk with Jane Oglander, she would be free to do what she liked all day.

As she lay back, feeling a little stupid and drowsy, for she had taken a dose of chloral the night before, Athena gave a regretful, kindly thought to Bayworth Kaye.

Yes, though no one knew it but herself, the gods had shown the young man that kindness which is said to prove their love. His only fault as a lover—a serious one from Mrs. Maule's point of view—had been an almost insane jealousy. He would have taken badly, perhaps very badly, her marriage to such a man as General Lingard.

It was well for Bayworth, and, in a lesser sense, well for her also, that he had died in this sad, sudden way. Death is the only final, as it is the only simple, solution of many a painful riddle.

Athena had not allowed the thought of Bayworth Kaye to trouble her unduly; but she had been uncomfortably aware that he might remain, for a long time, a point of danger in her life. She acknowledged that in the matter of this young man she had been imprudent, but he had come across her at a moment when she was feeling dull and "under the weather."

Poor Bayworth! He had taken the whole thing far too seriously. He had been so young, so ardent, so—so grateful. His death at this juncture was a relief. Athena paid his memory the tribute of a sigh.

And then she turned her thoughts to Jane Oglander. During the last few years she had had many proofs of Jane's deep and loyal affection for herself; but the type of woman to which Mrs. Maule

belonged can never form any true intimacy with a member of her own sex.

Jane had always been ignorant of everything that concerned Athena's real inward life—the vivid, exciting, emotional life, which she lived when away from Rede Place. Bayworth Kaye had been the one exception to the wise rule she had made for herself very soon after her arrival in England.

Jane Oglander, so Athena was quite convinced, knew nothing of the greatest of the great human games—had never fallen a victim to that jealous, compelling passion which plays so tragic a part in the lives of most of those sentient human beings who are not absorbed in one of the other master-passions.

For Mrs. Maule had valued Jane's unquestioning love; she had rested in the knowledge that Jane believed her to be as spotless a being as herself. Why, Jane had not even suspected poor Bayworth Kaye's infatuation! Athena forgot that Jane had never seen Bayworth and herself together.

But though Mrs. Maule told Jane Oglander nothing of her own intimate concerns, she had taken it for granted that she knew all Jane's innocent secrets. And now, when musing over her coming conversation with her friend, she felt a sharp pang of irritation when she remembered how little Jane had really trusted her concerning Lingard. Why, she hadn't even told her of the correspondence between them! Jane Oglander, Athena was sorry to think of such a thing of one whom she had always set apart in her mind as an exception, had been—sly.

Since the night of Jane Oglander's arrival at Rede Place, the night when Jane had behaved, so Athena now reminded herself, so queerly, the two women had never discussed Jane and Lingard's engagement—indeed, they hardly ever found themselves alone

together. This, of course, was Jane's fault quite as much as hers.

Now at last had come the opportunity to—to "have it out" with Jane; to defend herself, if need be, from any charge of disloyalty.

It took Mrs. Maule a considerable time to find her friend. Miss Oglander was in none of the usual living-rooms, neither was she in her own room or with Richard.

Was it possible that Jane had gone off for the day to the Small Farm in order to avoid the very explanation Athena wished to provoke? That was a disturbing thought.

And then, unexpectedly, she ran Jane to earth in a corner of the large library which only Dick Wantele habitually used, and which was at the extreme end of the house, furthest away from Mrs. Maule's boudoir.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," she exclaimed. "What made you hide yourself here, Jane?"

"Dick wanted something copied out of a book, and I thought I would do it now."

There was a look of fear, of painful constraint, in Jane Oglander's face; and as she came forward she kept the book she had been holding, a manual on practical cottage architecture, in her hand, open.

"There are such heaps of things I want to say to you, Jane, and somehow we never seem to have a moment!"

Jane looked into Athena's face—it was a penetrating, questioning look. Was it possible—perhaps it was possible—that Athena was

speaking in good faith?

The other hurried on, a little breathlessly: "Of course I want to hear all about your plans. I know you mean to be married quietly in London——" She vaguely remembered that Jane had said something to that effect during their one conversation together. "But what will you do afterwards? Hew is not obliged to take up his new appointment yet, is he?"

There was a long pause—and then, "I don't know exactly what he means to do," Jane answered in a low voice.

They were both standing before the fireplace; Jane Oglander was looking straight at Athena, but Athena's lovely head was bent down.

"Haven't you thought about it? But I suppose you'll pay some visits first."

There was a touch of sharp envy in Athena Maule's voice. It was absurd, it was irritating, to think that Jane, even if only for a short time longer, would be Hew Lingard's companion, sharer in his triumphal progress—unless of course something could bring about the end of their engagement—soon.

"I meant I did not know about his appointment." In each of the letters he had written to Jane during the ten days they had been apart, Hew Lingard had discussed the possibility of his being offered an immediate appointment, but she was only now being made aware that the offer had actually been made.

As a matter of fact, it had not been made.

Jane tried to believe that her ignorance of a fact so vital to Lingard was not in any way Athena's fault—indeed, that it was nobody's fault except perchance her own.

"You mean you don't know whether he will accept what will be offered him? But, Jane, forgive my interference—he and I have become such friends—you must *make* him take it. It would be a splendid thing, a stepping-stone to something really big. You'll have to train yourself now to be a little worldly——"

Athena spoke with forced lightness. It would be dreadful if Jane in her folly made Lingard do anything which would be irrevocable. "You can't always live with your head in the clouds, you know!"

Jane felt as if the other had struck her; this flippant, hard-voiced woman was not the Athena she had always known.

"I don't suppose," said Mrs. Maule, at last looking up, and smiling into Jane's face, "that you've even made up your mind where you will spend your honeymoon?"

She was feeling slightly ashamed,—ashamed and yet exhilarated by this absurd, make-believe conversation.

Jane shut the book she held in her hand, and put it down.

"Athena," she said quietly, "I did not mean to tell you yet, but now I think I had better do so. I am going to break my engagement. I see—of course I can't help seeing—that it's been a mistake from the beginning."

"He was not good enough for you, Jane," said Mrs. Maule impulsively. "What he wants is a wife who will help him. You did not understand. I saw that from the first——"

Jane went on quickly:

"After all, men—and women, too, I suppose,—often do make that sort of mistake. It's a good thing when they find it out in time—as I have done. But I would rather not talk about it."

She changed the subject abruptly: "I feel rather worried about Mabel Digby. She's really quite ill. I thought of lunching there to-day, if you have no objection."

"Yes, do go there! Surely you know I always want you to do just what you like when you're here?"

Athena's voice sounded oddly loud in her own ears. It seemed to her as if she had lost control over its modulations....

As the door of the library closed behind Jane Oglander, Athena Maule sat down. She felt oppressed, almost scared, by this piece of good fortune. She had never thought things would be made so easy for her.

How mistaken she had been in Jane's attitude, not only to Hew Lingard, but to life! And how mistaken Lingard had been! Athena could not help feeling a certain contempt for him; but all men, so she reminded herself, are vain where women are concerned. They always put a far higher value on themselves than does the woman on whom they are wasting their pity, their—their remorse.

Why, Jane had shown herself more than reasonable just now. She had made no stupid "fuss," attempted no disagreeable accusations. She hadn't even cried! But then, Jane Oglander was just—Jane; that is a sensible, a thoughtful, to tell truth, a cold creature! Athena, to be sure, had seen her moved, terribly so, over that business of her brother, but all the emotional side of the girl's nature had been exhausted over that sad affair.

What Athena was beginning to long for with all the strength of her being had now entered the domain of immediate possibility.

There would be some disagreeable, difficult moments to go through before she could become Hew Lingard's wife. Mrs. Richard Maule,

sitting there in the library of Rede Place, faced that fact with the cool, calculating courage which was perhaps her chief asset in the battle of life.

But she was popular, well liked by a large circle of people; she had little doubt that many of them would take her part—again she reminded herself that it would be very difficult for anyone to do anything else who, knowing her, had ever seen Richard Maule as he now was. She had heard of women doing far stranger things than that she was about to do in order to attain their wish.

She tried to remember the two or three names Mrs. Stanwood had uttered in a similar connection—but they were gone, irretrievably gone from her memory. No matter, the position of a woman whose marriage has been dissolved is quite other than that of a divorcée. Little as she really knew of English sentiment and prejudice, Mrs. Maule could be sure of that.

Athena's violet eyes grew tender. Hew Lingard respected as well as worshipped her; and should her dream, the delightful dream which was now taking such living shape, become reality, should she, that is, become Lingard's wife, she would never, never allow him to regret it.

She renewed, and most solemnly, the vow she had taken two nights ago. Ah! yes indeed—her wild oats were all sown! Athena Lingard would be a very different woman from Athena Maule. Besides, as Lingard's wife she would be free of England for a while.

She remembered vividly the day that he had casually told her that he expected an appointment abroad, for it had been the first time she had realised how utterly unsuited Jane was to be Lingard's wife.

Athena possessed the confident belief in herself and in her own powers that every beautiful woman is apt early to acquire in her progress through an admiring world. Such a wife as herself would be

of immeasurable use to such a man as was Hew Lingard. Of that she could have no doubt.

Hew was not exactly a man of the world, in fact he seemed astonishingly indifferent to other people's opinion. Well, that told two ways. Just now, it was a good thing that he cared so little what others might say or think. Instinct told her that as long as he was at peace with his own conscience, his own sense of honour, Lingard would care mighty little what the world said—besides, the world would have nothing to say. They, she and Lingard, would have to be careful till the legal matter was settled—that was all.

During the long hour that she sat alone in the library of Rede Place, Athena Maule had time to think of many things, for she was no longer anxious or excited now—everything was going well. The rest, to such a woman as herself, presented no real difficulty.

She dwelt with a feeling of exultation on the thought of the punishment she was going to inflict on Richard. She wondered idly whether the step she was about to take would affect her marriage settlements. They had been splendid—with none of those tiresome "if and if clauses" that she was told settlements often contain. Well, that was a matter of comparatively small consequence. From what she knew of Lingard, it was unlikely that he would allow her to continue in receipt of another man's money. From a practical point of view it was a pity, of course, that Hew was like that, but she liked him the better for it.

She could not, as yet, form any very definite plan of action. There was plenty of time for that now that Jane was out of the way. She would go to London—London was very pleasant at this time of year—and once there she would get one of her clever friends to recommend her a really good lawyer.

Constructive thought—thought such as Athena had now been indulging in for an hour—is a fatiguing mental process. She felt tired,

and quite ready for lunch, the principal meal of her day, when the gong sounded.

But before going off to her solitary meal, Mrs. Maule went over to that portion of the library where were kept several rows of old law books that had belonged to Dick Wantele's father. She marked the place where stood a solid volume inscribed, "A Digest of the Marriage Laws of England."

When she had a quiet hour to spare, and when no one was likely to see her engaged on the task, she would take that book down, and study it carefully: it doubtless contained information as to several matters of which she was as yet ignorant, and which it now behoved her to know.

CHAPTER XV

"... that supreme disintegrant, the Tyranny of Love...."

The Small Farm had become dear to Jane during the long miserable days she had lived through in the last fortnight. She had gone there whenever she wanted to escape from the intolerable pain of seeing Lingard's absorption in Athena Maule.

Each of the familiar rooms of Rede Place now held for her some bitter, some humiliating association. She never took refuge in her own room upstairs without remembering the long, intimate talk with Athena the evening of her arrival when she had been compelled to reveal more of her inner self than she had ever done in response to the other woman's curiously insistent, eager questioning.

Yes, no doubt Athena was right. Hew Lingard probably regarded a suitable marriage as a necessity of his career. She, Jane, had misunderstood him from the very first, proving herself, so she told herself with shamed anguish, a romantic fool.

In the region of the emotions there are certain secret ordeals which must be faced in solitude. Hew Lingard had taught Jane Oglander what love between a man and woman can come to mean. She had been ready not only to give all—but to receive all. This being so, she could not bring herself to endure the marriage of convenience she now believed to be all he sought of her.

She would have given all the exquisite happiness of the last two

years—happiness the greater and the more intense because it was so largely bred of her imagination—to blot out the week she and Lingard had spent together in London. It was during those days she had learnt to love him in the simple human way which now made the thought of parting agony.

Unwittingly Lingard had done her a terrible mischief during those enchanted days. She felt as if he had stolen her from herself, rifling all the hidden chambers of her heart. She had given everything in exchange for what she had believed to be the great, the sacred, treasure of his love. And now he was scattering the treasure which she had thought hers at the feet of another woman who, she believed, had not sought it and to whom it was dross.

She had heard of such enthrallments—a blunderer had so tried to excuse, to explain to her, her brother Jack Oglander's crime. Yes, Jack had been mad about that woman he had killed; that had been the word used—mad.

Mad? Jane Oglander, walking to the Small Farm, repeated the word—yes, Lingard had been made mad by Athena in much the same way as Jack had been made mad. When Lingard had implored her to marry him at once, during that hour on The Hanger, he had really been beseeching her to help him to escape. She saw that now—and perhaps, had she loved him less, she would have yielded.

But there are moments when love, though the most dissembling of the passions, cannot lie. Jane Oglander, when in her lover's arms, could not accept as gold the baser metal he, perhaps unknowingly, pressed upon her.

One thing remained to her. Nothing could take away from her the two years which had gone before. She had not yet destroyed, she did not feel that she need be called upon to destroy—until Lingard married some other woman—the letters he had written to her in those two

years. She told herself that they had not been love letters, although to her simple heart they had seemed strangely like it.

Any day during the past two years she might have opened a paper containing the news of Lingard's death. But if that of which she had had so sick a dread had happened, she would have had something dear, something intimately secret and sacred, to bear about with her, locked in the inner shrine of her heart, for the rest of her life.

The present and the immediate future must be considered, and, as she had now told Athena of her decision, they must be considered to-day.

She remembered the many broken engagements of which she had heard—Jane wondered if those other women had suffered as she was suffering now.

The one thing she felt she could not do would be to go back to that little house in London, which to her would ever be filled with Hew Lingard—not Lingard as he was now, gloomy, preoccupied, avoiding her presence and yet painfully eager to obey her slightest wish—but Lingard the happy, the masterful lover who yet had been so tender, so patient with her.

What did other people do when they broke off an engagement or—were jilted?

Jane tried to remember what she had heard such people did. One girl had been sent on a voyage round the world—another had refused to leave home, she had stayed and "faced it out."

Fortunately she was not compelled to consider either of these alternatives. She was mistress of her own life, and she had already learnt the hard lesson that to deaden pain—heart pain—there is nothing like incessant, unending work. She made up her mind to go to another part of London, and start once more the salvage work

which lay on the edge of the great sea strewn with human wreckage.

But before Jane could do this, she must put an end to what had become, certainly to herself, and probably to Lingard also, an intolerable mockery.

Jane found Mabel Digby in bed; and the girl, though but little given to caresses, drew her down and laid her head on the other's kind breast.

"Yes, it's true," she said, "I'm ill, and I don't know what's the matter with me"—she lifted her face and pushed her hair back from her forehead with a tired gesture. "No, I won't lie. I don't see why I should pretend—with you! I'm ill, Jane, because Bayworth Kaye is dead. I lie here thinking—thinking only of Bayworth. It's all so horrible—I mean that he should have died when he was so unhappy. I burnt all his letters the day he went away. You can't think how sorry I am now that I did that, Jane. There was nothing in them, they weren't love letters—at least I don't think so——"

Jane gave a muffled cry of pain.

"Jane, come nearer, and I'll tell you something which may make you think a little less poorly of me. Bayworth did speak to me three years ago, before he first went to India. I have never told anybody—not even his mother, though she was always trying to find out. And when he came back I was so happy—just for a few days—and then, almost at once, he fell into Athena's clutches——"

And as she saw the other make a restless movement of recoil she added, "I suppose you don't believe me, but it's true—horribly true. I saw it all happening, but I could do nothing except feel miserable. I

used to think—poor fool that I was—that everything would come right at the last. I thought she would get tired of him, and that I would get what was left." She broke into hard sobs. "She did get tired of him—but too late—too late for me!"

"I wonder, Mabel, whether you would like me to come and stay with you for a few days."

Jane felt that the way was at last opening before her. The grief, the angry pain, of the poor child now lying here before her soothed her sore heart.

"Jane! What an unselfish angel you are!" Mabel did not see the other's almost vehement gesture of denial. "Of course it would be the greatest comfort to have you here!"

Then, as the girl was nervously afraid that Jane should imagine her unwilling to speak of her engagement: "If you come here, I suppose General Lingard will leave Rede Place?"

"Yes, I suppose he will."

Mabel looked up. It seemed to her as if her own suffering was reflected, intensified, in Jane Oglander's sad eyes.

If only she could stay on here now to-day—and not see Lingard again! Such was Jane Oglander's thought, but she lacked the cruel courage. Richard Maule would be hurt and angered were she thus to disappear suddenly. More, it might even make him suspect the truth—the truth as to Lingard's infatuation—of which Jane thought him ignorant.

And so, when the dusk began to fall, she got up. Athena would be annoyed if she were not back by tea-time. Athena disliked very much being alone with her husband.

"Good-bye, Mabel. You'll see me some time to-morrow."

She hurried along the path through the trees and the bushes now stripped of leaves. She was oppressed, haunted, by the thought of Bayworth Kaye. Could Mabel Digby's story be true? Was Athena Maule a cruel, devouring Circe, lacking mercy, honour, shame?

Jane could not think so. To believe what Mabel Digby had told her would have required a readjustment of her whole view and conception of a nature and character she had humbly admired and loved from early girlhood. Jane had always unquestioningly accepted Athena's account of the humiliations and the trials which befall beauty bereft of the care and devotion of beauty's natural protector. Mrs. Maule, so Jane believed, made an unwilling conquest of almost every man who came within her magic ring, but till now Jane had never seen the spell working....

When more than halfway to the house, she heard the sound of wheels. Dick Wantele and Hew Lingard were coming back an hour sooner than they were expected.

She was glad it was so dark—but for that they must see her. She waited till the dogcart flashed past within two or three yards of the path on which she stood.

It looked as if Wantele was urging his eager horse, already within sight of his stable, to go faster.

Jane drew further into the underwood. She saw, as if the scene were actually before her, what would happen if she continued her way on into the house.

Tea was now served in Athena's boudoir instead of in the Greek Room. There the four of them, Jane, Athena, and the two men, came together each afternoon. Dick never stayed long. After a few minutes he would go to Richard, leaving the others—a strange unnatural trio,

—till Jane also escaped, sometimes to sit with her host, oftener to some place where she could be alone.

This was what happened every day; and now she suddenly made up her mind that it should never happen again. It was her heart, her mind, which was sick and tired, not her body. It would do her good to go on walking till the time came when she could creep quietly into the house and go up to her room. Athena and Hew would think, if they thought of her at all, that she had stayed on for tea with Mabel Digby....

All at once, out of the darkness, she heard a familiar voice: "Hullo, Jane! You've managed to travel a good way in ten minutes. I don't think it is ten minutes since we drove by. I thought I'd lost you!"

It was Dick Wantele, a little breathless, a little excited by the chase.

"Then you saw I was there?"

"I always see you, Jane."

He spoke quite lightly, but Jane Oglander felt touched—horribly touched. The tears came into her eyes for the first time that day. Dick, and Dick's friendship, was all that remained to her—now.

"Did it all go off quite right? Had you a good time?" she made a valiant effort to control herself.

"A very good time! The duchess is most anxious General Lingard should go on straight there after leaving here."

She felt the underlying, criticising dislike of Lingard in the tone in which Wantele uttered the words, and she felt troubled.

Suddenly she stumbled, and her companion, putting out his thin hand, grasped her arm.

"Jane," he said quickly, "wait a moment! It's not cold. I want to say

something to you, and I'd rather say it out here, where no one can interrupt us, than indoors."

He took his hand from her arm. "I trust to your—your kindness not to take offence."

"I shan't be offended, but—but must you speak to me, Dick? I've been so grateful to you for not speaking."

"Yes, I must speak. It's been cowardly of me not to do it before. It's about Lingard, Jane."

He waited a moment, but she made no movement.

"We are both agreed—at least, I suppose we are both agreed—that Lingard is taking the sort of adulation, the—the rather ridiculous homage, to which he is now being subjected, very well. But I don't think you realise, my dear,——" he waited a moment; never had he called Jane Oglander his dear before—"the effect on the real man—the extraordinarily disturbing, upsetting effect such an experience as that he is now going through is bound to have on any human being."

"I don't quite understand what you mean," her voice faltered; and yet what he said brought vague comfort with it.

"Well, it isn't very easy to explain. But I can't help thinking that one ought to be very merciful to a man who's being subjected to such an ordeal. Athena hasn't made it easier," he tried, and failed, to make the mention of his cousin's wife casual, easy. "Doubtless, without meaning it, Athena intensifies everything—she never allows Lingard to forget for a moment that he is a great man—a hero. You must remember that we had ten days—ten days of incessant glorification of Lingard before you arrived. He took it awfully well, but——"

"I do know what you mean," she said painfully. "Yet surely——" she stopped abruptly. Not even with Wantele could she discuss—not

even with him could she admit Hew Lingard's attitude to Athena Maule.

"I want to tell you—perhaps I ought to have told you before, Dick,—that I've made up my mind to end my engagement."

They walked on in silence for a few moments.

"I suppose you realise what the effect of your doing this now will be on Lingard?" he said. "Mind you, Jane, I don't say that he doesn't deserve it! But I do say that if you do this you will drive him straight to the devil——" he waited a moment, but she made no answer to his words.

"Have you told Athena?" Wantele was ashamed of the question, but burning curiosity and jealous pain impelled him to ask it.

"Yes, I told her this morning. But, Dick, I want to tell you, I think I ought to tell you, that I don't——" she hesitated, hardly knowing how to frame her sentence—"I don't blame Athena. I'm sure she couldn't help what's happened."

"You press very hardly on Lingard, Jane."

He spoke with a terrible irony, but Jane did not understand.

"No, no!" she cried, distressed. "I press hard on nobody, least of all on Hew."

CHAPTER XVI

"Quand le cœur reste fidèle, les vilenies du corps sont peu de chose. Quand le cœur a trahi, le reste n'est plus rien."

Athena, sitting alone in the boudoir, heard the return of the two men; but she waited in vain for Lingard to come to her, as he always did come to her, with that blind longing for her presence which he was only now, with dawning consciousness, beginning to resist.

To-night instinct, the wise instinct which always stood her in good stead in all her dealings with men, warned her against seeking him out.

Mrs. Maule had no wish to make Lingard either an unwilling or even a willing accomplice in the scheme which was to result in their ultimate happiness. She had gone quite as far as she dared to go with him the night before. Treachery is one of the few burdens which a human being can bear better alone than in company.

Athena realised that Lingard now regarded his violent, unreasoning attraction to herself as a thing of which to be mortally ashamed. But she was convinced that, once his engagement to Jane Oglander was at an end, he would "let himself go," especially if he was convinced that she, Athena, had been blameless.

And her instinct served her truly. Lingard, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the long day spent away from Rede Place, was in no mood for a renewal of the sentimental dalliance to which Athena had

accustomed him.

What had happened—the quick exchange of words, his echo of Mrs. Maule's longing for freedom from a tie which she had led him to believe had ever lacked reality, had brought him, and roughly, to his bearings.

The evening which had followed, spent in company with the two women—the woman to whom he owed allegiance, and whom he had held but a few hours before in his arms, and that other woman who had provoked the unreal words of which he was now ashamed, had contained some of the most odious moments of his life.

He had hailed with intense relief the engagement which took him away for a whole day; and on his return he had gone straight to the sitting-room set apart for his use, his supposed work, and where, after the first two days of his stay under Richard Maule's roof, he had spent so little of his time.

The rather elaborate apparatus connected with the book he was engaged in writing, filled him with contempt for himself. There were the maps, the books, the reports of his staff, his own rough notes, and—in a locked despatch-box—the long diary-letters he had written to Jane Oglander during the course of the Expedition.

The man who is all man, whose nature lacks, that is, any admixture of femininity, is almost always without the dangerous gift of self-analysis. Such a man was Hew Lingard.

All through his life he had always known exactly what he wanted, and when denied he had suffered as suffers a child, with a dumb and hopeless anger. It was this want of knowledge of himself that had ever made him ready to embark blindly in those perilous adventures of the soul in which the body plays so great a sub-conscious part.

Now, for the first time in his life, Lingard did not know what he

wanted, and the state in which he found himself induced a terrible and humiliating disquietude.

His was the miserable state of mind of a man who finds himself on the point of becoming unfaithful to a wife who is still loved. Jane Oglander, even now, seemed in a most intimate sense part of himself. When he had seen her the first time—it had been in summer, in a garden—he had experienced the strange sensation that he had at last found the woman for whom he had been always seeking, and whom he had always known to be somewhere waiting, could he but find her.

Almost at once he had told Jane that he loved her, and almost, even then, had he convinced her that it was true. He had not tried to bind her by any formal engagement, and he had kept to the spirit as well as to the letter of the law. The long diary-letters which he had written to her day by day, and which had reached her at such irregular intervals, were not in any obvious sense love-letters.

He had felt that wherever he was she was there too, and sometimes, when he was in danger, and he was often in danger during those two years, the sense of Jane Oglander's spiritual nearness became curiously intensified. Now that they were together, under the same roof, she often seemed infinitely remote.

Could he now have analysed his own emotions—which, perhaps fortunately for himself, he was incapable of doing—he would have known that his chance of being faithful to Jane would have been increased rather than decreased had they not spent together that week in London.

He had come to Rede Place in a state of spiritual and physical exaltation which had made him peculiarly susceptible to any and every emotion, and for a time he had believed the feeling he was lavishing on Athena Maule to be pity—a passion of pity for one who

had been most piteously used by fate.

The physical exercise of the day's shooting, spent in a place entirely lacking the emotional atmosphere induced by Athena, had restored Lingard's sense of perspective. With a rather angry discomfiture he realised that he had become afraid of Mrs. Maule and of her power over him. For the first time since he had known her he had been free of Athena, and then, as he and Dick Wantele got nearer and nearer to Rede Place, it had almost seemed as if she were beckoning to him, and he had longed to respond to her call....

It had required a strong effort of will on his part to go straight upstairs instead of to the room where he knew her to be.

For the first time in his life Lingard did not know what he wanted, or, rather, he was grievously aware that one side of his nature was imperiously demanding of him something he was determined not to grant. Last night he had thrown a sop to the ravening, hungry beast, but that, so he now swore to himself, should not happen again.

It was seven o'clock when Athena heard a key being turned in the lock of the Garden Room, and her eyes quickly sought the place where her own key was always kept. It was in its place; Lingard always returned it with scrupulous care immediately after having used it.

Then it must be Dick Wantele who was coming into the house. She wondered where he had been—perhaps to the Small Farm to fetch Jane Oglander.

What a fool Dick was! And yet—and yet not such a fool after all. Dick, if he were patient—Athena smiled a little to herself—and he certainly would be patient, might yet be granted the wish of his heart. Jane Oglander's marriage to Dick Wantele, so Mrs. Maule now admitted to herself, would be a most excellent thing for them all.

Yes—the two she would fain see become lovers had come in together; she could hear their voices in the corridor. And then, to her surprise, the door opened, and Wantele came in alone.

Athena felt suddenly afraid—afraid and uncomfortable. She told herself angrily that her nerves were playing her odious tricks, for as Dick came towards her she had the sensation, almost the knowledge, that he longed to strike her, and it was a very odd, a very unpleasant, sensation.

He came up close to her. "You know that Jane Oglander intends to break her engagement?" he said abruptly, and there was an angry, a menacing expression on his face.

Athena regained complete possession of herself. She felt quite cool, ready to parry any attack.

"Yes," she said quietly; "Jane told me this morning. I was surprised, but—not sorry, Dick."

He made no answer, dealt her none of those quick, sarcastic retorts of which he was master. She looked at him fixedly. He had no business to come in and speak to her like that!

"No one who knows and—and likes them both can think them suited to one another. You know that as well as I do, Dick."

"I deny it absolutely," he cried, "and even if it were true I shouldn't care! Our business in this matter—yours and mine—is to stand by Jane. I take it that you won't deny that Jane loves Lingard?" And then he went on, without waiting for her assent: "Do you remember the letter she wrote to you—the letter you showed me? That showed how Jane felt—how she now feels."

Her lips framed a sentence in answer, but she changed her mind and did not utter it. There was no object in making Dick angry, angrier

than he already was; for Athena was well aware that Wantele was very, very angry with her.

"And what do you think we can do?" she said slowly.

"Look here, Athena." He tried to make his voice pleasant, conciliating—and he actually succeeded. Then he wasn't angry, she thought, after all. "This matter is much too serious for you and me to fence about it. I asked you a few days ago to go away—I ask it of you again. After all, what you are doing now can lead to nothing. Lingard must give you but very poor sport, and what is sport to you—eh, what, Athena?"

She remained silent, listening to him with an odd look on her face.

He ventured further: "I feel sure that you had no idea that the matter would become serious, and I agree that if Jane were a different sort of woman she would understand——"

"Understand what?" she said haughtily. "Are you accusing me of breaking off Jane's engagement? I did not think, Dick, that even your dislike of me could go so far. Till she told me this morning, I had no idea she thought of doing such a thing."

Wantele shrugged his shoulders, but he was determined not to lose his temper.

"I don't accuse you," he said slowly, "and I don't wish to be unfair. We'll put it in another way, Athena. Lingard came—saw—was conquered! It's no use our discussing it at this time of day. Still less is it any use for you to try to deny it; you and I both know what happened. I think—nay, I'm quite sure—that if you were to go away, everything would come right between these two people."

"And do you really wish everything to come right between Hew Lingard and Jane Oglander?"

Athena looked at the man standing before her in a very singular manner. Her voice was charged with significance.

He met her challenging look quite coolly. "Yes, I do wish it to come right," he said, "because I believe that it would be for Jane's ultimate happiness. Come, Athena, make an effort!"

He spoke good-humouredly, as a grown-up person speaks to a spoilt child, and a cruel little devil entered into Mrs. Maule's mind.

"Isn't it funny," she said lightly, "how Jane the Good, and I, Athena the Bad, always attract the same man? They don't always like us at the same time, but——"

She stopped speaking, for Dick Wantele had turned and left the room, leaving the door open behind him, a thing he very seldom did.

CHAPTER XVII

"Nous devrions baiser les pantoufles de certaines femmes du côté où les pantoufles touchent à la terre, car en dedans ce serait tout au plus digne des anges."

The long day came to an end at last. Jane felt a sense of almost physical relief in the knowledge that to-morrow night she would no longer be there, and yet she had not spoken of her decision to the others.

For Athena Maule the day was not yet over. She waited till the house was sunk into darkness and stillness, and then, dismissing her maid, she put on a dressing-gown and went downstairs to the library.

The book she had mentally marked down that morning was found by her in a moment; but instead of looking at it there she took it to her boudoir. It was possible that Wantele—Wantele who had been so rude and unkind to her this afternoon—might, like herself, feel wakeful, and come down to the library.

With the heavy old law book in her arms, she made her way through the now dark corridor which ran the whole length of Rede Place till she reached her own sitting-room, and there, before turning up the light, she locked the door.

Then she sat down, and drawing forward a little table she spread the book out open before her.

The dying wood fire suddenly burst into flame; Athena looked round

her. She wondered if she would ever have so pretty a room again.

There was no hurry; she knew all that it was really necessary for her to know, thanks to Maud Stanwood's idle words.

Maud Stanwood? What would Maud Stanwood say of her when she heard what Mrs. Maule was about to do? So wondering, Athena suddenly made up her mind that there would be no necessity for her to go on knowing that lady. A woman who talked as Maud Stanwood talked would be no friend for General Lingard's wife!

The important thing—the one thing she must find out, and that this book would doubtless tell her—was how long a period must elapse after the dissolution of her marriage to Richard Maule before any second marriage contracted by her would be legal. She was aware that after a divorce a full six months must elapse between the Nisi and the Absolute; also that it was actually left to the good feeling of the offended party—that was very unfair—as to whether the decree should be made absolute at all.

Athena felt a tremor of fear. It would indeed be an awful thing if she put it into Richard's power to leave her in the disagreeable, the ridiculous, position of being neither married nor single.

But thanks to the excellent index of this useful work on the marriage laws of England, it only took Mrs. Maule a very few moments to discover that in this important matter her fear was quite groundless. Once judgment was given—once, that is, a marriage was dissolved—there was no impediment to an immediate remarriage on the part of the injured party.

She looked up and gave a long, unconscious sigh of relief. There had been a secret, unacknowledged terror in her heart, that she might find, now at the last moment, some hidden snag.

Sitting back in her straight, carved Italian chair, she began to make a mental list of her large circle of acquaintances. Which of them would give her shelter during the weeks, nay the months, that must perhaps elapse before she would be free?

Mrs. Maule had but one intimate friend—that friend was Jane Oglander. She had little doubt that as soon as the painful business of the engagement was over, she and Jane would return to their old terms of unquestioning affection.

What a pity it was that Hew Lingard's rather absurd conscience and his—well, his sense of delicacy, would make any arrangement with Jane impossible! However, she knew several good-natured women who might help her through such a pass—especially if she could venture to whisper the truth as to what the future held for her....

But there were certain other facts it would be well for her to know before taking so important a step as that of consulting a lawyer. Athena Maule did not believe in trusting people too much.

Bending once more over the table, she set herself seriously to study the sense of the dry and yet very clearly expressed chapter containing the information she sought.

And then, as she read on, slowly mastering the legal phraseology, conning over the cases quoted in support of each assertion, it gradually became horribly, piteously plain to her that if her husband cared to defend the suit, she had but a very poor chance of obtaining what this work so rightly styled "relief."

The knowledge brought with it a terrible feeling of revolt and of despair to Athena Maule.

She pushed the book away, then got up and stared into a small Venetian looking-glass. She was frightened by what she saw there; the shock of her discovery had drained all the colour from her face,

and, for the moment, destroyed her youth.

She turned away from the mirror with a feeling of sick disgust. Her face, as reflected there, actually reminded her of Richard's face. It was absurd, disquieting, that such a notion should ever come into her mind, and it showed the state in which her nerves must be.

She looked round her fearfully. The room on which she had wasted a regretful thought had become an airless cage in which she would have to spend all that remained to her of young life and of the wonderful beauty which had, so she now told herself bitterly, brought her so little happiness.

She had actually believed—how Richard would grin if he knew it!—that if she only could make up her mind to a certain amount of "scandal" and "publicity," she could free herself of him. How could she have supposed that the law—a law framed and devised by men—would put such a power in a woman's hand?...

And yet—and yet it was still true that nothing but Richard's will stood between herself and complete, honourable freedom—between her and the man who had in his gift everything that she longed for and believed herself specially fitted by nature to possess.

So much, and surely it was a great deal, the book which was still lying open on the little table made quite clear. If only Richard Maule could be brought to that state of mind in which he would consent to be merciful and leave his wife's suit undefended, all would yet go well.

Athena sat down again and began to concentrate her mind intensely.

How could she bend, coerce Richard to her will?—that was the formidable problem which was now presented to her, and she set herself to consider it from every point of view.

Mrs. Maule was afraid of her husband—it was an instinctive,

involuntary fear; her whole being shrank from him with a dreadful aversion. When he had been hale and strong, adoring her with the rather absurd ardour of adoration a middle-aged man so often lavishes on a young wife, she had despised him. Now that he was stricken, old, and feeble, he inspired her with terror.

It had amused her to deceive him when he had been the doting, lover-like husband, in days which seemed to belong to another life; but now, when his sunken eyes gleamed as they always gleamed when staring into hers, seeming full of a cruel knowledge of the pardonable weaknesses into which her heart betrayed her, then her body as well as her spirit quailed.

Suddenly a great light came into the dark chamber of her mind. Athena Maule saw in a moment a way in which the problem might be solved. How amazing that she had not thought of it yesterday—even this morning!

Jane Oglander should be her advocate with Richard. Richard would do for Jane what he would do for no one else. That had been proved many times. To take a recent instance—how harshly he had always resisted his wife's wish to ask people to Rede Place! But when General Lingard had come into the neighbourhood, it was Richard who had suggested that Jane Oglander's lover should be bidden to stay, and to stay a long time.

Athena's face became flushed, fired with hope, with energy. She had been foolish to be so frightened. How fortunate it was that Jane had spoken to her—had told her of her intention to break the foolish engagement with Lingard! It made everything quite easy.

She shut the book—the sinister old book which had given her so awful a shock.

Why not go up and see Jane now—at once? It was still early, not

much after midnight. Athena glanced at the tiny clock which had played its little part just before Jane's arrival at Rede Place in provoking Hew Lingard's avowal of—of weakness. Yes, it was only ten minutes past twelve. Jane was probably wide awake still.

Athena went to the library and carefully put back the volume in its place among the other legal books which had belonged to Wantele's father. Then she made her way, in the deep, still darkness, to the door of Jane Oglander's room. Knocking lightly, and without waiting for an answer, she walked in.

In old days this room had been known as "the White Room," now it went by the name of "Miss Oglander's Room." Only Jane Oglander ever occupied it.

Jane was asleep—sleeping more soundly than she had done for many days, but as the door of her room opened she woke, and sitting up turned on, with an instinctive gesture, the electric light which swung over her bed.

Athena came quickly across the room. She was wearing a rather bright blue silk wrapper, and her graceful form made a patch of brilliant colour against the varying whitenesses of the walls, of the curtains, and of the rugs which covered the floor.

"I couldn't get to sleep," Athena's voice shook with excitement and emotion, for she was going to take a great risk—to stake her whole future life on one throw. "Somehow I guessed you were awake, like me."

Jane looked at Athena without speaking; she was telling herself that Hew could not help being enthralled—that no man could have helped it. She had never seen her friend look as lovely as she looked to-night; and there was a pathetic, a very appealing expression on the beautiful face now bending over her.

Mrs. Maule kissed Jane Oglander.

Then she straightened herself.

"I can't sleep because I keep thinking of all you told me this morning," she said at last. "I know you don't want to talk about it, and yet—and yet I feel I must tell you that what you told me is making me wretched, Jane. Are you sure that you really wish to break off your engagement?"

Jane was very pale; she was spent with suffering, and yet, as Athena saw with a pang of envy, she looked very young; her fair hair lay in two long thick plaits, one on each side of her face. It was that perhaps which made her look so young, so placid—so defenceless.

"It seems to me the only thing I can do," she spoke in a very low voice, but to the woman listening she seemed irritatingly calm.

Athena climbed on to Jane's bed, as she had so often done in the days when she and Jane happened to be at Rede Place together—days which had come far oftener four and five years ago than recently.

It hurt Jane to see Athena there. The contrast between the past and the present cut so shrewdly. She did not wish to judge her friend—or rather she did judge her, and very leniently.

Athena could not help what had happened. Of that Jane felt sure. But still Athena must know the truth—she could not but be aware of the effect she had had on Lingard; she must know that without meaning it she had witched his heart away.

But whatever Athena knew or did not know, any allusion to what had happened would be degrading to them both. Certain things slumber when left in peace; they leap into life if once discussed. Jane Oglander believed in the honour of the man she loved. Hew would go

away, and in time he would batten down, fight and conquer his infatuation for Mrs. Maule.

"Of course I wish to break my engagement. But I would rather not talk about it," she said, at last.

"But I must talk about it!" cried Athena desperately. "You don't realise how I feel, Jane, how—how miserable, how ashamed I am about it all! Of course I know how you must be hating me."

An expression of anguish came over the younger woman's face. She believed her friend. But deep in her heart was breathed the inarticulate prayer: "Oh God, do not let her mention Hew—do not let her speak of Hew!"

Athena suddenly covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Jane, I could not help it," she wailed, in her low, vibrating voice. "Oh, Jane, tell me that you know I could not help it!"

"I know you could not help it," repeated Jane mechanically.

She was being tortured,—tortured with a singular refinement of cruelty. But even now she did not blame Athena. Athena had meant kindly by her in coming here to-night. But oh! if she would only go away. It was agony to Jane to see her there.

"He respects you!" whispered Mrs. Maule, leaning forward. "He admires you! He esteems you! Oh, Jane, I should feel proud if any man spoke of me as he speaks of you——"

But Jane did not feel proud. Jane felt humiliated to the dust. During the many miserable hours she had spent in the last fortnight, she had been spared the hateful suspicion that Hew Lingard ever spoke of her to Athena Maule.

And indeed Lingard had never so spoken, yet the strange thing was

that Athena, when uttering those lying words, half believed them to be true. In the first days of her acquaintance with Lingard, she had herself said many kind, warm, affectionate things of Jane Oglander, to which he had perforce assented. It now pleased her to imagine, and even more to say, that it was he who had spoken those words of praise, of liking, of warm but unlover-like affection....

"If you only knew how he feels," she went on rapidly, "you would feel sorry for him, Jane, deeply sorry; not, as you have a right to feel, angry—angry both with him and with me! I'm afraid—I know, that often he feels wretched—horribly wretched about it all."

"I am very sorry," said Jane Oglander in a low voice, "sorry, not—not angry, Athena——" and then she stopped short.

"Sorry" seemed a poor, inadequate word, but it was the only word she could find. Her heart was wrung with sorrow, with unavailing, useless sorrow for both these unhappy people, as well as for herself. Judging them by what she would have felt had she been either of them, she believed them to be very miserable.

Athena was now huddled up on the bed. She was crying bitterly, her face hidden in her hands, the tears trickling through the fingers. She was dreadfully, dreadfully sorry for herself.

Jane Oglander could not see anyone as unhappy and as abased as she believed her friend to be feeling, and make no attempt at consolation. Bending forward, she put out her arms and gathered to her the slender rounded shoulders, the beautiful dark head.

"If only something could be done," she whispered, "if only there was a way out, Athena!"

Athena Maule raised her tear-stained face. Her moment had at last come.

"There is a way out," she said slowly, impressively.

She put the palms of her hands on the other woman's breast—"Tell me, Jane, would it make you very unhappy, would you ever be able to forgive me—if I married Hew Lingard?"

Jane looked at her with troubled eyes. "I don't understand," she faltered. "Do you mean when—when Richard is dead, Athena?"

"No. Of course I don't mean that! What a horrible idea! But, Jane, there is a chance that I may become free. It is difficult to explain, but you may believe me when I tell you that if Richard were a different kind of man, if he was noble, if he was high-minded, as you are noble and high-minded——" Jane shook her head.

"Yes, you are—you are——What was I saying? Yes: if Richard were different he could have given me my freedom long ago, and our marriage could be dissolved even now."

As the younger woman made no movement, said no word, only went on looking at her in puzzled silence, Athena drew herself out of Jane's arms, and there came a look of impatience over her face.

"You are not a child! Surely you know what I mean, Jane? You must have heard of marriages being annulled? Richard has kept me tied to him all these years—years that I might have been free."

And, again, the strange thing was that Athena Maule, as she said those words, believed them—with certain mental reservations—to be true. It was certainly true that for the last eight years she, a passionate, living woman, had been tied to death in life.

She would have been shocked, angered, had any still small voice reminded her that the scheme she was now determined to carry through was a new scheme, one that she had never considered seriously till now, though she had told the lie which was the keystone

of her scheme so often that she had at last begun to believe it must be true.

"Oh, Jane!" she cried, and then she slipped off the bed and threw herself on her knees. "Oh, Jane, there is only one person in the world to whom Richard will ever listen—No, I'm wrong—there are two—there's Dick as well as you. But Dick"—a look of hatred for a moment convulsed her face—"Dick loathes me," she said slowly, "even more than Richard does," and this was true.

"You, Jane, are my only hope—mine and Hew's only hope——"

"Do you mean," said Jane slowly, "that you want me to speak to Richard, Athena,—to suggest his taking this step?"

For the first time Jane Oglander felt a touch of physical repulsion from Athena. It was a curious sensation, and one which troubled her exceedingly.

"Richard would have to do nothing—nothing! Simply leave my suit undefended. And if you could bring yourself to speak to him, Jane, I honestly believe that he might do now what he ought to have done long ago—release me. Nothing can give me back the years—the long miserable years I have spent with him, but I should at least have the future——"

She looked furtively at Jane. It would be so much more—well, comfortable, if she and Lingard could count on Jane's approval, on her blessing, as it were.

Jane Oglander lay back and turned her face away, to the wall. Athena, with remarkable self-control, stilled her eager, impulsive tongue. But the moments of waiting seemed very long.

At last Jane turned and once more sat up. She had made up her mind that it was her duty—her duty, not only to Athena, but also to

Hew Lingard,—to do this difficult, this repulsive thing which was being required of her.

"I will speak to Richard to-morrow, Athena—but if he is shocked, if he is hurt by what I shall say to him—and I fear he will be both—you must not expect me ever to come back to Rede Place."

Mrs. Maule gave a little cry. It was only now that she realised how doubtful she had been of success. She might have known Jane better. Jane had always been her one loyal friend. Athena was fond of the word "loyal."

"Oh, Jane," she said humbly, "I—I don't know how to thank you. Will you mind very much?"

"You mustn't be surprised if I fail," Jane said slowly.

Athena again sank on to her knees. But all the humility had gone from the voice in which she uttered her words. "Oh, but you mustn't fail, Jane! It would kill me." She hesitated—"You will be very careful what you say to Richard? You will not—you need not mention——"

Jane put out her hand with a quick gesture as if to ward off the name Athena was about to utter.

"No, no," she cried vehemently, and it was the first time she had spoken with any strength in her tones. "You need not be afraid. Of course I shall mention no one—I think you can trust me, Athena."

CHAPTER XVIII

"Il y a des hommes qu'on trompe, et d'autres qu'on trahit, en accomplissant le même acte."

Richard Maule heard the door of his bedroom close behind Jane Oglander.

He had been so ailing the last day or two that he had been obliged to stay upstairs with Dick's companionship as his only solace, and his cousin had persuaded him to say good-bye to Jane there.

She was only going as far as the Small Farm, to look after Mabel Digby who was ill. She would still be at Rede Place every day, but she was old-fashioned and punctilious; she did not wish to leave Mr. Maule's house without thanking him for his hospitality, not only to herself but to General Lingard, who had been asked there for her sake.

She had come upstairs about six, already dressed in her outdoor things, and Dick had left her for a few moments with Richard in order that she might say good-bye.

The few moments had prolonged themselves into half an hour, only half an hour, though the time had seemed a great deal longer to them both, and then she had left him with a gentle "Good-bye, Richard."

As he stared at the door which she had closed quietly behind her, Richard Maule wondered whether he would ever see her again. Indeed, he was not sure that he wished ever to see Jane Oglander

again.

He had stood up to bid his guest good-bye, but, though he felt weak and a little dazed, he did not sit down again in his padded armchair near the fire. Instead, he went over to a glass case where were kept a number of fine old snuff-boxes collected by Theophilus Joy before there was a craze for such things.

Opening the case, he brought out from the back a snuff-box which had an interesting history. It was believed to have been a gift from Madame du Barri to Louis the Fifteenth. It was of dull gold, embossed with fleurs-de-lys.

Richard Maule's faithful valet thought he knew everything about his master that there was to know, but there was one thing, a trifling thing, that Mr. Maule had managed to keep entirely secret over many years. It was an innocent, in fact a womanish secret; it was simply that sometimes, not very often, he used a little rouge.

He kept the small supply he required, which lasted him a long time, in the snuff-box he now held in his hand. This box possessed the rare peculiarity of a false bottom.

What the careful valet never suspected, had naturally never entered into Dick Wantele's mind. All he noted was that on certain occasions his cousin was more flushed, and so looked in better health than usual. Richard Maule's usual colouring was a curious chalky white, and those of his visitors whose breeding was perhaps not quite so perfect as it might have been, almost always commented, either to Mrs. Maule or to Dick Wantele, on Mr. Maule's peculiar complexion.

He closed the glass case, and went over to a narrow mirror near the fireplace. There, in a few moments, he achieved his very rudimentary "make up" with the aid of a small piece of cotton-wool.

Yes—now he looked better; placing the snuff-box on the table which was drawn up close to his chair, he rang, and then sat down.

He wished his man would come. He felt physically very uncomfortable and oppressed. The talk with Jane Oglander had shaken him almost as much—he was quite honest about the matter—as it had shaken her.

Poor Jane! Dick's pretty Jane! How strange that a woman like Athena should possess the power of putting such a creature as was Jane Oglander to torture.

Modern medical science has standardised the body much as mechanical science has standardised the most intricate machinery. Richard Maule, fortunate in a physician who kept in touch with every new discovery and palliative, had it in his power to fit his physical self for any special effort, especially if that effort were mental rather than physical.

The valet received careful instructions. Mr. Maule would rest both before and after his light dinner, till ten o'clock. Then, and not before, he would be glad to see Mr. Wantele. He felt, however, too far from well to receive General Lingard, as he so often did for a few moments in the evening.

Everything fell out as the master of Rede Place had ordained it should do. With the help of certain colourless and odourless drops, he relieved the oppression which was troubling him. He forced himself to eat more than usual. He read with what seemed to him fresh zest an idyll of Theocritus, and then he waited, doing nothing, his eyes on the door, till he heard his kinsman's light, familiar step on the bare floor outside.

Dick Wantele came into his cousin's bedroom very unwillingly. He wondered why Jane had stayed so long with Richard. He feared she had told him of her intention of breaking her engagement.

Wantele felt convinced that Richard Maule had seen nothing of the drama which had been going on round him—though never actually in his presence—during Lingard's long sojourn at Rede Place.

Every day Lingard spent about an hour with his invalid host, and Wantele was aware that those hours had been very pleasant to Richard Maule. The Greek Room had become a place where they all, with the exception of Athena, had fled now and again as if into sanctuary. There Jane, so Wantele had soon divined, spent her only peaceful moments, for her host was very dependent on her; when with him, she played chess or read aloud, always doing, in a word, something which perforce distracted her mind from everything but the matter in hand.

But Richard Maule had been very unwell during the last few days; compelled to take each night the opiate which was the one habit—the bad habit—he and his wife had in common. Conversation after half-past nine or ten o'clock, even of the mildest type, excited him, and gave him, even with the aid of a powerful opiate, a restless, bad night. Why then had he put off seeing Dick till ten o'clock?

The young man was in no mood to control himself, to assume the quiet, equable manner he always assumed. The hour just spent with those two,—with Athena and Lingard alone,—had tried his nerves.

Mr. Maule was dressed in the evening clothes he had put on early before saying good-bye to Jane Oglander. It was a little matter, but it surprised Wantele; his cousin, as a rule, was always eager to get into the dressing-gown in which he lived when upstairs.

"I had an odd conversation with Jane this evening——"

Wantele nodded his head. Then it was as he had feared,—she had told Richard.

"——and I wish to talk the matter over with you, Dick." He motioned the younger man to sit down, and there was a long moment of silence between them before he spoke again.

"Jane Oglander has got a very strange notion into her head; and I should like to know if she said anything of it to you. Perhaps"—a slight smile came over his unsmiling lips—"perhaps I ought not to call it Jane Oglander's notion, it is evidently the notion—plot would be the better name—of another person. Do you know anything of it, Dick?" He looked fixedly at Wantele.

"No, Jane said nothing to me—nothing that could be described in the terms you have used, Richard."

Wantele's face was overcast with an expression of anxiety and unease.

"Are you quite sure of that, Dick? I beg of you not to spare me."

"Quite sure, Richard."

"Jane seems to think——" Richard Maule was still looking at his cousin intently, and Dick Wantele moved under that look uncomfortably in his chair. "Jane seems to think," Mr. Maule repeated deliberately, "that it would be possible for my marriage with Athena to be annulled. From what I could make out, but Jane was—well, I'm afraid she was very much distressed at proposing such a thing to me,—she evidently thinks I ought to free my wife, that is my duty to make it possible, in fact, for Athena to start afresh—to marry again."

"Good God!"

"Yes, it's an odd notion—a very odd suggestion to come from a nice

young woman. And it gratifies me to see that you too are surprised, Dick." There was an edge of irony in his low, tired voice. "I was very much surprised myself—surprised, first, that the notion had never before presented itself to Athena's active brain; and even more surprised," he spoke more slowly and all the irony was gone, "that the suggestion should have come in any way through Jane Oglander."

Dick Wantele turned deliberately away and stared into the fire.

"I did not explain to her that what she was good enough to suggest was quite—well, impossible. That she had been, to put it crudely, misinformed."

Dick Wantele stared at his cousin. "You did *not* explain that to her, Richard?"

"No, I wished to consult you about the matter, and hear what you had to say. The scheme of course originated with Athena. Our English marriage laws make life very difficult to the sort of woman I have the honour to have for my wife."

The other made no answer.

"You never even suspected that such a plot was in the hatching?" insisted Richard Maule. "I want a true answer, mind!"

Dick Wantele got up from his chair. He put his hand on the back of it and stared down into his cousin's face.

"Once, many years ago, Athena spoke to me as if such a thing would be possible," he said.

He never lied, he never had lied—in words—to Richard Maule, and he was not going to begin now.

"You mean in Italy, when I was ill?"

Wantele nodded his head, and then he felt gripped—in the throes of a horrible fear. It was as if a pit had suddenly opened between his cousin and himself, between the man whom he loved,—whose affection and respect he wished above all things to retain, for they were all that remained to him,—and his miserable self. He wondered whether the secret thing he feared showed itself in his face.

Richard Maule slowly got up. Wantele made an instinctive movement to help him, but the other waved him off, not unkindly, but a little impatiently.

"Dick?" he said. "My boy, I want to ask you a question—an indiscreet question. You need not answer it, but if you answer it, please answer it truly."

Wantele opened his mouth and then closed it again. He could not think of the words with which to entreat the other man to desist——

Richard Maule, looking at him, knew the answer to his question before he had uttered it, but even so he spoke, obsessed by the cruel wish *to know*

"In Italy——?" His voice sank to a muffled whisper, but he did not take his eyes, his suffering, sunken eyes, from Wantele's tortured face.

Still the other did not—could not—speak.

"I knew it. At least I felt sure of it." He sighed a quick convulsive sigh, and then in mercy averted his eyes.

"But never here?" he muttered questioningly. "Everything was over by the time we came back here?"

"Yes, Richard. I swear it."

"I knew that too—at least I felt sure of it. I'm afraid you must have

suffered a good bit, Dick?"

The younger man nodded his head. "I have loathed and I have despised myself ever since."

"I'm sorry you did that. I'm sorry I waited till now to tell you that I knew, that I understood."

"How you must have hated me!" said Wantele sombrely.

"Never, Dick. I—I knew her by then. If you had been the first"—he quickly amended his phrase—"if I had been fool enough to believe you were the first, I think it would have killed me. As it was," his voice hardened, "it only made me curse myself for my blind folly—folly which brought wretchedness and shame on you, Dick, and—and now, I fear, on Jane Oglander"—he saw the confirmation he sought on the other's face. "It's about Jane I wish to speak to you to-night. For a moment I ask of you to think of me as God——"

Wantele stared at Richard Maule; it was the first time his cousin had ever uttered the word in his presence.

"If I were God—Providence—Fate—and gave you your choice, would you choose that Lingard should marry Jane or that you should marry her?"

And as Wantele still stared at him in amazement: "Take it from me—I have never deceived you—that the choice is open to you. I don't wish to hurry you. Take a few moments to think it over."

"I—I don't understand," stammered Wantele.

"There is no necessity for you to understand. In fact I hope that, after to-night, you will dismiss the whole of this conversation from your mind. But I repeat—the choice is open to you."

And he added, musingly, "I think, Dick, that with the others out of the

way you could make Jane happy—in time." But there was doubt—painful, deliberating doubt, in his tone.

Wantele shook his head.

"I don't agree," he said shortly. "You see, Richard, Jane"—he moistened his lips—"Jane's never loved me. She loves Lingard. And so, if God gave me the choice, I would give her to Lingard."

"You think well of the man?" Maule spoke lightly, and as if he himself had no reason to dissent from any word commending the soldier.

"You mustn't ask me to judge Lingard"—the words were difficult to utter, and he brought them out with difficulty. "I've been there, you see. I know what the poor devil's going through. I loved you, Richard—but that didn't save me. Lingard loved Jane, I believe he still loves her, and—and I should take him to be a man jealous of his honour—but neither his love nor his honour has saved him."

Wantele began walking up and down the room with long nervous strides. Then he stopped short—"What is it you mean to do, Richard?" he asked.

Richard Maule hesitated. He knew very well what he now meant to do, but he did not intend that his cousin should have any inkling, either now or hereafter, of his decision. And Dick, as he knew well, was not easily deceived. Still, he put his mind, the mind which was in some ways clearer, harder, than it had been before his illness, to the task.

"There are three courses open to me," he said slowly. "The one is to allow matters to remain as they are, *in statu quo*; the second is to do what Jane Oglander suggests—allow my wife to bring a suit for the dissolution of our marriage, and to allow it to go undefended—it is that which I should have done, Dick, had your answer been other than

it was."

"And the third course?" Wantele was looking at his cousin fixedly.

"The third course, which I may probably adopt, will be for me to begin proceedings for divorce. I take it that Lingard knows nothing of the real woman? I mean, he looks at Athena as she looks at herself?"

Wantele nodded. That was certainly a good way in which to describe Lingard's mental attitude.

"But I have not quite made up my mind as to the best course," said Richard Maule. "I shall think the matter over for a day or two. But I fear—and I don't mind telling you, Dick, that the thought isn't exactly a pleasant one to me—that it must be what I said just now."

He beckoned to the other to come nearer, and Wantele did so, his pale face full of pain and anger.

"I want you to understand," his cousin added, in a low voice, "that when I've said that I've said all. The business won't affect me as it would most men. I never gave a thought to the world's opinion in old days, and why should I do so now?"

He spoke hesitatingly, awkwardly. It was disagreeable to him to be thus lying to his cousin—to be filling the heart of the man who loved him with a flood of indignant pity and pain. But the tragi-comedy had to be played out.

"I shall really feel very much more comfortable when it's all over," he said. "I don't fancy even lawyers waste as much time as they used to do over this kind of thing. And this case is so simple, so straightforward. I shall be sorry for the Kayes. But they must have known it. I fancy everybody in this neighbourhood knew it. People will pity Athena; they will agree that she had every excuse——"

He leant back in his chair. There was nothing more to say.

"Shall I call Carver?" asked Wantele solicitously.

"No. Not now. But I should be obliged if you will tell him that I shall want him in an hour. I shall try and read for a while by the fire."

Richard Maule waited till he heard the sounds of his cousin's quick footsteps die away. Then he rose feebly and walked over to the recess which had been fitted up as a medicine cupboard in the days of his childhood, when drugs were more the fashion than they are now.

In a wide-necked, glass-stoppered bottle were the crystals of chloral which he had long used in preference to the more usual liquid form. He knew to a nicety the dose which he himself could take with safety, the dose which sometimes failed to induce sleep.

He now measured out in his hand some three times his usual dose.

Had Dick Wantele's answer been different, Richard Maule would have administered to himself the crystals he now held in his hand. But Dick's decision—what the man of average morality would have regarded as his noble and unselfish decision—had signed another human being's death-warrant.

The thought that this was so suddenly struck Richard Maule as the most ironic of the many avenging things he had known to happen in our strange world. And, almost for the first time since he had formed his awful conception of the meaning of life, he knew the cruel joy of laughing with the gods, instead of writhing under their lash.

As he shook the crystals into an envelope and slipped it into his

waistcoat pocket, he told himself that revenge was at last to be his. The gods were yielding him one of their most cherished attributes.

CHAPTER XIX

"The fact that the world contains an appreciable number of wretches who ought to be exterminated without mercy when an opportunity occurs, is not quite so generally understood as it ought to be, and many common ways of thinking and feeling virtually deny it."

Richard Maule turned the handle of his wife's bedroom door. A glance assured him that the beautiful room was empty. So far the gods whose sport he believed himself to be had been kind, for he had met no one during his slow, painful progress through the house, and Athena, as he knew well, would not be up for another hour.

Standing just within the door, he looked round the room with a terrible, almost a malignant, curiosity. The fire had evidently just been built up; it threw dancing shafts of light over the rose-red curtains of the low First Empire bed, at once vivifying and softening the brilliant colouring of the room.

Till to-night, the owner of Rede Place had never seen this oval bedchamber since it had been transformed nearly nine years before in view of the home-coming of his wife—the home-coming which had been delayed for two years after their marriage.

He had planned out with infinite care and lingering delight every detail of the decoration, taking as his model the bedchamber of the Empress Josephine at Malmaison. He and the expert who had helped him in his labour of love had journeyed out—even now he

remembered the journey vividly—to the country house near Paris where Napoleon spent his happiest hours.

As for the room next door, the room which was to have been his, it had long ago been dismantled, and was now the sewing-room of his wife's maid.

Athena had arranged her life in a way that exactly suited her. She had lived on unruffled by the thunder-bolt, hurled unwittingly by herself, which had destroyed him. But a tree blasted by lightning outstands the most radiant of living blossoms....

He felt a wave of hatred heat his blood. Stepping slowly over the garlanded Aubusson carpet, he moved across the room till he stood by the side of the low, wide bed.

On a gilt-rimmed table was placed a crystal tray he well remembered, and on the tray were a decanter of water, a medicine glass, and a bottle of chloral. Above the wick of a spirit-lamp stood a tiny gold kettle filled with the chocolate which Mrs. Maule always heated and drank after she was in bed.

Her intimate ways of life were very present to her husband's memory. It was not likely that time had modified any habit governing Athena's appearance and general well-being.

He remembered the day they had first seen the gold kettle. It had been at a sale held in the house of one of those frail Parisian beauties who, following a fashion of the moment, had put up her goods to auction. The notion that his wife should possess anything that had once belonged to such a woman had offended Richard Maule's taste, and he had resisted longer than he generally did any wish of hers. But she had cajoled him, as she always in those days could cajole him into anything.

He put out his thin hand and noted with satisfaction that it was

shaking less than usual. Slowly he lifted back the lid of the gold kettle.

Yes—there was the chocolate still warm, still in entire solution.

Straightening himself, Richard Maule stood for a moment listening....

Silence reigned within and without Rede Place. Steadying his right hand with his left, he shook the crystals of chloral he had brought with him into the dark liquid. Then he turned, and walked languidly towards the fire. The emotion caused by his short conversation with Dick Wantele had wearied him.

Suddenly there fell on his listening ears the sound of footsteps in the corridor. He knew them for those of his wife. But it was hate, not fear, that heralded Athena.

He turned round slowly, uncertain for a moment how to explain his presence there.

She swept in—God! how superb, how radiantly alive—and then gave a swift cry. "Richard! You have frightened me!" But she faced him proudly. "I've come up to find something I wish to show General Lingard——"

She turned on the lights, and Richard Maule, looking at her fixedly, found his first quick impression modified. Her lovely face was thin and strained. There were shadows under her dark, violet eyes. But even so, how strong she was, how full of vibrating vitality! By her side Richard Maule felt that he must appear dead, or worse, ill to death.

Athena was dressed in the purple gown she had worn the night Lingard had first come to Rede Place. So had she looked when she had opened the door of the Greek Room and led in their—hers and

Richard's—illustrious guest.

There was something desperate, defiant in the look she now cast on him. She was telling herself how awful it was to know that this wreck of a man standing before her could hold the whole of her future in his weak and yet tenacious grasp! How cruel that this—this cripple should possess the right to grant or to deny what had become the crowning wish of her heart!

Perhaps something of what was in her mind penetrated to Richard Maule's quick brain.

"The ailing and the infirm," he said, staring at her fixedly, "are treated by the kind folk about them like children. They are never left alone. I do not choose that our household should know that I desire to have a private interview with you, and so I thought the simplest thing would be to come here and wait for you——"

"What is it you wish to say to me?" Her voice shook with suspense. She clasped her hands together with an unconscious gesture of supplication.

"I have brought you—I have brought us all—the order of release."

A feeling of exultant joy—of relief which pierced so keenly that it was akin to pain, filled Athena Maule's soul. She had indeed been well inspired to tell Jane all that was in her heart—and Hew's. And here was Richard actually saying so! For, "You chose a most excellent Mercury," he observed dryly.

"You mean Jane Oglander?" her voice again shook a little. "She was not my messenger. She asked my permission to speak to you——"

"Yes, I mean Jane Oglander. She showed me where my duty lay. For a while I hesitated between two courses—for you know, Athena, there were two courses open to me."

She looked at him without speaking. How cruel, how—how unmanly, of Richard to say this! And how futile. There was only one moment when he could have divorced her. Providence had stood her friend by choosing just that moment to make him ill. Since then—she thought she had learnt enough English law to know that—he would be held to have condoned.

But her look made him feel ashamed. The javelin does not thus play with its victim.

"I beg your pardon," he muttered almost inaudibly.

"I know you have always hated me," she said passionately.

"You have not known that always," he answered sombrely—and for a moment she hung her head.

"Perhaps now, Richard, we may be better friends."

She reminded herself that in old days—in the days when she had been his idol, his goddess—she had had a certain contemptuous fondness for her husband. She would be generous—now. Jane had taught her that it was good to be generous.

How true a friend had Jane Oglander been to her! Athena felt a rush of warm gratitude to the woman who still—how strange, how absurd it seemed—was engaged to Lingard. Jane, like the angel she was, would help them—Athena and Hew Lingard—over what must be for some time to come very delicate ground. Their progress, albeit that of happy and, what was so satisfactory, of innocent lovers, would be hampered with small difficulties. How fortunate it was, how more than fortunate, that Lingard's engagement to Jane had not yet been publicly announced....

"Have you told Dick?" she asked nervously. Her husband—he was

still her husband—had smiled strangely as only reply to her kindly words. "Was it about that you wished to see him to-night?"

"No, I have not yet told Dick of my decision."

"I suppose it can all be managed very quietly?" she said plaintively. "I hope I shan't have to go and appear before a judge—or shall I?"

Richard Maule looked at her thoughtfully. "That is a thing I cannot tell you," he said slowly. "Many would say to you most confidently—yes, that you will have to appear before the Judge."

"I thought there was a thing in England called taking evidence on commission. You yourself, Richard, could not possibly appear in person. And then—I want to know, it is rather important that I should know"—her husband bent his head gravely—"if there will be any delay?"

"You mean any lapse of time before the decree can be obtained?"

Her eyes dropped. "Yes, that is what I do mean." In old days it had always been better to be quite frank with Richard.

"I think not. In this kind of case I think there is no delay. The legal procedure is quite simple."

He waited a moment. "You of course will bring the suit, and I shall not oppose it. You see, Athena,—no doubt you have been at the pains to inform yourself of the fact, for to my surprise Jane Oglander was aware of it,—the dissolution of a marriage carries with it no stain—no stain, that is, on the wife who has been so poorly used."

There came a look of raillery on his white face, and Athena again told herself that he was very cruel—cruel and heartless.

"The wife, I repeat, goes out into the world unsullied, ready, if so the fancy takes her, to become another man's bride—his wife in reality

as well as in name."

He looked at her significantly, and added, more lightly, "The world has become more liberal since the days of my youth. I am sure there will be great sympathy felt for you, Athena. Such a marriage as ours is in truth a monstrous thing. I did not need Jane to tell me that, though it was odd of Jane to have thought of it."

There came over him a terrible feeling of lassitude. "And now I'm afraid I must ask you to help me to get back to my room."

This punishment he put on himself. He must not be met coming out of his wife's room alone.

"Of course!" she cried eagerly. "You know I would have done much more for you—I mean since you became ill—if you had only allowed it! But Dick was always jealous—Dick has always hated me!"

"Surely not always?" he said mildly.

"Yes, always!"

He would not take her arm, or lean on her. She simply walked by his side, her mind in a whirl of amazement, of gratitude, of almost hysterical excitement, till he dismissed her, curtly, at his door.

The hour that followed was perhaps the happiest hour of Athena Maule's not unhappy life. It bore a curious resemblance to that which had immediately followed Richard Maule's proposal of marriage, the proposal for which her father and mother, as well as herself, had watched and waited so anxiously. But now there was added what had been quite lacking before—a sufficiently strong feeling of attraction to the man who would place her in the position she longed feverishly to

enjoy and adorn.

That Lingard, in the throes of his passion for her, should go through moments of acute self-depreciation and remorse, only made her feel her power, her triumph, the more.

She now came down to him gentle, subdued, as he had never yet seen her,—Nature provides such women with a wonderfully complex and full armoury—and Lingard, alas! once more under the spell, sprang towards her. The unexpected departure of Jane to the Small Farm had angered him.

"I have seen Richard." The pregnant words were uttered solemnly. "I found him, for the first time in my life, in—in my room. Jane spoke to him to-day, and he is going to release me, to let me out of prison—at last!" and then, not till then, Athena allowed herself to fall on Lingard's breast, and feel the clasp of his strong arms about her.

It mattered naught to her that the man who was now murmuring wild, broken words of love and passionate joy at her release from intolerable bonds, felt what the traitor feels—that his intoxication was even now seared with livid streaks of self-loathing and self-contempt.

She knew well that he would not trouble her overmuch with his remorse. She could almost hear him, in his heart, say the words he had said the night before Jane Oglander had come to disturb and trouble the sunlit waters into which they two had already glided. "It is not your fault,—any fault there may be is mine."

But just before they said good-night Lingard frightened Athena Maule, and sent her away from him cold, almost angry.

"If I were the brave man men take me to be," he said suddenly, unclasping the hands which lay in his, "I should go out into the night and shoot myself."

She had made him beg, entreat, her forgiveness for his wild, wicked words. But they frightened her—dashed her deep content.

Athena Maule did not know Hew Lingard with the intimate knowledge she had known other men who had loved her. But there was this comfort—about this man she would be able to consult Jane—Jane who was so kind, so reasonable, and who only wished to do the best for them both.

She reminded herself that men are always blind where women are concerned. If nothing else would convince Hew Lingard that Jane, after all, did not care so very much, then Jane must be persuaded, after a decent interval, to marry Dick Wantele. After what had happened to-day, everything was possible....

Athena, to-night, was "fey." She felt as if she held the keys of fate in her hands. But even so, she went on thinking of Lingard's bitter words long after they had parted, and when, having dismissed her maid, she was heating the cup of chocolate which sometimes sent her to sleep without an opiate.

And then, as she lay down among her pillows, there came over Athena Maule the curious sensation that she was not alone. Bayworth Kaye—poor Bayworth, of whom she had thought so kindly, so regretfully, only two nights ago—seemed to be there, close to her, watching, waiting....

Athena did not believe in ghosts, and so she did not feel frightened, only surprised—very much surprised.

She turned on the light and sat up in bed.

This feeling of another presence close to her—how strong it still was!—must be a result of the emotion she had just gone through, of her exciting little scene with Hew Lingard.

It was strange that she should think of Bayworth Kaye here, in this room where he had never been but once, and then only for a moment on a June night when they had both been more reckless than usual. It would have been so much more natural to have felt a survival of Bayworth's presence downstairs—when she had been in Lingard's arms....

Suddenly she was overwhelmed with an intense, an overmastering drowsiness, and, quite unconscious of what was happening to her, she fell back, asleep.

The light above the low rose-red bed was still burning when they found her in the morning.

CHAPTER XX

"Who spake of Death? Let no one speak of
Death.

What should Death do in such a merry house?
With but a wife, a husband, and a friend
To give it greeting?..."

Richard Maule sat up in bed. He had taken a rather larger dose of chloral than usual the night before, and he had over-slept himself.

'Twixt sleeping and waking he had seemed to hear a number of extraordinary sounds—they were, however, sounds to which he had become accustomed, for they were produced by the Paches' motor.

Now his servant was drawing up the blinds, moving about the room with well-trained, noiseless steps. It seemed to him that the man avoided looking across at the bed; but when, at last, his persistent glance caused the servant to look round, nothing could be seen in the other's impassive face.

"Is it a fine morning, Carver?"

"No, sir—at least, yes, sir. But it's been raining."

"I thought I heard a car drive away a few moments ago, or did I dream it?"

The man hesitated.

"Yes, sir—perhaps you did, sir. Mr. Wantele had the machine out to go for the doctor. Mrs. Maule is not very well, sir, and Mr. Wantele thought he'd better fetch the doctor as quickly as possible."

Carver's voice gained confidence. His master was behaving "very sensible," and did not seem at all upset. The upsetting part was to be left to Dr. Mallet.

"I was to say, sir, that the doctor would like to see you."

"Who went for the doctor?" asked Richard Maule suddenly.

"Mr. Wantele himself, sir. I heard him say he thought it would lose less time for him to go off at once, than to wait and send anyone."

"And did Mr. Wantele bring the doctor back with him?"

"Yes, sir, I think he did—I think they came back together."

There was a knock at the door, and then the murmur of words outside.

"Who's there?" called out Richard Maule in a strong voice. "What's all that whispering about?" He spoke querulously, as he sometimes did in the morning.

"It's only I—Mallet!"

The doctor came in. He and Richard Maule were old friends—in fact, contemporaries. But there was a great difference between the two men—the one was broad, ruddy, and did not look his years; the other was the wreck we know.

"I'm sorry to say Mrs. Maule is very ill." The doctor plunged at once into the business which had brought him. Long experience had taught him the futility, the cruelty, of "breaking" bad news.

"What's the matter with her? She's always enjoyed remarkably good health." Richard Maule moved a little in his bed.

"Yes, I should have taken her to be a remarkably healthy woman, though of course as you know—we both know—she has always been very sleepless. Almost as if she caught insomnia from you, eh?"

The doctor's courage was beginning to fail him, curiously. It was strange, it—it was horrible, the hatred, the contempt Richard Maule felt for his wife.

"Mallet—come here, closer. I believe you are concealing something from me. If there's bad news I'd rather hear whatever it is from you than from Dick." Mr. Maule spoke in a hard, rather breathless tone.

"There is something to hear. Your wife last night took an overdose of chloral——"

The doctor said no word of sympathy. The words would have stuck in his throat. He knew too well the real relationship of the husband and wife. Richard Maule would receive plenty of condolences from others. But even so, to learn suddenly of the death of a human being with whom one has been associated over long years is always a shock, is always painful.

Richard Maule straightened himself in bed. "An overdose of chloral," he repeated, "then she's—she's——"

The other bent his head.

"She thought she would outlive me many years."

The doctor looked thoughtfully at his patient. He knew that illness of a certain type atrophies the memory and the affections, while leaving unaffected the mind and a certain fierce instinct of self-preservation. Dr. Mallet was not so much shocked or so much surprised by Richard

Maule's remark as a layman would have been.

Again the bereaved husband spoke, and this time questioningly. "A peaceful death, Mallet? A happy death?"

"Yes—yes, certainly." Something impelled him to add, "But a terrible thing when it comes to one so young, so beautiful, as was your wife!"

He compared the stillness, the equanimity, of the man lying before him, with the awful agitation of Dick Wantele—an agitation so terrible, a horror so overwhelming, that it had confirmed Dr. Mallet in a theory of his, a theory formed a good many years ago, and of which he had sometimes felt ashamed.

But the mind of an intelligent medical man who has enjoyed for many years a large family practice becomes like one of those old manuals for the use of confessors. His mind perforce becomes a store-house of strange sins, of troubled, abnormal happenings, which belong, from the point of view of the happy and the sane, to a fifth dimension, unimagined, unimaginable. The wise physician, like the wise confessor, does not allow his mind to dwell on these things, but he does not make the mistake of telling himself—as so many of us do—that they are not there. The doctor had formed a suspicion, which had now become a certainty. Yet he was surprised by Richard Maule's next words.

"It must have been an awful shock to Dick, Mallet. He was thrown so much more with Athena than I could be of late years, though to be sure she was a great deal away."

He waited a moment, and as the doctor made no comment, "Although they didn't pull it off well together, still for my sake they both kept up a kind of armed truce, eh, Mallet?" He looked searchingly at the other man. "I am telling you nothing you do not know."

The other nodded gravely.

"Where's Dick now?" Mr. Maule asked abruptly; and the doctor saw that the thin hand holding the coverlet shook a little.

"I sent him off to get Ricketts. I thought it better to give him something to do; for as you say, as you have guessed, he was very much overwrought and upset. Of course Ricketts can do nothing, but I thought he had better be sent for. And to tell you the truth, I wanted to give Dick a job."

"Has anyone told General Lingard, Mallet?"

"No. He went out for a walk before breakfast—an odd thing to do, but it seems he generally does go out every morning. They're expecting him in in a few minutes. Would you like me to tell him?"

"I should be grateful if you would. And after you've told him, Mallet, I should like to see him—just for a few moments. My poor wife was very fond of him. You know he's engaged to Jane Oglander?"

"Yes. Dick told me. But I understood it was a secret?"

"Yes—yes, so it is."

"Mrs. Maule? Dead? An overdose of chloral?"

Lingard repeated what the doctor had just said very quietly, but he stammered out the words, and his face had gone an ashen grey colour.

They were in the dining-room. Breakfast had only been laid for two.

Dr. Mallet was surprised, that is as far as anything of this kind could surprise him.

Here was a man used to facing death, and to seeing death dealt out to others—nay, he had doubtless in his time dealt out death to many. And yet now this famous soldier was unmanned—yes, unmanned was the word, by what was, after all, not a very unusual accident.

"Yes, it's a terrible thing," the doctor said briefly, "a terrible thing!"

Lingard walked over to the sideboard. He poured himself out some brandy, and drank it.

"You must forgive me. I had a touch of fever yesterday—jungle fever," he said. "Your news has given me a great shock."

"Yes, yes. Naturally."

"Will you tell me again? I don't quite understand."

He had come back and now stood facing Dr. Mallet. His face was set, expressionless, but he kept on opening and closing his right hand with a nervous movement.

"It happened, as these things always do, in the most simple way in the world. I had a similar case six months ago. Poor Mrs. Maule took an overdose of chloral last night. When her husband first became ill in Italy many years ago, she had a very anxious time, and had to supervise, so I understand, very inadequate nurses. Her anxiety, and the strain generally, brought on insomnia, and the doctors there—very wrongly from my point of view—gave her chloral. It is a most insidious drug, as you probably know, General Lingard. She and Mr. Maule have both taken it for years."

"Then there is no doubt as to its having been an accident?" Lingard's voice sank in a whisper.

"No doubt at all," said the doctor emphatically, "I never saw a woman who, taking all things into consideration, enjoyed life more than did

Mrs. Maule. The thought of suicide is out of the question. The maid who saw her the last thing tells me that she hadn't seen her so well or happy—gay was the word the Frenchwoman used—for many months. Before she went to bed, she wrote a letter addressed to Miss Oglander at the Small Farm which she gave orders should be taken over there this morning. It went by hand nearly a couple of hours before the sad truth was discovered."

"And then they sent for you at once?"

Lingard felt as if he was in an evil dream. He could not bring himself to believe, to face the fact that Athena was dead—gone, for ever, out of his life, out of all their lives.

"Yes. Mr. Wantele came and fetched me without losing a moment," said the doctor gravely. "But of course I saw at once that there was nothing to be done. I have, however, sent for a colleague of mine. Mr. Wantele, who, as you can easily imagine, is very much—well, upset, went off to fetch him. I wonder they're not back yet."

There was a long silence between the two men.

Dr. Mallet looked at the famous soldier with interest and curiosity.

General Lingard was a remarkable-looking man apart from his reputation. But there were lines on his seamed face that told of strain—an older strain than that induced by the shocking news which had just been told him. He had now pulled himself together; he was doubtless annoyed with himself for having been so terribly affected. But Mrs. Maule possessed a very compelling, vivid personality—even the doctor could not yet think of her as anything but living.

"I'm afraid, General Lingard, that I must prepare you for a rather painful ordeal. Mr. Maule wishes to see you, and if possible at once."

The other made an involuntary movement of recoil.

"To see me?" he repeated. "Why should he wish to see me?" And then he added hurriedly, "But of course I'll go and see him. He and— and Mrs. Maule"—he brought out her name with an effort—"have both been most kind to me, though our acquaintance has been short."

Again there was a pause. And then Lingard said abruptly, "Well—shall I go up and see him now? I—I suppose you will come with me?" If restrained, there was no less an appeal in his hushed voice.

"I'll just go up with you, and then I'm afraid I shall have to leave you with him. Perhaps I ought to tell you that Mr. Maule took the news very quietly, General Lingard. He's in a sad state—a sad state. A man in that condition does not take things to heart in the same way that we who are hale and strong do."

As they passed along the corridor, a housemaid was engaged in drawing down the blinds, and it was into a darkened room that Lingard was introduced by the doctor.

Richard Maule did not rise to receive the condolences of his guest. He was up and in his dressing-gown, and he sat huddled in a deep invalid chair. To Lingard's eyes he looked pitifully broken.

Various feelings—anger, contemptuous pity, and an unwilling respect for the man who had, only the day before, made up his mind to face the greatest humiliation open to manhood—all these jostled one another in the soldier's mind as he stood staring down at his host.

Their hands just touched—Lingard's icy cold, Richard Maule's burning hot.

"Thank you, thank you, General Lingard. I felt sure that I should have your sympathy."

There was an odd gleam in the stricken man's eyes, but the other,

intent on preserving his own self-command, saw nothing of it.

"Do sit down. Yes, it's a strange, a most strange thing. She was always so strong, so well. Poor Athena! Thanks to you in a great measure, her last weeks of life were very bright and happy."

He looked furtively at Lingard. The man was taking his punishment like a Stoic. But bah! what were his sufferings to those which Maule himself had endured eight years before?

"I've troubled you to come to me," he continued, "not so much to receive your kind sympathy, as to speak to you of Jane—of Jane Oglander. She was, as you know, my poor wife's best friend—and in a very real sense. This will be a most terrible shock to her. She would naturally receive the news better from you than from anyone else, and I really asked to see you that I might beg you to go at once, as soon as possible, over to the Small Farm. Thanks to my good friend Dr. Mallet, we have managed to establish a cordon round the house. But of course the truth will be known very shortly in the village—if, indeed, it is not known there yet."

Lingard rose from the chair on which he had reluctantly sat down in obedience to his host's wish.

"Yes," he said in a low, firm voice. "I will certainly do as you wish. I know how truly, how devotedly, Jane and Mrs. Maule loved one another."

"It would be idle for me to pretend to you, General Lingard, now that you have formed part of our household for nearly a month, that my poor wife and I were on close or sympathetic terms—" The other made a sudden restless movement. "It is, however, a comfort to me to feel that last night, for the first time for many years—" he was looking narrowly at his victim, and Lingard fell into the trap.

"I know—I know," he exclaimed hastily. "It must be a comfort to you

now, Mr. Maule, to feel that you—that you—" he stopped awkwardly.

Richard Maule smiled a curious smile, and Lingard felt inexpressibly shamed, humiliated. But what was this Richard Maule was saying?

"Ah, so she told you! Strange—strange are the ways of the modern woman, General Lingard. But I suppose that to Athena you and Jane Oglander were as good as husband and wife. She thought that what she could say without impropriety to the one she could say to the other. Well, I won't keep you now. I should be sorry indeed if Jane heard what has happened from anyone but yourself."

CHAPTER XXI

"It is my life; I bring it torn and stained
Out of the battles I have lost and gained;
Once captured, won back from the enemy
At a great loss; yet here I hold it still,
My own to render up as now I do;
I render it up joyfully to you,
Choosing defeat: do with it as you will."

To be out of doors, away from that strange, unreal house of mourning, brought with it a sensation of almost physical relief.

Lingard walked rapidly along, on his way to the Small Farm. He was pursued, obsessed, by the horror of the fact. He felt as if he had never before realised the awful obliteration of death.

Many a mother, wife, sister, kept among the most precious of her treasures letters signed "Hew Lingard"—letters speaking in high terms of a dead son, of a dead husband, of a dead brother. But those men and lads on whose dead faces he had gazed had died the death which to Lingard and his like puts the crown on a soldier's life. He had lost comrades who had been dear to him and whose loss he had lamented sorely. But never, never had the sudden cancelling, so to speak, of a human being brought with it this sense of chilling horror, of nothingness where so much had been.

And then there was something else—something which at once revolted and distressed him inexpressibly. The immediate past, the

events of the last four weeks, became, in so far as they concerned the woman who was now lying dead, both fantastic and shameful.

Last night, for the first time, something of Athena's ruthless egotism had forced itself upon Lingard's perception. Hitherto he had been too deeply concerned with his own egotism, his own cruelty, his own remorse, to give thought to hers.

That she should have used Jane Oglander as her ambassador to Richard Maule had shocked, nay more, had disgusted him, as soon as he had found himself away from the magic of her presence.

Wholly absorbed in the future, Athena, after her first words of eager gratitude for Jane's intervention, had dismissed Jane from her mind, expelled her from her mental vision. Nay, she had gone further, for in answer to a muttered word from Lingard, she had at last said something which had jarred his taste, as well as roused that instinctive dog-in-the-manger attitude which slumbers in all men with regard to any woman who has been beloved.

"Jane," Athena had said impatiently, "will end by marrying Dick Wantele. But for me she would have done it long ago!" And angrily the listener's heart, his memory, had given Athena the lie.

After Mrs. Maule had left him the night before, Lingard had gone out of doors, and now chance brought him to the spot where he had stood for a long time staring at the long low house which now sheltered Jane Oglander, driven there, as he knew well, by his base, it now seemed his inconceivable, cruelty. How clearly he had visualised her last night! Imagining her as widely awake as he was himself, but denied by a thousand scruples from the relief of being able to go out, alone, into the darkness and solitude. If they had met there last night, he might at least have told Jane of his fight—of his losing fight for his lost honour. Now she would always believe that he had surrendered without a struggle.

He walked on and into the curious, formal little garden of the Small Farm, even now gay with late autumn blossoms. The beams of a wintry sun lay athwart the picturesque old house.

From the first,—nay, not quite at first, but very soon,—Lingard had disliked Mabel Digby. He had thought of her as an ally of Dick Wantele, and at a time when he was still trying to lie to himself as to the nature of his attraction to Athena, he had often seen her clear brown eyes fixed on him with a puzzled, troubled expression. Even now he could not be sorry she was ill. He felt that to-day he could not have faced those honest, questioning eyes.

Lingard walked up to the porch, and rang the bell. By an odd twist, he began to think, as he stood there, how it would have been with him had it been Jane who was lying dead. Clearly he realised that Jane, dead, would still in a sense have been to him alive. But Athena? Athena was gone—gone into nothingness. He felt a tremor run through him, a touch of the old fever....

"Miss Oglander? I think she's upstairs with Miss Digby, sir. But I'll fetch her down. Will you come into the drawing-room?"

Lingard went through the hall into the long sitting-room which he remembered, as men remember a place to which they have been in dreams. Jane had brought him there on the first morning after her arrival at Rede Place. They had not had a very pleasant walk, for each seemed to have so curiously little to say to the other, and Lingard, at least, had hailed with pleasure the moment when they had gone into the house.

He remembered that he had been amused and touched by the many mementoes of the Indian Mutiny the room contained—quaint coloured prints and amateurish drawings of Delhi, before and during the great epic struggle, curious engraved portraits of the various

Mutiny veterans under whom Mabel Digby's father had fought,—signs of a hero-worship the old soldier had transmitted to his daughter.

He also recalled the feeling of acute irritation with which he had noticed Mabel Digby's look of shy congratulation at Jane and at himself. She had been at once too shy and too well-bred to make any allusion to an engagement which was not yet announced, but there had been no mistaking her glance, her smile.

How long ago all that seemed! It might have been years—instead of only weeks.

He went and stood by the fireplace, and then stared up at Outram's portrait. Was that man, and were that man's comrades and contemporaries, whose virtues as well as whose courage have become famous as the virtues and the courage of ancient legendary heroes—were they untouched by the failings and weaknesses of our poor common humanity? It was certainly not true of their own immediate predecessors, or—or of their successors.

A click of the latch—and Jane came into the room. She was pale, but her manner had regained its old quietude and gentleness.

As she came towards him and saw his ravaged face, a feeling of great concern, of pity so maternal in texture that it swept away every other feeling from her heart, almost broke down her new, unnatural composure.

She wished ardently—and Jane was full of hidden fire—to make everything easy for him. But oh! she could not bear him to look as he now looked.

It was not in order that Hew Lingard should look, should feel, as he

was now looking and feeling that she had made the great renouncement—the renouncement which Wantele had implored her with such fierce, passionate energy to refrain from making. Was it possible that Wantele had been right, and that she was doing an evil thing by the man she loved?—such was the agonised question which went through Jane Oglander's mind as she advanced quietly towards him.

Only a few moments ago she had destroyed Athena's note of wild joy, of gratitude to herself. As she had watched the paper burn, as she had seen Athena's delicate, graceful monogram vanish in the flame, Jane had felt as if her heart was shrivelling up with it.

She had been in the room but a very few moments, and already her presence was bringing peace to Lingard's seared unhappy soul.

There was nothing on her face to show the conflicting emotions with which she was being shaken, and to him she breathed renunciation, serenity. How amazing to remember that only yesterday her nearness had brought him intolerable unease, as well as keen shame. Now he felt as if a touch from her hand would cure him of all his shameful ills.

Jane Oglander's pity, and he knew that she was very pitiful, had the divine quality of raising, instead of debasing, as does so much of the pity lavished on others in this sad, strange world.

She held out her hand; he felt it fluttering for a moment in his strong grasp, but alas! it was her unease, her miserable misgiving that she now bestowed on him. There came over her eyes and brow a look of suffering, and Lingard dropped her hand quickly. No—he could not tell now, at once, what he had come to tell her.

"Will you come out with me, Jane?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. Of course I will." It seemed a long, long time since he had

asked her to do anything—with him.

They went out into the little hall. As he helped her on with her coat, she made a slight shrinking movement which cut him shrewdly; he reminded himself that she had the right to hate, as well as to despise, him.

With common consent they turned into the lonely country road, instead of under the beeches of Rede Place, and as they walked, each kept rather further from the other than do most people walking side by side. Jane respected his moody silence, and her memory went back to the first walk he and she had taken together on the day of his triumphant return home.

It had been a clear starry London night in autumn, and they had crossed from the shabby, quiet little street where she lived to that portion of the Embankment which lies between the river and St. Thomas's Hospital,—a stone-flagged pavement open only to walkers.

There Lingard had linked his arm through hers, and the movement had given her a delicious thrill of joy, deepening in her that protective instinct which makes every woman long for the man she loves to cling to her.

As they had paced up and down, so happily alone in the peopled solitude London offers to her lovers, Jane's tender heart could not forget what lay so near, and she had compared her blest lot with that meted out to the suffering and the forlorn, who lie in their serried ranks in the wards she so often visited.

How gladly now she would have changed places with the one among them who was nearest to death.

They were close to the Rectory gate, and Jane suddenly remembered that Lingard had promised to go in and see Mrs. Kaye

this morning. She had forced herself to ask him to do so, and she remembered now that he had assented to her wish with almost painful eagerness. Perhaps he thought she meant him to go there with her. That would explain his coming to the Farm so early.

"Mr. Maule asked me to come to you," he said at last, breaking the long oppressive silence. "He thought—God knows why he thought it!—that a certain terrible thing which has happened—which happened last night—would reach you best from me."

"Something which happened last night?" Jane repeated in a low voice. "I know it already. Athena wrote to me."

She turned and faced him steadily.

"Don't look like that, Hew. I—I can't bear it. I know you couldn't help what's happened. I know you never loved me in the way a man ought to love a woman whom he is going to marry."

"I did," he said hoarsely. "I swear to God I did!"

She shook her head.

"We both made a mistake," she answered steadily—"and it is fortunate that we discovered it in time. After all, engagements are often broken off, and we were engaged such a little—little while. I am glad Mr. Maule has made up his mind to do what is right."

She flushed for the first time a deep red. The discussion was hateful to her.

"You are going to the Rectory to see Mrs. Kaye? I won't go in with you, but I will wait here till you come out; and then we will walk together to Rede Place. I am going away to-day, back to London, and I can't go away without saying good-bye to them. I promised Athena I would come for a few moments——"

The emotion she was restraining, the tears she kept from falling, stained her face with faint patches of red, and thickened her eyelids. The measure of beauty which was hers, that beauty which owed so much to her ever-varying expression, was wholly obscured to-day.

Lingard felt intolerably moved. It was horrible to him to feel that he had bartered the right, the right he had owned for so short a time and had yielded so lightly, of taking Jane into his arms, and yet he felt he had never loved her as he loved her now, defenceless, before him. He could not wound and shock her by telling her of the terrible thing which had happened. Mr. Maule had asked too much of him.

His mind turned with relief to the task Jane had set him to do. In this matter of comforting the mother of a dead soldier son he would be able surely to bear himself in the old way.

He opened the Rectory gate and walked up, alone, the winding path which led to the front door.

Yes—Kaye was the name of the poor young fellow who had died at Aden. What were his disagreeable associations with the name of Bayworth Kaye?

He remembered.

For the first time since the doctor had told Lingard of what had happened the night before, it seemed as if Athena, her actual physical presence, was close to him again. He could almost hear the sound of her melodious voice as it had sounded when, thrilling with anger and scorn, she had told him of the gossip there had been about herself and this very man, this young Kaye, whose subsequent death seemed to arouse so much pity and concern in the neighbourhood.

Mrs. Kaye had been watching and waiting for General Lingard since ten o'clock. She had spent the hour in her shabby drawing-room going and coming from one window to the other, a tall, gaunt figure, clad in the deepest black.

When she saw him walking through the garden she retreated far back into the room, and there came into her face a look of fierce relief. She had so greatly feared that Mrs. Maule would prevent the fulfilment of his promise.

She was, as we know, a woman who made plans, and who carried out her plans to a successful issue. The rector, in his own way as bereaved, as heartbroken as was his wife, was in his study. She had told him curtly that he must stay there until she came and fetched him.

The cook had been sent into the market town four miles away, and the village girl, who was being trained with a kind of hard efficient care into a parlourmaid, had received her instructions.

General Lingard was to be shown straight into the drawing-room on his arrival; and then the girl was to start immediately on an errand to the village.

There was to be no eavesdropper at the interview Mrs. Kaye intended to have with the great soldier who was coming to offer his condolences on the death of her only son.

Strange rumours had reached the rectory, or rather Mrs. Kaye, for the rector had known nothing of them—rumours which she had drunk in with cruel avidity, rumours of General Lingard's extraordinary absorption in his beautiful hostess, of the long walks and drives they took together, of the many hours they spent alone in her sitting-room.

As yet, however, not even village gossip had linked together the

names of Lingard and Jane Oglander. That secret had been well kept, as are most innocent secrets.

At last the young servant announced, in a nervous, fluttered voice, "General Lingard, please, ma'am."

As Lingard walked in, as he saw the figure in deep mourning, his face relaxed and softened.

He himself came of clerical stock. His grandfather had been one of the Golden Canons of Durham, and as a child, as a youth, he had lived much in the more prosperous section of the Church of England. Often in the holidays he had accompanied relations on calls to rectories and vicarages which were as poverty-stricken, as full of self-respecting economy, as was this house. In those days all Lingard's instinct had stood up in rebellion against the clerical atmosphere in which he was being bred. But with years there came across him a queer feeling of loyalty to the cloth, to what had been his father's cloth.

Poor young Kaye! And yet most fortunate young Kaye. Such was Lingard's involuntary thought as he glanced round the homely room—for the lad whose mother stood there mourning him had known that a devoted father and mother watched with solicitude, with pride, with anxiety, every step of his career.

How different from Lingard's own case!—deprived of his parents in babyhood, and with none to care whether he did well in his profession or whether he went to the devil—as he had so very nearly gone to the devil some twenty years ago.

As he shook hands with the grey-haired woman who stood there with so tragic, so oppressed, a look on her face, there came across him the thought of his own long dead mother, and for a moment he was freed of the terrible happenings of the last few hours.

With an effort he set himself to remember all that he had heard to

Bayworth Kaye's credit. Those who had mentioned him had nearly all of them alluded to his reckless bravery, to his indifference to physical danger, to his Victoria Cross....

Ah! it was easy to utter a eulogy of such a son when speaking to the bereaved mother. It was so strange, so tragic, too, that he should have died in the way he had died, of fever. Lingard remembered hearing of the alternate hours of anxiety, of hope, and lastly of despair, through which the unfortunate parents had passed between the time they had first heard of their son's illness and of his lonely death.

Mrs. Kaye listened to the kind, heartfelt words of condolence, of respectful pity for herself and for her husband, in silence; and the eyes which she kept fixed on Lingard's face were tearless and very bright. Lingard, moving a little uneasily under their fixed scrutiny, asked himself whether she really heard and understood what he was saying? So far, she had not asked him to sit down.

He remembered a long interview of this kind he had had with another mother. That poor lady had received him surrounded by mementoes of a son who had been a trusty and sure comrade to himself. He recalled the photographs which had been brought out for his inspection, the floods of tears which had punctuated each of his words. But Mrs. Kaye was far more truly stricken than that other mother had been—Mrs. Kaye required no photograph of her son to remind her of his face. She had not yet been granted the relief of tears. Hers was evidently grief of a terrible, a passionate intensity.

"It is good of you to say these things to me, General Lingard—and to spare the time to come and see me," she said at last. "But I should not have troubled you—I should not have presumed to trouble you, were it not that I wish to consult you about what is to me a very important matter."

He bowed his head gravely, and sat down in the shabby armchair to which she rather imperiously motioned him.

"I am entirely at your service," he said quietly. No doubt she wanted some message transmitted to the War Office.

"I have no one else to ask or to consult," she said in low, rapid tones. "It is not a matter about which I desire to trouble my husband, and I am glad to think that he knows, as yet, nothing of what I am going to say to you. Whether he has to learn it or not will depend, General Lingard, on your advice."

Lingard looked at her attentively. He was puzzled and rather disturbed by her words.

"When they told my son he was not likely to live," she said, "he persuaded the doctor to allow him to write a letter to me, his mother."

She stopped a moment, then went on steadily: "In it he made a certain request. It is about that request I wish to consult you, General Lingard. I wish to know whether you consider that I ought to be bound by his wishes. My son desired that his Victoria Cross and one or two other things which he greatly valued, and which we, his parents, naturally value even more than he valued them, should be handed over, given by us to—to a lady."

Lingard felt a sudden feeling of recoil from the woman who sat opposite to him, watching for his answer. Then it was jealousy, pathetic but rather ignoble jealousy, that was making poor Mrs. Kaye look as she looked now—jealousy rather than grief....

There came the sound of a motor-car in the road which was above the level of the rectory garden.

It stopped, and Lingard saw through the window Wantele jump out and cross over to where Jane Oglander was walking up and down.

They spoke together for some moments, and Lingard felt a great lightening of his heart. Wantele must be telling Jane the awful thing which had happened, and he, Lingard, would be spared the dreadful task.

Jane came up close to the car. Lingard could not see the expression on her face. At last, or so it seemed to him, they both got in under the hood.

So Jane, breaking her promise to wait for him, had gone on to the house?

Making a determined effort over himself, Lingard forced himself to return to the matter—the painful, the rather absurd matter—in hand.

"I suppose you know all the circumstances," he began awkwardly.

"The circumstances, General Lingard, are perfectly simple." The fingers of Mrs. Kaye's thin right hand plucked nervously at the buttons which fastened her black woollen bodice. "The lady in question is a married woman. She got hold of my boy, and she bewitched him into forgetting the meaning of what I thought he valued more than life itself—his honour."

She rose up and stared down at Lingard, and there was a terrible look on her face.

"Having amused herself for the best part of a year—having got from him all she wanted—she threw my son aside like a squeezed orange. His heart was broken, General Lingard. I cannot doubt he allowed himself to die. And it is to this woman that he desires I should give all that he has left me to remember him by——"

Lingard had also risen to his feet.

"You are bringing a very serious accusation," he said coldly, "against

a lady for whom, as you yourself admit, Mrs. Kaye, your son entertained a great regard. Young men—forgive me for reminding you of what you must know as well as I—sometimes form strange, secret attachments which are, believe me, often as entirely unprovoked as—as—they are unrequited. I have known more than one such instance."

She drew from her breast a piece of paper.

"I ask you, nay, after what you have just said I implore you, to read what is written here——"

She almost thrust it into his reluctant hand.

"I don't wish to trouble you with my private concerns, but read this—read these lines," her shaking finger drew his troubled eyes to the words: "Do not be hurt, mother. You've never understood. In the sight of God Athena is my wife. She was nothing—she was never anything, to that wretched, cruel old man whose name she bears—and to whom she is so good when he allows her to be."

Lingard read the words over twice very deliberately. Then he folded the letter, and handed it back to its owner.

"This letter," he said firmly, "should be destroyed. I am sorry you showed it me, Mrs. Kaye. It was meant for no eyes but yours."

"Ah!" she cried, and tears at last welled up into her eyes. "You blame my poor boy! But he told me nothing I did not already know——"

She went to the fire and, stooping down, held the piece of paper over the tongues of shooting flame till he thought her hand must surely be scorched.

She turned on him. "There! It's gone!" she exclaimed. "No one but you, General Lingard, and I, his mother, will ever know that my son

wrote that letter. Perhaps I was wrong to have shown it to you. But what you said—but what you said"—she gave a hard, short sob—"hurt me, made me angry. I did not know how else to make you understand. And now, if you say I ought to do what my son asks, I will abide by your decision."

"In your place," he said quietly, "I should certainly carry out your son's wishes."

But as the mother looked into Lingard's fiercely set face, she told herself, with sombre triumph, that her boy was avenged.

At the door he turned and faced her.

"I cannot help wondering," he said in measured tones, "whether you have heard what has happened at Rede Place? Mrs. Maule took an overdose of chloral last night. She was found dead this morning."

Mrs. Kaye was for a moment utterly astounded by the news. Then, quickly gathering herself together, she said in a low dry tone, "I will ask you to believe, General Lingard, that I was ignorant of this—this judgment when I spoke to you just now."

Lingard made no answer; he looked all round him like a man who seeks some way of escape.

Suddenly there came into his view the figure of Jane Oglander, moving patiently up and down on the road beyond the gate.

So she had waited for him....

As Mrs. Kaye went down the passage leading to her husband's study, she murmured once or twice, "Vengeance is mine!" It was a

comfortable thought that she was alone in the house. She did not consider her husband anyone. "Vengeance is mine!" she repeated the words in a louder tone. And then she went into the rector's study and very quietly told him what she had just heard.

Mr. Kaye was truly shocked and grieved. He had always liked Athena. She had always been quite civil to him, and so kind, so remarkably kind, to his dear dead son.

He got up and began looking for his hat. He hoped his wife would not interfere, and prevent his doing what he thought right. It was surely his place, as the clergyman of the parish, to go up to Rede Place and offer his sincere condolences to the bereaved husband.

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