

FICTION

Ruby M. Ayres

The Beggar Man

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

THE BEGGAR MAN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE WOMAN HATER

THE BEGGAR MAN

THE ONE WHO FORGOT

THE PHANTOM LOVER

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

THE MASTER MAN

THE SECOND HONEYMOON

PAPER ROSES

THE WINDS OF THE WORLD

FOR LOVE

THE LITTL'ST LOVER

THE UPHILL ROAD

THE BLACK SHEEP

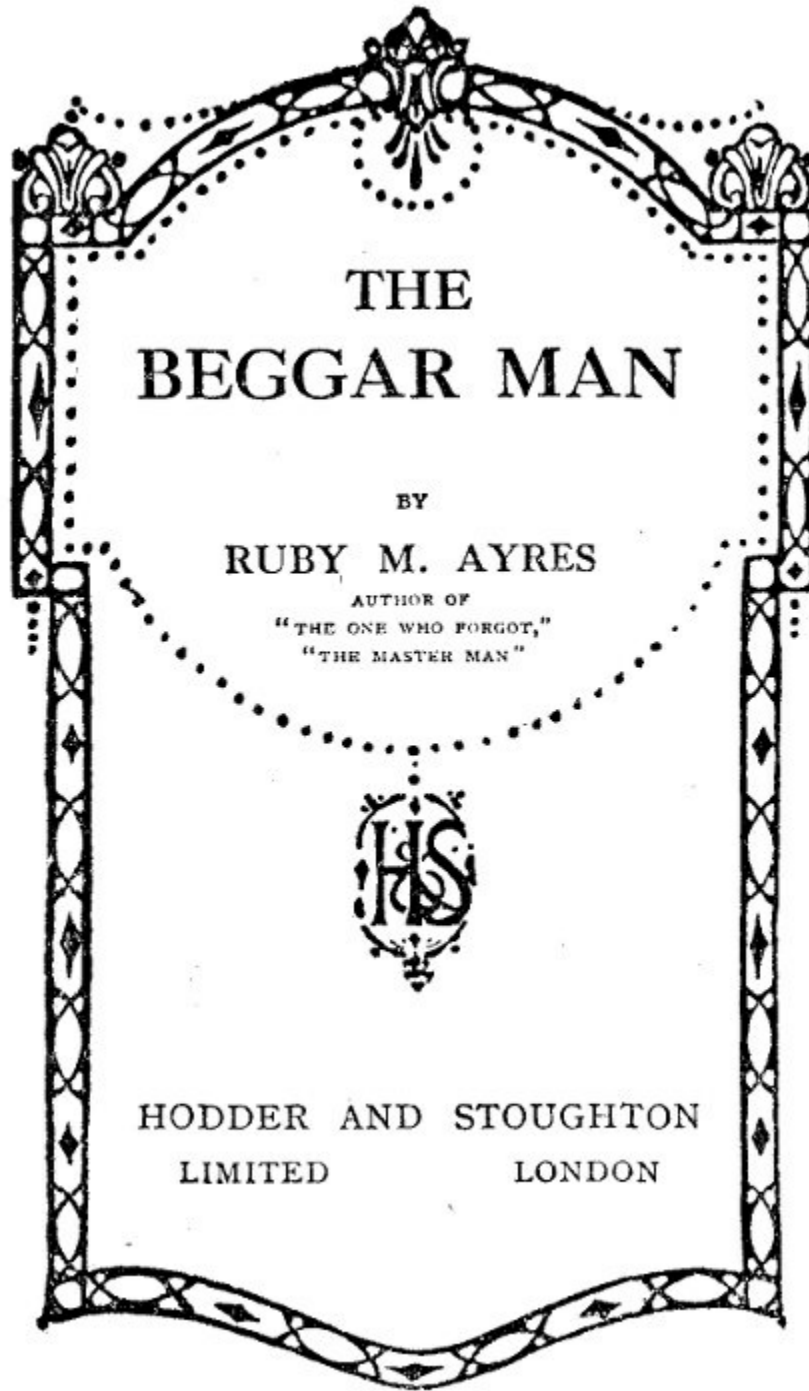
RICHARD CHATTERTON, V.C.

THE REMEMBERED KISS

INVALIDED OUT

A BACHELOR HUSBAND

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON



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CHAPTER I

She was small and slight, with timid, brown eyes and soft, fair hair and a certain daintiness of person that singled her out for attention in spite of the shabbiness of her clothes.

The first morning she put in an appearance at the factory the other girls marked her down as being a little different from themselves; a little less rough and capable of looking after her own interests, a little more refined, and ready to shrink from jest and laughter.

They crowded round her to stare with interest, in which there was mingled a faint suspicion. A volley of questions greeted her from all sides.

"What's your name?" "Where do you come from?" "Who took you on?"

She shrank back a little from their good-natured inquisition. She answered their questions at random--nervously.

"My name's Faith Ledley.... I live in Poplar.... I just applied, and the manager said he'd give me a trial."

She could feel the something hostile in the air, and her brown eyes darkened with anxiety. She felt herself so small and alone in this crowd of muscular, cheery young women.

One of them, who seemed a sort of leader amongst the others, took a little step towards her.

"What are you--a machinist?"

"Yes----"

"Oh!" The elder girl's rather bold blue eyes seemed to take stock of the younger one; then she said, with a note of greater friendliness:

"Oh, well, come on. You can sit next to me if you like."

Faith took courage.

"What is your name?" she asked diffidently.

The elder girl laughed. "They call me Peg," she said, and with sudden impulse she held out her work-roughened hand. "Come on," she said again, with an unconscious note of imperiousness in her voice, and Faith obeyed.

That was Faith's initiation into the workings of Heeler's blouse factory. It was the beginning, also, of a lifelong friendship between herself and Peg Fraser.

During the day Peg asked many questions.

"Have you got a father and mother?"

"A mother--she's delicate."

"Oh! Any brothers and sisters?"

"Two little sisters."

"Do you keep them?"

Faith smiled. "Oh, no! I help--we take lodgers."

"Oh." For a moment Peg was silent, treadling away busily at her machine, and Faith stole a timid glance at her.

Peg was handsome in a bold sort of way. She had jet black hair and a high colour, blue eyes, a little hard in expression, and a fine figure.

She was a power to reckon with in the room in which she worked, as Faith was quick to discover. Even the forewoman, who was thin-lipped and shrewish, seemed a little afraid of her. Presently she asked another question:

"What was your father?"

Faith flushed sensitively. "He was a gentleman," she said proudly.

Peg's blue eyes opened wide and for a moment she stopped work. Then:

"My father was a night-watchman," she said dryly. She snapped off a thread with a vicious little gesture. "He was a drunken brute," she added vehemently. "We were all glad when he died. Were you glad when yours died?"

Faith's eyes clouded with tears. "No," she said; "it was like the end of everything."

Peg paused again to regard her with curiosity. She had never met a girl quite like this one before. "What did he die of?" she asked blankly after a moment.

It was Faith's turn now to stop work; she looked up with a sudden flush in her pale face.

"He was ruined," she said. "Someone took all his money, and it killed him."

"Oh," said Peg, thoughtfully. "Like a novelette. I suppose your mother was a lady," she added with a touch of sarcasm.

Faith answered simply enough: "She was in a shop at Clapham when father married her, and his people never forgave him."

"You mean because they were swells?"

"Yes, I suppose so; I've never seen any of them."

"It's like a novelette again," said Peg, and fell upon her machine with renewed energy.

It was some moments before she next spoke.

"It licks me why you've come here. You'll loathe it like poison before you've been here a week. The noise of the machines gets on your nerves and makes you want to scream. Miss Dell gets on your nerves, too." She nodded in the direction of the thin-lipped forewoman. "You'll hate her, and you'll hate the sight of things like these and all the rich, hateful people who buy them."

She caught up a dainty silk blouse from the table beside her and shook it contemptuously.

"Do you know Scammel?"

"Scammel?" Faith echoed the name blankly. "No; who is he?"

"He owns this place," Peg explained. "There's no Heeler in it really--it's just a name. It's Scammel we're all swotting to make money for," she added. "And I hate him----"

"You seem to hate a lot of things and people," Faith said timidly.

"So would you if you knew as much as I do," was the sharp retort.

Faith pushed the soft hair back from her forehead; she was beginning to feel unutterably fagged. "I don't think I could hate anyone very much," she said, "except the man who ruined father," she added slowly.

Peg said "Humph!" and for some moments they worked silently. Then Faith asked again: "What is he like?"

"Who? Scammel? Oh, big and ugly."

"Does he ever come here?"

"Bless your heart, no! He's a millionaire with a house in Park-lane or somewhere, and a yacht, and a place on the river, and a Rolls-Royce, and no end more...." She was drawing entirely on her imagination. "I saw him once when he brought two ladies round the works--dressed-up creatures they were, too! One of them spoke to me. I nearly told her to mind her own business and not try the district visitor stunt on me."

Faith caught her breath. "You wouldn't dare!" she said aghast.

Peg laughed. "Wouldn't I! I'm not afraid of anybody or anything."

Faith could well believe her, and from that moment the friendship between the two girls was finally cemented. In a hundred small ways Peg proved herself nobly. She helped Faith through the long, weary days, taking extra work upon her own capable shoulders to save the younger girl; shielding her many times from the petty disagreeablenesses of the room and the sharp tongue of Miss Dell.

"You're not fit for a life like this," Peg said once angrily. "Why doesn't your mother send you somewhere better?"

Faith gave a little wavering smile. "It's not so easy now to get work," she said.

Her little face had grown pale and peaked during the last week, and there were shadows beneath her soft brown eyes.

"I should go sick if I were you," Peg advised one morning.

"It's no worse for me than it is for the rest of you," Faith answered. But in her heart she knew that she could not stand it much longer. Sometimes she felt as if she could not breathe in the hot, noisy room.

Then one night, going home, she fainted.

One moment she had been quite well, walking with hurried, eager steps through the sun-baked streets, and the next the pavement seemed to rise up to her face, and she knew no more....

"If only someone of you would get some water instead of standing staring ... here--let me come!"

She struggled back to consciousness to the sound of a man's impatient voice, and then she felt herself gently raised by a strong arm and something was held to her lips.

She turned her head protestingly. "Don't ... don't ... I'm all right...." And then quite suddenly she burst into tears--tears of sheer weakness that would not be checked.

Ashamed, she covered her face with her trembling hands; and then she felt herself lifted and carried and set down gently against softly padded cushions.

She looked up with scared eyes. She was lying back in the luxurious seat of a motor-car and a man with a big, burly figure was standing at its door, his face turned from her, talking to a policeman.

"All right, constable, I'll see her home," she heard him say. She saw the policeman salute and stand back, and the next moment the car was moving slowly away from the kerb.

Faith sat up with a frightened gasp, the colour coming back to her white cheeks.

"Where are you taking me? Oh, I'd much rather walk."

The big man was sitting opposite to her now, and his eyes were kind as they noted her distress.

"It's all right," he said cheerily. "You're not fit to walk. Just tell me where you live and I'll drive you straight home. Feel better?"

"Yes." She began a trembling apology. "It was the sun, I suppose; it's been so hot all day."

"Do you work in the city?"

"Yes--at Heeler's."

"Oh, that place!" There was a note of disparagement in the man's voice. "Now tell me where you live?" he said again.

She told him reluctantly. Poplar and its poor surroundings seemed so terribly far removed from this man and the magnificence of the car in which they were driving.

He repeated her directions to the chauffeur and the car quickened its speed.

Faith was feeling almost herself again. The air beat on her pale cheeks and stirred the soft hair on her forehead. She stole a shy glance at the man opposite to her.

Not very young--quite forty, she decided--not very good-looking. Big and burly, a little clumsy in build, the fastidious might have said, but strong and manly, with a square jaw that spoke of strength and determination, and humorous grey eyes set rather deeply in his brown face. His soft hat was worn with a rather Colonial tilt.

He was perfectly aware of her scrutiny, and after a moment he asked whimsically:

"Well, what do you make of me?"

Faith flushed to the roots of her hair.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she stammered. "I know it was rude--I didn't mean anything."

The man laughed carelessly. "No need to apologise," he said. "I was only wondering what sort of a chap I appeared to you."

She did not answer, and he went on: "You're thinking that I'm to be envied with this car and all the other things you can

imagine I've got stored up at home--eh?"

Faith clasped her hands.

"I think you must be the happiest man in the world," she said fervently.

The man smiled grimly. "Yes, that's what everyone thinks," he said. "And, of course, you would not believe me if I were to tell you that there is no man in the world so poor as I am."

She stared at him with wide eyes of incredulity.

"Why, no!" she breathed.

His eyes softened a little. "Have you got a mother?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes."

"And do you love her?"

"Oh, yes!" said Faith.

"Anyone else--any other people?" he asked.

"Two little sisters," said Faith, and her voice was eager. She loved to speak of her sisters. "They're just the dearest little mites," she urged. "They're twins, just turned six."

The man nodded. "In fact, when you're at home, you're happy, eh?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Faith again, earnestly. "If only we'd got a little more money, we'd all be quite, quite happy," she added wistfully.

The man said: "Then it's *you* who are to be envied, not me!"

She coloured a little. "I don't understand," she said in a whisper.

He laughed. "Do you know the story of King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Well, anybody will tell you--I'm no good at explaining things. Ask your mother when you get home, and then remember that I said that you were Queen Cophetua, and I the Beggar Man."

She echoed his last word incredulously. "Beggar Man! How can you be, with all--this?"

"All this--" he answered dryly--"is all I have, and there is no man so poor as he who has only money. Now do you understand?"

The car had turned a corner and was slowing down. "I think this must be your home," he said, and Faith gave a sigh. It had been such a heavenly drive; why did all beautiful things end so soon?

He opened the door of the car and gave her his hand. "Good-bye, Queen Cophetua," he said. His grey eyes rested on her serious little face. "Or perhaps we won't say good-bye, as I hope we shall meet again."

The colour surged to her cheeks; a little ripple of laughter flickered into her brown eyes.

"Oh, good-bye, Beggar Man," she answered, and then caught her breath at her own daring. But the man only laughed, and presently the big car was gliding slowly away down the road.

Faith watched it go before she turned indoors. She felt very much as Cinderella must have done when she got back to the kitchen from the Prince's ball.

Her mother, who had seen the car drive away, met her in the narrow hall; she was a sweet-looking woman with tired eyes and a perpetual cough.

"Well, little girl?" she said, and there was a world of anxiety in her voice.

Faith kissed her, and explained: "I fainted--it was so hot--and he brought me home in his car." Her eyes fell for some reason which she could not understand. "He was very kind," she added.

"And you don't know who he is?" her mother asked anxiously.

Faith shook her head. "He didn't tell me, but ... mother--who was King Cophetua?"

They were in the little sitting-room now, where tea was laid ready, and the twins sitting up to table.

Mrs. Ledley was busying herself with the teapot. She answered absently that King Cophetua was only a man in a story, a king who married a beggar maid.

"But it was only a story, Faith," she added earnestly. "One of those stories which couldn't end happily even if it came true."

Perhaps those tired eyes of hers had seen more than one would have imagined; perhaps she guessed the trend of her daughter's thoughts.

Faith went on with her tea, but above the noise and chatter of the twins she seemed to hear the soft purr of the wonderful car that had brought her home, and the voice of its owner who had called himself "the Beggar Man."

He was not very young, he was not very good-looking, but his voice and his eyes had been kind, and he had given Faith her first glimpse of the romance for which her youth had been unconsciously hungering.



CHAPTER II

When she met Peg in the morning Faith told her what had happened.

Peg listened sceptically; she seemed more impressed with Faith's fainting than with its sequence. "I said you ought to give up and have a holiday," she said bluntly.

Faith was vaguely disappointed. She had been so sure that Peg would see the romance of her adventure. She worked badly that day; her fingers seemed all thumbs.

Twice the forewoman spoke to her sharply, and once Peg said with a faint smile: "You're thinking about that car, aren't you, Faith?"

The girl flushed sensitively, with quick denial.

"Of course not." But she knew that she was.

She looked at herself anxiously in a tiny glass before she started home. For the first time she realized how pale and thin she was, and how poor her clothes. Her heart swelled with a sense of the injustice of life as she trudged along the hot streets.

To-day there was no Beggar Man, no wonderful car gliding up to the kerb to pick her up and carry her the weary way home; such a thing could not happen a second time.

"But it was only a story, Faith...." That was what her mother had said, so perhaps everything wonderful in life was just a story, too--never coming true!

She quickened her steps with a feeling of shame. The day of miracles had passed; fairy princes did not go about the East End of London disguised as big, burly men with kind eyes.

Faith turned a corner sharply and came face to face with "the Beggar Man." ...

He pulled up short with a conventional apology, then all at once he smiled.

"I was thinking of you a moment ago. It was just here that we met yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Faith had flushed like a rose. "I was just thinking of you, too," she said, with courage born of her delight.

He looked at her. "Have you had your tea?" he asked in his abrupt manner.

"No, I'm just going home."

"Then we'll have some tea first; there's a shop just along the road."

Faith followed obediently. He looked younger to-day, she thought, and better-looking! She wished with all her heart that Peg or some of the other girls could see her. They faced one another across a marble-topped table, and the man ordered tea and cakes.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. Faith shook her head; she was too pleased to be hungry.

She kept telling herself that, of course, it must be a dream. Under cover of the table she gave herself a hard pinch to make sure that she was really awake....

"You're not eating anything," the man said, and she awoke with a start to realities.

"How old are you?" he asked, and she told him with fluttering haste, "I'm nineteen."

"Nineteen!" He raised his brows. "I should have said sixteen," he smiled. "How old do you think I am?"

She considered for a moment. "Forty?" she hazarded.

He laughed. "Not quite so bad; I'm six-and-thirty."

"Oh!" She looked at him gravely. "It's not very old," she said kindly.

"Nearly twenty years older than you," he reminded her.

"Yes."

He went on: "I've lived abroad most of my life, and that ages a man, you know. I've slept under the sky for months at a time and never spoken to a living soul for weeks. I've starved and begged." He laughed. "Once I even robbed a man. But I paid him back when I got the money. Are you shocked?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" She thought him the most wonderful person she had ever met.

"Tell me something about yourself," said the Beggar Man abruptly.

She told him the little she knew--how that her father had been "a gentleman"; how his people had cast him off for marrying her mother; how that he had died three years ago, leaving them without a penny.

"And I work at Heeler's," she added.

"Yes, you told me that yesterday. And they treat you--well?"

"Peg says it might be worse. Peg is my best friend and I love her," said Faith fervently.

"Lucky Peg!" said the Beggar Man.

Faith shook her head. "She doesn't think she's lucky," she answered seriously. "She's always saying how unfair things are. She hates rich people and she hates Mr. Scammel, too! She says that she would like to murder him."

"And who is Scammel?" asked the Beggar Man.

"Heeler's belongs to him," she told him. "He's ever so rich, and he's got a house in Park-lane and a place on the river, and a yacht and a car----"

"Anything else?" the man asked amusedly.

"Oh, yes, I expect so. Peg says he makes his money out of us, that he squeezes us dry to make himself rich. I think he must be something like the man who ruined my father," she added.

"Have some more cake?" said the Beggar Man.

"No, thank you."

Faith finished her tea and looked round the room. Hitherto she had only had eyes for her companion. The shop was not very full.

A girl at the next table was staring at her, and the girl in the cash desk by the door was staring, too. Faith flushed. Of course, they were both wondering what she was doing with this man, and once again the consciousness of her own shabbiness overwhelmed her.

"I think it's time I went home," she said, and broke off sharply as the door swung open and Peg Fraser walked into the shop.

Faith hardly knew if she was glad or sorry to be so discovered. She gripped her hands hard.

Peg came slowly down between the tables, her eyes looking to right and left in search of a vacant seat; suddenly they fell upon Faith.

She made a quick little movement towards her; then stopped, staring.

Faith smiled nervously. She did not know why, but her heart seemed to stop beating, when Peg turned on her heel without a word or sign of recognition, and sat down at a table at the far end of the room.

The man had not noticed anything; he turned to ask for his bill. Presently he looked up at Faith.

"We will go, if you really wish it," he said.

"Please." She followed him from the shop, not daring to raise her eyes to where Peg sat. Some strange emotion kept her from doing so.

Out in the street the sky had grown overcast. Heavy drops were spattering the pavement. "We'd better have a taxicab," the man said.

Faith stood on the kerb while he went in pursuit of a taxicab. It seemed wonderful to her that anybody should have so much money that a taxicab was an ordinary everyday luxury. It was raining steadily by the time they drove away. The man pulled up the window.

"My luck's in," he said abruptly. "I wanted to speak to you and it would not have been possible if we had walked."

His grey eyes searched her wistful face doubtfully, then he went on again:

"I've taken a fancy to you. There's something about you I like. I should be very pleased if with all my money I could do something to make your life happier. I've never seen your mother or the twins, but I should like to see them."

The colour rose slowly to Faith's face. She was sure now that he was joking.

"Of course, you don't mean it!" she said quiveringly.

"Don't mean it? Good heavens!" The man laughed. "I do mean it, every word! When we were having tea just now I did a lot of thinking. I am a man who makes up his mind quickly and sticks to it. Now, look here, I'm going to make you an offer--without sentiment or any nonsense of that sort. I want a wife, and I want a girl who hasn't been spoiled by the tomfoolery of the world. I want a girl I can mould to my own ideas. I'll treat her well and be a good husband to a woman who could fancy me." He paused. "Well, what do you say?"

Faith was staring at him with wide eyes and parted lips. His astounding proposition had robbed her of speech. It was some seconds before she could gasp out, "What do you mean? What do you mean?"

"I mean," said the Beggar Man earnestly, "that I'd like to marry you, if you think you'd care about it."

It was many moments before Faith could find her voice; many moments before she could conquer the conviction that all this was a dream. Then she broke out, unconsciously using the words of Peg Fraser's favourite ejaculation: "It's like a novelette."

She really thought it was; she was breathless with astonishment, dazed with the unexpectedness of it all. The Beggar Man laughed.

"Is it? They always say that truth is stranger than fiction, don't they?" He let down the window of the cab and thrust his head out, calling to the driver:

"Go down the West End--the park--anywhere! I'll let you know when to stop." He sat down again beside Faith. "Well, do you think you'd like to be my wife?" he asked.

Faith shrank away from him, her face flushing.

"I don't know anything about you. You don't know anything about me," she stammered. He smiled.

"That can soon be remedied. My name is Nicholas Forrester, my *real* name, that is! I've been known by lots of others in my lifetime, but that's neither here nor there. I've got more money than I know what to do with. I'm like the poor devil in 'Brewster's Millions'--everything I touch turns to gold. Have you read 'Brewster's Millions'?"

"No."

"I'll tell you the story some day. There isn't time now. But if you marry me you can buy any mortal thing you like, except the moon or Buckingham Palace. Doesn't that attract you?" he asked dryly.

The colour surged back into Faith's pale face. She leaned a little towards him.

"*Anything!*" she asked.

The man looked faintly disappointed.

"I thought you were going to be different from other women," he said curtly. "Well, what is it you want, diamonds?"

"Diamonds!" She echoed the word blankly. "Oh, no, I was wondering if I could take mother away from Poplar, and send the twins to a nice school. They have to go to the Board School now," she explained. "If I can do that for them, I shan't want anything for myself." She raised apologetic eyes. "It's asking an awful lot, I know," she added.

The Beggar Man laid his hand for a moment on hers. Such a strong, kind hand it was, that instinctively the fear of him that had been in Faith's heart died away.

"It's not asking anything," he said. "We'll send the twins to the finest school in England if you like, and your mother can have a house in the country and anything else she wants--if you'll marry me!"

Faith's cheeks were crimson; her eyes on fire. It never occurred to her for a moment to refuse.

She looked up at him with brown eyes of gratitude unutterable. "I should just *love* to marry you," she said fervently.

The Beggar Man said "Humph!" For a moment there was a silence, during which he looked at her doubtfully; then:

"What about your mother?" he asked abruptly. "What do you think she will say?"

Faith's face fell a little; in her eagerness and excitement she had forgotten what her mother would say.

"I--I'm afraid she won't quite like it," she said slowly.

She was sure that her mother would not like it. Mrs. Ledley had always been so careful about Faith's choice of friends that the girl knew what an astonishing proposal she would consider this offer of marriage to be.

Mrs. Ledley could be very firm when she chose, and Faith knew well what opposition she would have to encounter.

A sudden idea flashed across her mind.

"But we need not tell her, need we?"

A faint smile crossed his face.

"You mean till we are married?"

"Yes."

There was another queer little silence, then the Beggar Man asked, with sudden change of voice: "Do you often keep things from your mother--like this?"

She shook her head.

"I never have, until now. There's never been anything to keep. Nobody has ever asked me to marry him before, but I thought--she would be so glad afterwards, when I told her how rich you were, and what we could do for her and for the twins."

"I see."

The Beggar Man looked away from her out of the window. The rain was still falling steadily, but he did not notice it. He was trying to see ahead into the future and wondering ... wondering...

Presently he turned again to the girl beside him.

"Of course," he said abruptly, "I should be a fool to ask you if you've got any ... any personal regard for me! How could you have when we've only met twice."

He waited hopefully it seemed, but Faith did not know how to answer him, and he went on rather ruefully:

"But, all the same, you're willing to marry me without telling your mother till afterwards?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that rather foolish?"

She flushed sensitively.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, that for all you know, I might be the biggest blackguard unhung. I might be wanted by the police--I might be all of a hundred and one unsavoury things. Do you realize that?"

Faith laughed now. She was not in the least afraid that he could be any of these things.

"I think you're the kindest man I've ever met," she said.

"Do you?" He laughed dryly. "But, then, you haven't met many men, I take it."

"No."

Another little silence.

"Have you got a mother?" Faith asked shyly.

He turned his head.

"I haven't a relative in the whole world as far as I know. I was born in Australia, and my mother died there, and my father broke his neck when I was fifteen."

"Broke his neck?" echoed Faith, horrified.

"Yes. We had a farm in Australia, twenty-eight miles from a town, and, when he was riding back home one night, the pony caught its foot and threw him." He paused. "I found him lying along the track next morning," he added grimly.

Faith drew a long breath.

"And you were only fifteen! How awful!"

"Yes, it was pretty bad. I know I sat there beside him in the scorching sun and cried for half the day, till someone came along and took me home."

"And--then?" she asked.

"Oh, I've roughed it in thousands of ways since then, and I'm tired of roughing it. That's why I want to get married." His eyes softened as they looked at her. "I think you and I will get on well together," he said.

"Yes," Faith assented. "I think so, too."

"And I'm to fix it up without your mother knowing, is that it?"

"Yes--if you--if you don't mind."

He laughed. "Bless your heart, it's not for me to mind! I'll get a special licence, and we can be married to-morrow."

She caught her breath.

"To-morrow! Oh, it's too soon!"

"Too soon! What is there to wait for?"

"I shall have to tell them at Heeler's, and there's Peg...."

"That friend of yours? Well--tell her afterwards--when you tell your mother."

Faith wavered. She would like to have told Peg, but she answered after a moment: "Oh, very well, but--but not to-morrow!"

"Very well--on Saturday, then--that gives you three days to fix things."

"Thank you."

His eyes wandered over her small person.

"Have you got any money?" he demanded.

"I get paid on Saturday--two pounds."

"Two pounds! Good heavens!"--he thrust a hand into his breast pocket, and brought out a bundle of notes. "I'll give you twenty--buy some clothes and make yourself look pretty."

Faith turned from red to white. She drew back when he would have put the money into her hands.

"I can't. Oh, I couldn't," she faltered. "Oh, I should be afraid----"

"Afraid!" He regarded her in amazement, and then, suddenly aware of the tears in her eyes, he added: "Very well--I'll give you ten--is that better? And will that buy a frock?"

She laughed tremulously. "Why, it will buy us all one--me and the twins--and lots of other things besides!"

She gathered up the money with shaking fingers. She was sure that she was dreaming. Even the touch of the crisp banknotes seemed unreal! What would her mother say? What would Peg say? Her head was in a whirl.

"I think I'll drive you back home now," the Beggar Man said, suddenly. "Your mother will be wondering where you are." He spoke to the driver, and the taxi turned about.

The Beggar Man was sitting opposite to Faith now. He kept looking at her in a queer, nervous sort of way. Suddenly he

said in his abrupt manner:

"Do you mind if--if I kiss you?"

She raised her brown eyes.

"If you kiss--me!" She echoed the words with fluttering incredulity. "Oh, no, of course not--if you really want to."

"Thank you." He leaned across and kissed her cheek awkwardly.

There was a little silence, then he said, angrily: "Of course, some people would call me an absolute blackguard!"

She looked at him in amazement.

"Why, what do you mean?"

He explained disjointedly.

"You're such a child--and I'm nearly twenty years older than you are. You don't realize what you're doing--marrying me. I may make your life miserable." She smiled serenely.

"You couldn't! How could you? I'm going to be ever so happy." She drew a long breath of rapture. "It's just like a novelette," she said again fervently. The Beggar Man frowned. He let the window down with a run; the rain had almost stopped.

"I think we're quite near your home," he said.

"Perhaps you would rather walk the rest of the way? Or shall I come in and see your mother?"

Faith started up. "Oh, no--I'll walk; I'd much rather."

The taxi stopped and the man got out.

"Well--good-bye. Till to-morrow," he said.

She looked up eagerly.

"Oh, shall I see you again to-morrow?"

"I'll meet you outside Heeler's in the evening."

She looked like a delighted child.

"That will be three days running that I've seen you," she said.

He smiled rather grimly.

"You'll have to see me all day and every day after Saturday," he answered.



CHAPTER III

"Idling again! That's the third time I've had to speak to you this morning."

Miss Dell's harsh voice woke Faith from the day-dream, into which she had fallen over her machine, and set her hurriedly working again.

That the events of yesterday were unreal she was still convinced. A hundred times since she parted from Nicholas Forrester she had put her hand into the little bag containing the money he had given her, which she wore hidden under her frock. That was real enough, at all events. She was too awed by its possession to think of spending it. It seemed to her ignorance that all the wealth of the world was hers.

"If I have to speak to you again I shall report you to the manager," Miss Dell went on. "We've no time for idlers here, you understand."

Faith said "Yes" meekly enough, but she did not feel meek. Only two more days and she would be free of this place for ever. She would never have to trudge to and fro in the heat of the day any more. She could ride in a taxi or the Beggar Man's car to the end of her life.

She cast a swift glance to the table at which Peg generally worked. It was empty to-day, and her machine covered up.

Peg was ill--so the other girls had told her. Peg was not coming back that week.

Faith felt a little chill of apprehension. She missed Peg sorely, and yet she was glad of her absence. She could not easily forget the strange way in which her friend had behaved last night in the teashop--how she had turned and walked away.

After all, what did it matter? And yet ... she wished she could have taken Peg into her confidence. It was terrible to have nobody in whom she could confide, terrible to have to keep all these wonderful secrets locked up in her own heart.

Last night she had almost told her mother. Mrs. Ledley had looked at her again and again in a puzzled sort of manner, and once she had asked, hesitatingly:

"Is anything the matter, Faith, dear?"

Faith had laughed.

"No; what could be the matter?" and Mrs. Ledley said, slowly: "I only wondered----"

This day seemed interminable. Faith did her work slowly and badly. She knew that Miss Dell had real cause for her frequent complaints. She was thankful when at last it was time to go.

She snatched up her hat and was first out of the factory; she reached the end of the road hot and breathless with her haste.

The Beggar Man was not there.

Faith looked eagerly up and down the road, but there was no sign of him, and a thrill of apprehension touched her heart.

Had it after all been a dream, and was she never to see him again? She walked on slowly.

Perhaps she was too soon--perhaps something had happened to detain him. She looked up and down the street for a clock, but there was not one to be seen. She retraced her steps slowly; he would come! Of course he would come! In a moment she would see him turn the corner--in a moment she would hear his voice....

She tried to think of something else, so that the time would pass more quickly, but she could not concentrate her thoughts.

Supposing he had not been serious! Supposing all her wonderful dreams were never to come to anything after all! Supposing she had still to go on, week in and week out, in Heeler's noisy, stifling factory. A feeling of desperation seized her--she could not bear it--she would die if she never saw him again. She remembered in a panic that she did not know where to find him, that he had never told her where he lived, or given her any address.

She lifted a trembling hand to the notes hidden beneath her frock; they were real enough--and then came another and

more cruel thought. Supposing he had given them to her by way of farewell--her heart almost stopped beating.

Such things did happen she knew in novelettes, if not out of them! Peg had told her one lurid story, in which...

"Good afternoon," said the Beggar Man beside her.

Tears of relief started to her eyes. She was so glad to see him she could hardly speak; she stammered out:

"I thought you were not coming any more--I thought you had gone away."

He looked faintly surprised.

"Am I late? I'm sorry. I would have been earlier if I had known you would be here."

Faith smiled, and brushed the tears from her eyes.

"It doesn't matter a bit now you've come," she said. She was quite happy again.

"But I've got something to tell you," said the Beggar Man reluctantly. He looked up and down the street.

"Not a taxi to be seen, of course! Well, we must walk a little way."

But he walked so quickly that Faith had almost to run to keep up with him.

A great many people in the street seemed to know him, she noticed, and a policeman at the corner saluted smartly as they passed.

She felt tremendously proud of the Beggar Man. She wished everyone could know that on Saturday he was going to marry her.

"We'll go in here," Nicholas said suddenly, and led the way into the same teashop where they had sat last night.

He chose the same table and ordered tea. Faith looked round her with excited eyes. There was the same girl in the desk, staring at them curiously, and over there was the table where Peg had sat--empty now! And Faith turned her eyes away with a little thrill of foreboding.

The Beggar Man was speaking.

"It's just this--I've got to go away----"

Faith's eyes dilated. In an instant everything else was forgotten.

"Go away!" she echoed blankly.

"Yes--only on business--to America. I shall be gone seventeen days, and I go to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" Faith felt as if she was drowning. She did not know that she had turned pale to the lips.

He went on speaking quickly.

"I can't take you--I wish I could. You'd want lots of clothes for one thing, and it would take too long to get them, and to explain things to your mother and the rest of the world. But"--he leaned a little nearer to her over the table--"I've got a special licence in my pocket," he said. "Will you marry me before I go?"

Faith put out both hands blindly and grasped the edge of the table before her. For a moment she felt as if she were blind and deaf; then she drew a long breath.

"Marry you--before you go!" she gasped. "To-day?"

The Beggar Man smiled. "Well, there's hardly time to-day, is there? I thought to-morrow morning--early--about nine, if that is not too early for you."

"I have to be at the factory at half-past seven." She uttered the excuse tremblingly, knowing full well that it was no excuse at all.

He made an impatient movement.

"There is no need to consider the factory. You were to have left, anyway. I'll make it right with them."

Faith had been conscious of a feeble sense of resistance, but now, as she met his eyes, all will power seemed to desert

her.

"Very well," she said, in a whisper.

The Beggar Man gripped her hand. "Thank you. I hope you will never regret it," he said.

The tears swam into Faith's eyes.

"And--mother?" she faltered.

"You can tell her to-morrow as soon as we're married, if you like," he answered. "Or leave it till I come back, and I'll tell her myself. I shall only be gone a little while, after all. Seventeen days will quickly pass."

"Will they?" She smiled wistfully. To her ignorance, America sounded as if it must be in another world.

"Don't you want any more tea? Very well, then, we'll get along."

They went out into the street together.

"I haven't bought any new clothes," she said timidly. He glanced down at her.

"Never mind--get them while I'm away. What does it matter what clothes you are married in? There will only be me to see you."

He meant the words kindly, but they gave her a little thrill of apprehension. Only him! That was what it would be for the rest of her life--only this man, who, after all, was almost a stranger to her.

She wanted to put her thoughts into words, but glancing up at his grave face she was suddenly afraid, and he went on talking, quite unconscious of her agitation.

"Do you know Victoria Station? But of course you do! Well, if you'll meet me there to-morrow... No, I'll come and meet you and we'll drive down together. I'll be at the end of your road at half-past eight. Will that do?"

"Yes." Her heart was beating so fast she thought it would choke her.

Yesterday she had been all happiness and excitement at the thought of her marriage. This morning it had still seemed some wonderful dream, but now ... the suddenness of it all made her feel as if someone had asked her to jump off the edge of the world.

"If you don't mind," the Beggar Man said suddenly, "I must leave you now. I've a lot to do this evening. You must let me send you home in a taxi."

"Oh, no, no."

He looked surprised. "Why not? You don't want to walk all that way."

"I'd rather go on a bus if you don't mind."

She felt that she must cling to her old life with might and main for this last evening. After to-morrow--well, she could not help what happened after to-morrow.

The Beggar Man's face softened. She looked so young and appealing, and perhaps he understood better than she imagined what she was feeling.

"Very well," he said gently. "I'll say good-night, then. Half-past eight at the end of your road, and ... thank you!"

Faith looked up quickly.

"Oh, it's for me to say thank you," she said. "You've been so good to me. Nobody could have been so kind."

The Beggar Man flushed.

"I hope you'll always be able to say that," he said awkwardly as he raised his hat and turned away.

Faith went home on top of an omnibus. For the first time that evening she felt that she could breathe freely. The sense of unreality was leaving her, and she began to see things more in their true perspective.

She was taking a rash step! Young and ignorant of the world as she was, she knew this, and realized that all she knew of the man whom she was to marry was the little he had chosen to tell her. He might be anything--anyone!

That he had money she was sure, and Peg had often said that with money one could do anything! Money was the golden key to the world; and Faith knew that it would be a golden key, not only for herself, but for her mother and the twins.

They could have everything they wanted! Wonderful visions began to unfurl before her eyes.

It was as if she wilfully held rose-tinted glasses before her eyes excluding the vague shadows that haunted her. She would not look at the dark side of what might be. She would keep her face turned towards the sun.

But when she got home her spirits fell once more. She began to remember that this was the last night of her old life. That after to-morrow she would be quite, quite different. She would be the Beggar Man's wife! She would be Mrs. Nicholas Forrester!

She could hardly eat any supper for the choking lump that would rise in her throat. She knew that from time to time her mother glanced at her with anxious eyes.

"Is anything the matter, Faith?" she asked at last, just as she had asked last night, and Faith answered desperately that her head ached and that she would like to go to bed.

When she was in bed the tears came. This was the first time she had ever had a secret from her mother, and even the thought of the wonderfully happy surprise it would be could not comfort her. She felt like a lost child as she hid her face in the pillow and sobbed.



CHAPTER IV

Faith was married at nine o'clock the following morning. It was raining hard, and as she stood beside the Beggar Man in the dreary registry office she watched the raindrops chasing one another down the window.

The old dream feeling was upon her again, and she could not believe that all this was really happening. The monotonous voice of the man who was marrying them sounded a long way off. The Beggar Man's hand in hers was the only real thing in life, and she clung to it with the desperate feeling that without it she would collapse and fall off the edge of the world.

She wore the same shabby costume in which she had gone each day to the factory, and she had a queer sort of feeling that this was not a bit as she had always imagined a wedding to be. There was no satin frock, no coloured confetti, no wonderful music.

What would Peg think? In her heart Faith was a little afraid of what her friend would think. The clasp of the Beggar Man's hand suddenly relaxed about her own, and she looked up with scared eyes. He was smiling.

"It's all over," he said. "We're married. You've just got to sign your name."

Faith said "Oh!" She blinked her eyes as if she had been asleep.

She had always thought that directly you were married, you felt quite different, but no wonderful metamorphosis had come about so far. She felt just herself, save for a dull sort of nervous headache.

She signed her name on the line pointed out to her and stood aimlessly holding the pen. The man who had married them was filling in a form and the Beggar Man was watching him.

Faith glanced down at her left hand. A brand new gold ring shone on her third finger. She spread her hand out and stared at it.

The registrar folded up his papers and shook hands with the Beggar Man. Then he shook hands with Faith and wished her luck.

Faith said "Thank you." She thought he was very kind. She liked the way he smiled.

Then the Beggar Man spoke to her.

"Well--are you ready?"

Faith started. She had been dreaming again.

"Quite ready," she said, and followed him outside to where a taxi was waiting. Presently they were driving away together.

The Beggar Man sat beside her. After a moment he began to speak rapidly.

"We're going to have some lunch at my flat. I've got a flat in the West End. I shall give it up now we're married, of course, but I thought it would do for the present--just till I come back and we can look round."

"Isn't it rather early for lunch?" Faith asked, helplessly.

"Is it? Well, we can have a glass of wine and some sandwiches. I've got such a little time. My train goes at twelve...." He looked down at her with sudden fire in his eyes. "I wish I had not got to go!" he said, vehemently.

"Do you?" said Faith nervously. She shrank a little from him. "You said you would soon be back," she added.

"I know--but on one's wedding day...." He broke off abruptly as the cab stopped. "Here we are."

He held his hand to her, but she avoided it. Fear was upon her once again.

The flat was on the first floor, and the Beggar Man opened the door with his latch-key.

"I bought some flowers and things," he said helplessly. "But it doesn't look very grand. What is it?"

Faith had given a little cry.

"Oh, but it's lovely! lovely!" She had forgotten her shyness. She was running round the room like a delighted child looking at the pictures and ornaments with which it was filled.

He made her drink a glass of wine and eat some cake, but all the time her eyes were wandering round the room, lost in admiration.

He watched her with a chagrined smile. Surely this was the oddest of wedding days, he thought. A shabby little bride, who had no eyes for her groom, but who sat and stared with rapt attention at such things as chairs and pictures and ornaments.

And the time was flying--flying. He looked impatiently at the clock, and then at the girl who was now his wife. And suddenly it was he who felt shy and tongue-tied.

She met his eyes and flushed, without knowing why, and the Beggar Man rose to his feet and went round the table to where she sat.

"You're my wife now, you know," he said.

"Yes." She drew back a little, her eyes dilating, and he broke out again abruptly: "I wish I'd arranged to take you with me. I was a fool. It could have been managed. Will you come if even now I can take you?"

She gave a little cry of alarm.

"Oh, no, I couldn't. There's mother..."

He turned away with a little harsh laugh.

"I see. Your mother and the twins," he said dryly. "They all come before me, who am only your husband."

She looked at him with puzzled eyes, and, vaguely realizing that in some way he was hurt, she said apologetically:

"But I've known you such a little time."

He echoed her words ironically.

"Yes! You've known me such a little time." Then he laughed, more naturally, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you're my wife anyway. Nothing can alter that. And when I come back..." he paused.

"Yes," Faith echoed, "when you come back..."

"Then," he said again slowly, "I'll teach you to think more of me than you do either of your mother--or the twins!"

There was the faintest note of fun in his voice though his eyes were grave, and Faith smiled, relieved.

"I love mother best in the whole world," she said seriously.

The Beggar Man nodded.

"Some day you will love me best," he said. He took both her hands, drawing her to her feet. "So, it's good-bye for a little. It's all been such a rush; but I've done the best I can. My lawyers know all about our marriage, and if anything should happen to me you'll be all right. Shawyer will look after you if you want any help. Here's his address." He put an envelope into her hand. "There's some more money, too--enough to keep you going till I'm back."

Faith took the envelope, which felt extravagantly bulky.

"I haven't spent what you gave me yesterday," she reminded him.

"But you soon will," he answered. "Once you start shopping."

There was a little silence, and they looked at one another shyly. Then the Beggar Man said, with an effort:

"Well, it's time I was going. I sent my baggage on last night. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going home."

"I should like you to have stayed here, but ... perhaps it's best for you to go home." He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her gently towards him.

"Good-bye, my little wife."

Faith laid her hand on his chest, as if to hold him away; then suddenly she melted:

"Oh, I hope you'll soon, soon come back," she said, as a child might have done, and she raised her face for his kiss.

They said good-bye in the street with a handshake, just like ordinary friends, and Faith stood looking after the cab that carried him away.

He had gone out of her life as quickly and strangely as he had entered it.

She looked down at her hand, with its new ring, and a shy sort of pride thrilled her. She was his wife! She was a married woman! The tears that had welled to her eyes dried by magic as she walked on, her head held high with childish dignity. She longed for someone in whom to confide, and a sudden thought came to her. It was Saturday, and the girls left Heeler's at twelve. It was still quite early. She would go along and meet Peg.

With confidence born of her new position, she hailed a taxi, trembling at her own audacity as she did so, and told the man where to drive.

This was the beginning of her new and wonderful life. She hardly gave a thought to the Beggar Man. Her mind wandered off to the spending of the money he had given her, to the gifts she would buy for her mother and the twins. The stopping of the cab roused her with a start. She scrambled out, and to her horror discovered that he had taken her right to the door of Heeler's, and that it was twelve o'clock, and the girls were already pouring out from work.

She was crimson with confusion as she paid her fare. She wished the earth would open and swallow her up. Several of the girls came up to stare and speak to her.

"My word! Faith Ledley's going the pace! Someone left you a fortune, Faith? Where have you been? Old Dell was mad when you didn't turn up this morning."

Faith stammered her reply. "I'm not coming back any more. I've left. I want to see Peg. Where's Peg? Oh, there she is!"

She broke through the little group and ran after her friend, calling to her breathlessly.

Peg turned reluctantly. There was a grim sort of look on her handsome face.

"Well, where have you been?" she demanded.

Faith slipped a hand through her arm.

"I've got so much to tell you," she said. "It seems so long since we met. Are you better?"

"Well enough," was the uncompromising reply, and Peg jerked Faith's arm from her. "What have you been doing?" she asked again.

Faith smiled and blushed rosily.

"I've been getting married," she said with sudden boldness.

"Married? A kid like you!" Peg stared. "Well," she said then bluntly, "I only hope he's some decent chap and not like the rotten sort you were having tea with the other day when I saw you."

The colour died from Faith's cheeks, her heartbeats slowed down sickeningly.

"What--what do you mean?" she faltered.

"I mean what I say," said Peg firmly. "I thought better of you, that I did--having tea with him! Where did you pick him up I should like to know?"

Faith tried to answer, but no words would come.

"I suppose you thought I shouldn't recognize him," Peg went on wrathfully, "but I knew him right enough, the mean, selfish brute.... I----"

Faith caught her arm in shaking fingers.

"Peg, do you know who you're talking about?" she gasped. Peg laughed.

"Do I? I should rather say I do! Once seen never forgotten, my dear! I'm talking about the man you were having tea with the other day--Scammel, the brute we're all slaving for to make him rich."

For a moment Faith stared at her friend, then she laughed.

"Well, you're wrong, quite wrong," she said, with a little sigh of relief. "His name isn't Scammel at all--his name is Nicholas Forrester, and so...."

Peg shrugged her shoulders.

"So it may be, for all I know, but he's Scammel, and he owns Heeler's. Ask him, if you don't believe me. He's the man who brought that crowd of women round the factory I told you about--stuck-up crew! He's the man who cut down our overtime money. Ask any of the girls. Ask old Dell, if you don't believe me. He may call himself Forrester, or Jones, or any other old name, for all I care, but he's Scammel right enough, and he's as mean as he is rich," she added violently.

"I don't believe it," said Faith. She was surprised at her own boldness. As a rule, she never dared to contradict Peg, but her heart sprang to the defence of this man whom she had so recently married. He was good and generous. She had had ample proof of it.

Peg began to walk on quickly. There was a sullen look in her handsome eyes. Faith had almost to run to keep pace with her.

"Don't walk so fast," she broke out at last breathlessly. "What's the hurry when I haven't seen you for so long?"

"I've been ill," was the uncompromising reply.

"I know, and I'm ever so sorry. I came up here particularly to see you, Peg--it's unkind to talk to me like this."

Peg slackened her steps a little. She was very fond of Faith, but because she considered her weak and unfit to take care of herself she thought it as well to be angry with her sometimes.

"Oh, well," she said more graciously; "it's no use going for you, I suppose. You're only a kid, after all." She smiled faintly. "What sort of a man have you married? And does your mother know?"

Faith coloured a little. She answered nervously that her mother did not know yet, but that she was going to tell her when she got home.

Peg said "Humph!" and added that she did not think Mrs. Ledley would be particularly pleased.

"Are you ashamed of the man or what?" she demanded bluntly. "He can't be much of a chap not to have wanted to see your mother."

Again Faith rushed eagerly to his defence.

"He did want to. It was my fault that she was not told. It was my suggestion. I wanted to surprise her."

Peg laughed grimly.

"I should say she'll be surprised all right," she said.

"She'll be delighted," Faith maintained. "Why, we shall be ever so rich!"

"Rich!" Peg stared at her companion suspiciously, and the younger girl flushed.

"Mother won't have to work any more," she said proudly. "And we can send the twins to a nice school." She paused. "And he's got a motor-car," she added in an awed voice.

Peg burst into shrill laughter.

"Lord! It's a novelette come true," she said. "Hark at her! You'll be telling me next that he's a second Scammel or something. What did you say his name was?"

"Nicholas Forrester!" said Faith defiantly.

Peg stood stock still, as if she had lost all power of movement. She stared at Faith with horrified eyes.

"Scammel!" she ejaculated.

Faith flushed scarlet.

"He's not Scammel, I tell you!" she said passionately. "How dare you say that he is? I wouldn't believe it--not if everyone in the world told me that he was!"

"You're a little fool!" Peg answered brutally. "I don't know why I trouble about you at all, and that's a fact. You'll

probably find that he's married already. What on earth do you think he wants with a wife like you? Why, with all his money he could have anybody he likes. Where is he now, I should like to know?"

"He's gone away--he went to America this morning."

"America!" Peg laughed bitterly. "Yes, and that's where he'll stay. Mark my words, you'll never see him again! Bah! You make me sick!"

She turned abruptly and struck off across the road, leaving Faith alone staring after her tall figure. Then mechanically she began to walk on.

In spite of her brave defence of the Beggar Man, there was very little real confidence in her heart. Peg was generally right, she knew, and the knowledge filled her with terror.

A sudden wild longing for Forrester almost overcame her. How should she get through these seventeen dreadful days till he came back?

Supposing he never came back!

Such things did happen, she knew! In the novelettes, of which Peg devoured about six weekly, it was a common occurrence for the villain of the story to desert his bride at the altar.

Panic closed about her heart. She began to run. All she wanted in the world was to get to her mother and tell her of this dreadful thing that had happened. She reached home white and breathless. The front door was open, and the twins, just back from school, were playing in the narrow passage.

The sight of them and the sound of their voices calmed her. She told herself that she was foolish to have been so easily influenced by what Peg had said. She looked at her new wedding-ring and gained courage.

Of course, they could not be true, all these horrible accusations. How could the Beggar Man be Scammel, when he had told her himself that his name was Forrester! She almost laughed at her panic. He had given her money, and he had kissed her--he had taken her to his beautiful flat and wished her to stay there. He had given her the address of his lawyer and told her to go to him if she were ever in trouble. What more could he have done? She was ashamed of her want of trust in him. It comforted her to remember the firm clasp of his hand and the steadfast look in his eyes.

He was her husband, and they were going to live happily ever after! Before he came back she would make herself into a lady. She walked into the house quite steadily and stooped to kiss the twins.

"We're all going for a ride this afternoon," she told them. "A lovely ride right down into the country."

The twins clung clamouring round her. "In the country! On a bus?" they asked in one voice.

Faith laughed happily.

"No," she said, "we're going to have a taxicab."

Mrs. Ledley, coming from the kitchen, heard the words.

"Faith! You shouldn't promise them such things, when you know it's impossible." She rebuked her daughter wearily. "You've got new shoes to buy out of your money this week, and there's the gas to pay...."

Faith smiled and dimpled. The pendulum had swung the other way now, and she was hugging her secret to her breast delightedly.

"I'm not going back to Heeler's any more," she said.

"Not going back!" Mrs. Ledley stared at her helplessly for a moment; then she burst into tears.

"I knew something had happened," she sobbed. "I knew you hadn't been yourself all this week. What have you done, Faith, that they've sent you away just when you were settling down so nicely?"

"I haven't done anything," said Faith. "At least ... nothing you will mind. And I wasn't sent away. I left on my own account."

Mrs. Ledley went on crying.

She sobbed out that she wished she was dead, that she did not see what was the use of going on living.

Faith went down on her knees beside her and the twins held hands and cried for sympathy.

"There's nothing to cry for, mother," Faith urged, kissing her. "There's only something to be glad about. Such a wonderful thing has happened. It's like a...." Like a novelette, she had been going to add, but she remembered the way the Beggar Man had said that he did not like the expression, and changed it to "a fairy story" instead.

She drew her mother's hands down from her face.

"You'll be able to live happily ever after," she said excitedly. Her eyes shone like stars. "We're going to be rich--all of us. We can go away from London and live in the country. And the twins can go to a lovely school and have really pretty frocks. Oh, smile, darling, smile, and say you're glad!"

Mrs. Ledley looked up.

"I think you must be ill--or dreaming," she said with a sob. "What is the good of talking such nonsense, Faith? How do you think such things can ever come true?"

Faith held out her left hand with its new wedding ring.

"Because I've married a Fairy Prince," she said.

Mrs. Ledley stared at the little ring for a moment in absolute silence, then she broke out tremblingly:

"Faith! It's not true! You're just teasing me! It's just a joke! You couldn't have got married without telling me first! Why, there's nobody who would ask you!" She caught the girl by both shoulders and peered into her face.

"Faith!" she urged again passionately.

Faith laughed tremulously. Somehow she had not expected her news to be received so tragically; her old fears came surging back. Peg's words echoed once more in her ears.

"What do you think he wants with a wife like you? With all his money he could have anybody he likes...."

To drown the insistence of that voice she broke out into hurried explanations.

"It's the man who brought me home in his car that day I was ill. He's ever so rich, and we were married this morning. Oh, mother, don't look like that; it's all right--indeed, it is! You saw him. You saw him drive me up to the gate.... He's so good--so kind; he's going to help us all. He's going to buy you a house in the country and send the twins to school. He's given me ever so much money already--look!"

With shaking hands she dragged the money from her frock and put it into her mother's lap.

"You can have it all--all!" she went on eagerly. "It's for you that I wanted it. Not for myself. Oh, mother, why don't you speak? Why don't you say something?"

Mrs. Ledley moved suddenly. She pushed the girl almost roughly from her, letting the notes fall unheeded to the ground. She rose to her feet and walked away up the stairs, and Faith heard the key turn in her bedroom door.

She stood there in the narrow hall, all her happiness fallen from her.

What was the reason that nobody was glad? She had hoped such great things from her mother and Peg, and both of them had disappointed her.

The twins had dried their tears and were clamouring round her to know how soon they could start for their promised drive. Faith hardly heard them. She went down on her knees and gathered up the Beggar Man's despised money. She took it into the sitting-room and laid it on the table; then she sat down by the window with a feeling of utter helplessness.

What was the matter with everyone? Why had all her dreams gone so sadly awry?

She thought of Forrester with a very real pang. If only he had been here--if only she had allowed him to see her mother first, as he had wished, all this might have been averted.

When would she see him again? The future loomed before her like a thick shadow, without one ray of sunshine. She wished wildly that she had gone with him at the last moment when he had asked her to. She had never felt so lonely in her life.

It seemed a long time before Mrs. Ledley came downstairs again. She came into the room where Faith sat, and looked at her with hard eyes.

"This man you say you have married?" she asked. "Where is he?"

"He has gone to America," said Faith. "He went this morning; he won't be back for seventeen days."

Then the full pathos of her position overcame her and she broke down into tears.

"I did it for your sake," she sobbed. "I thought you would be so glad. I hated to see you look tired. I hated to see you work so hard, and he promised me he would give you a house in the country and send the twins to school. When he comes back he'll tell you himself."

There was a little silence.

"Faith," said Mrs. Ledley painfully, "do you think he ever will come back?"

Faith's tears were dried in a scorching flush. She raised her little head proudly.

"I know he will," she said.

Mrs. Ledley's face softened. She came over to where the girl sat, and bending, kissed her.

"Tell me all about it," she said.

Faith told her the little she knew--of their first meeting, right down to the strange marriage that morning in the registrar's dingy office, but she carefully kept to herself the things that Peg Fraser had said. They were too preposterous to mention!

She showed the letter for Mr. Shawyer, the lawyer, and Mrs. Ledley's face cleared a little as she took it and read the few lines.

"We will go and see him," she said. "On Monday we will go and see him, Faith, you and I."

Faith looked up eagerly.

"And you will believe in him then, won't you?" she asked. "If Mr. Shawyer tells you that it is all right you will believe in him, won't you?"

Mrs. Ledley took the girl's eager face in her hands.

"Do you love him--very much?" she asked rather sadly.

Faith echoed the words vaguely.

"Love him? Who do you mean?..."

"I mean this man--your husband."

Faith looked away across the room, and there was a little frown between her eyes.

"I don't know," she said hesitatingly. "I don't think I've ever thought about it. He's very kind--nobody has ever been so kind to me before."

Mrs. Ledley gripped the girl's hand.

"Faith, if you don't love him, why did you marry him?" she asked.

Faith raised her brown eyes.

"I told you," she said. "For you and the twins."



CHAPTER V

John Sawyer looked across his paper-strewn table at Faith's mother and smiled indulgently.

"I really don't think there is any need for you to be so alarmed," he said kindly. "I have known Mr. Forrester for a great many years, and have every reason to believe that he is an honourable man. He came to see me only last Friday and told me all about his romantic marriage. Unfortunately he has had to go to America, as you know. I think at the last it worried him considerably that he had not seen you before he left and been able to explain things. The marriage is perfectly in order, but you can go to the registrar yourself if you would prefer to do so...."

Mrs. Ledley broke in tremblingly.

"It all seems so extraordinary. Mr. Forrester had only seen my daughter three times before he married her, and ... and if he is as rich as you say, surely he would have looked higher for his wife?"

Poor woman! She could remember more than twenty years ago when she had made her own runaway match, the tortures of inquisition through which she had been put by her husband's relatives, and the complete ostracism with which the miserable affair had finally ended.

She had known herself incapable of ascending to his position in the world, and he had loved her well enough to sink into obscurity with her. Was history about to repeat itself in Faith's marriage?

"It is impossible to regulate romance," said Mr. Sawyer; privately he thought that the Beggar Man had shown taste in his choice of a wife. He considered that Faith had a charming face, and he was shrewd enough to see that with a few alterations in clothes the little moth would have no difficulty in spreading her wings and turning into a butterfly.

He was extremely interested in the whole affair. He had always considered Nicholas Forrester unique, and he genuinely admired his pluck in having taken this step.

"I am sure," he went on pleasantly, "that Mr. Forrester would be only too pleased for me to answer any questions you may care to ask. He told me if the occasion arose I was to be perfectly frank--especially in regard to his financial affairs, and...."

Mrs. Ledley interrupted hurriedly.

"It isn't the money I'm thinking of at all. It isn't the money that matters, if he is a good man, and will be kind to my little girl. But I know nothing about him! I only saw him once from the window, when he brought Faith home in his car, and I should not know him again if I saw him. If you could just tell me something about his people--if he has a mother and father living, or what he has been doing all his life...."

Mr. Sawyer cleared his throat and drew his chair closer to the table.

"I shall be only too pleased to answer those questions," he said. "As far as I know, Mr. Forrester is quite without relatives! His mother died when he was a small boy, and for some years he lived in Australia with his father. The father broke his neck in a riding accident, and from that time the son seems to have roughed it all over the world. He must have been born with the gift for making money, as he seems to have made a great deal before he was five and twenty--and spent it!" Mr. Sawyer added with a smile.

"About ten years ago," he went on, "he first came to England on some business deal with which I was concerned, and it proved to be a wonderful success, and I think I am right in saying that from that day he has never looked back. At the present moment I have no doubt that he is one of the richest men in London--he is known everywhere--perhaps I should tell you that he has not always been known under the name of Nicholas Forrester, though it really is his name--"

Faith leaned forward, the colour surging into her face.

"What--what other name, then?" she asked with an effort.

Mr. Sawyer smiled.

"For business purposes," he said gently, as if he were speaking to a child, "he calls himself Ralph Scammel! I know he would not object to your being told, otherwise I should certainly not have mentioned it, I----"

He broke off. Mrs. Ledley had risen to her feet. She was as white as death, and her eyes were like fire as she took a step forward and leaned heavily against the paper-strewn table.

"Scammel!" she said hoarsely. "Ralph Scammel! Is that the man my daughter has married?"

"It is merely an assumed name," Mr. Sawyer said quickly. "For business purposes." Mrs. Ledley was breathing fast. It was with difficulty that she at length found her voice.

"Ralph Scammel is the man who ruined my husband," she said.

Faith had hardly spoken during the whole interview, but now she started up from her chair with a little stifled cry.

Ever since her father's death, though she had never heard the name of the man who had brought about his ruin, she had been encouraged always to think of him with hatred.

Even the twins, in their play, frightened each other with an imaginary bogey of him, whom they called for want of a better name "The Bad Man," and sometimes Mrs. Ledley herself, tired and worried to death, would quiet them and force them to settle down to sleep by telling them that unless they did the "bad man" would come and carry them away.

And now Faith had married him!

She was still child enough to feel a nameless fear of the imaginary bogey, as well as suffocating shame and dread of the thing she had unwittingly done.

After a moment she broke out hysterically:

"It's not true! I won't believe it! You're all against me, all of you! His name is Nicholas Forrester! I tell you his name is Nicholas Forrester!" She broke into violent sobbing.

Mr. Sawyer looked greatly distressed.

"No doubt it is all a misapprehension," he said. "There is some mistake in the name. It is not such a very uncommon name," he suggested. But he knew that it was.

"There is no mistake," Faith's mother insisted flintily. "If my daughter has married that man I will never forgive her to my dying day."

"Mother!" The word came from Faith in a heart-broken cry, and once more Mr. Sawyer rushed gallantly into the breach.

"It is very unjust to my client to take this premature view," he said reprovingly. "Naturally, I know nothing of the circumstances of which you are now speaking, and we can only wait until Mr. Forrester comes home before they are proved or disproved. I speak of him as I have always found him, and I can truthfully say that your daughter will be perfectly safe and happy with him."

But for all notice Mrs. Ledley took he might have spared himself the trouble of speech. Disappointment and sorrow had hardened her, and she could see nothing beyond the fact that her own child had married the man whom she herself most hated in all the world.

Almost before Mr. Sawyer had finished speaking she rose and took up her shabby little handbag.

"There is nothing more we need stay for," she said harshly. "Faith, dry your eyes and come home."

But Faith could only sob on in the bitterness of her heart: "It isn't true--I know it isn't true! And if it is--how did I know--how could I have known?"

Mrs. Ledley looked at her with hard eyes.

"If you had cared for me at all," she said dully, "you would not have married him without my consent. I've been a good mother to you, and this is the reward I get. It was only of yourself you thought when you married him. You never thought of me at all."

Faith looked up, her face all flushed and quivering.

"It was only of you I thought," she sobbed, "you and the twins. I wanted you to be rich--I wanted them to go to a good school and he promised and I knew he was rich!..."

Mrs. Ledley clenched her hand.

"I would rather die than take a penny of his money," she said passionately. "Money made dishonestly--from the ruin of other men's lives."

Mr. Shawyer made another attempt.

"All this may or may not be true," he said smoothly; "but at any rate no fault can be attached to this child here." He laid a kind hand on Faith's arm. "And if you will forgive my saying so, Mrs. Ledley, it is very cruel to her to speak in this way."

Mrs. Ledley turned and faced him proudly across the table.

"I loved my husband," she said, "and if you think--even for my daughter's sake--I shall ever receive Ralph Scammel into my house, you make a very great mistake! Faith has married him, and she can do as she pleases, of course, but it will mean a choice between her husband and me. That is my last word," and she turned and walked out of the room, leaving Faith sobbing in her chair.

Mr. Shawyer rose to his feet and began pacing the room. He hated scenes, and during his lifetime he had been forced into a great many. He was unutterably relieved when Faith stopped crying and put her handkerchief away. Something of the childishness in her face seemed to have deepened to womanhood as, for a moment, she raised her brown eyes to him.

"And what am I to do now?" she asked.

Mr. Shawyer spread his hands.

"My dear young lady, how can I advise you beyond saying that the only thing to do is to wait until Nicholas Forrester comes home. He is your husband and rightful guardian, and if you love him you know what course to adopt. Even if--if what your mother says is a fact, he has not injured you knowingly, at all events. You say he has been all that is kind and good. Well, that is all that concerns you! A man's past is his own."

It was an easy and comfortable doctrine from his point of view, and he went on:

"After all, he is a business man. I never met a keener! And if in the course of business he unfortunately bettered your father in some transaction, well, how can he be blamed?"

Faith had been listening attentively, but now she broke in vehemently:

"If he is Ralph Scammel, he is a bad man! Peg says so, and Peg is always right!" And then again, with renewed anguish: "Oh, but it can't be true, I know it can't."

"If you have that much faith in him," said Mr. Shawyer quickly, "you must be content to wait till he comes back and ask him yourself. Now, take my advice and go home, and you will find that already your mother has repented of her hasty words."

Faith shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said slowly. She knew her mother well in many ways, and she knew the bitter and relentless hatred with which Mrs. Ledley had always regarded the "bad man," as the twins called him.

He had robbed her of all happiness. He had brought her and her children down to poverty. Faith did not think that her mother would ever relent or forgive.

She went home with dragging steps. Before she entered the house she slipped off her wedding ring and put it into a pocket. She felt more free without it, could almost imagine that the whole thing was nothing more, than a bad dream.

She was afraid to face her mother. She went up to her own little room on the top floor and sat down at the window.

There was not much to be seen from it but roofs and telegraph poles and wires, but the sky was blue beyond them all, and against her will Faith thought of the sea, which she had only seen once, years ago, and of Nicholas Forrester, who was even then being carried away from her across its blueness.

Since he said good-bye to her she had many times wished him back again, but now the thought of him made her shiver. She wished never to see him any more.

In her childishness she somehow fancied that she had only to say she regretted her marriage and give back everything he had ever given her to wipe the episode out of her life. She was thankful now that she had not spent a shilling of his money. She took it all from its hiding place and made a little parcel of it, with her wedding ring, and addressed it to the flat where he had taken her for lunch after their marriage.

He would find it when he came back and understand, she thought. She slipped out and posted it at once, for fear she

should be tempted to change her mind by the sight of the twins' shabby frocks and the memory of all she could have bought them with the Beggar Man's money.

Then she went into the kitchen to her mother and held out her trembling bare left hand.

"I've sent it back," she said in a whisper. "And the money--I never want to see him any more."

Mrs. Ledley stared at her helplessly, then something in the girl's face, its immature look and innocent eyes, swept the anger and bitterness from her heart.

She took Faith on to her lap as if she had still been a child, and the two kissed and cried together.

Mrs. Ledley did not believe Faith would ever see the Beggar Man again. She thought she knew only too well the type of man he was. She sobbed out that she was only too thankful to have her daughter safely with her.

"I didn't mean to be hard and cruel," she said over and over again. "It would have broken my heart if he had taken you away from me."

"He wanted me to go and I wouldn't," Faith said. She tried to believe that she was quite happy cuddled into her mother's arms, but she knew that she was not. There was something old and sad in her heart which would never leave her again she knew. She listened apathetically while Mrs. Ledley spoke of her husband.

"You haven't forgotten him, Faith? You haven't so soon forgotten your father? He was so good to you. He loved you all so much. This man ruined him and caused his death. I know that my little girl could not love such a man."

"I wanted you to be rich," Faith whispered brokenly. "I wanted everything for you and the twins."

She sat up with sudden energy, pushing the dark hair from her face. "I hope I never see him again!" she said fiercely. "I hope he never comes home any more!..."



CHAPTER VI

Faith went back to the factory the next day and asked to be taken on again. Miss Dell would like to have refused, but she met Peg's fierce eyes across the room and changed her mind, and Faith was reinstated.

There was not much time for talking that morning. There was a rush of work on hand and hardly a moment to spare, but during the dinner hour Peg asked a storm of questions.

"What has happened? He's not coming back, of course! What a brute! Didn't I always say he was a brute?"

Faith shivered.

There were moments when she still clung passionately to the hope that there was some mistake--that when he came back he would be able to explain and put matters right. And there were other times when she shrank from the very thought of him, and only wished to be able to forget those few days of delirium.

She would not even confide in Peg. All she would do was to beg her to ask no questions.

"It's all over and done with," she said tremblingly. "You said he would not come back. I hope he never will."

"I said I should not be at all surprised if he didn't," Peg answered. "But, of course, he may do. Sometimes in novelettes the villain of the story turns out to be the hero after all, you know."

Faith did not think it was at all likely in this case, and the days began slowly to creep away.

When a fortnight had gone and the seventeenth day drew near, panic closed about her heart. Supposing he came after all?

She had had no word from him, and she hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. Perhaps it meant that he never would come back. She wished she could believe this.

At other times, lying awake at night in her little room with its sloping roof, against her will she was forced to remember every word the Beggar Man had said to her, every kindly action that he had done, and there was always a great unanswered question in her mind.

"Why did he marry me if he was bad, as they say he is? He need not have married me. There are heaps of other girls in the world."

Mr. Shawyer wrote and begged her to go and see him, but she neither went nor answered the letter.

She spent as much of her time with Peg as possible, and the elder girl once more resumed her role of friend and protector.

"If you're worrying about that good-for-nothing!" she said to Faith one day in her blunt manner, "you're a little fool. There are as good fish in the sea as any that were caught, my girl, and don't you make any mistake. Let old Scammel stay in America. Jolly good riddance, I say!"

Faith did not answer, but her nerves were tearing her to pieces. Every time a man's voice sounded in the passages of the factory or a door opened suddenly she was sure it was the Beggar Man come back to find and claim her. Every time she heard the sound of a motor coming up the street her heart beat so fast she could hardly breathe. She never knew how she dragged through the seventeenth day, but it passed somehow, and the eighteenth and nineteenth and twentieth, and still there was no sign of Nicholas Forrester.

She began to pluck up courage. He would not come now, she was sure. If he had returned to England he had found her wedding ring and the returned money and had understood what she meant. Perhaps even he had repented as much as she, long before he got back home.

Or perhaps he was still abroad! That would be best of all, if she could only be sure that the sea was still dividing them.

Five days after Nicholas was due to return Mrs. Ledley spoke of him.

"He'll never come back, Faith." There was triumphant thankfulness in her voice. "Somehow I felt all along that he would never come back."

Faith could not answer. Though her fear had decreased it was not yet dead, and only last night she had dreamed of the Beggar Man, dreamed that she was on one side of a locked door on which he knocked, knocked ceaselessly. It was

early evening, and Faith had come home from work to find Mrs. Ledley dressed to go out.

"You won't be long, mother, will you?" she urged. She dreaded being alone in the house. Though it was early evening, the twins were in bed and asleep, and everything seemed very still.

"I shan't be long," her mother answered, "but I must have a breath of air. The house has stifled me all day. I can't breathe at all sometimes."

Faith watched her down the street and went back indoors.

And Mrs. Ledley had not been gone more than half an hour, when there was a great knocking at the outer door. Shaking in every limb, Faith went to open it. A strange woman stood there, and down at the gate was a little crowd and a policeman. The strange woman put kind arms round the girl's shrinking figure and told her as gently as she could that something terrible had happened, but that she must try to be brave and---

"Mother!" said Faith. She broke away like a mad thing from the arms that would have held her and rushed to the gate. She gave one look at the white face of the woman they were carrying home and screamed, hiding her face with distraught hands.

Mrs. Ledley was dead. She had been walking along quite naturally, so they said, and suddenly had been seen to fall.

There was nothing to be done. Hard work and sorrow and bitterness had taken their toll of her strength and ended her life.

Faith could not shed a tear. After that first wild scream she had been silent. She went to the room where the twins lay sleeping and crouched down beside them, desperately holding a chubby hand of each.

Downstairs a kindly neighbour was in charge of the house; presently she came upstairs to Faith and bent over her.

"A gentleman, dearie. I told him you couldn't see anyone, but he seemed so distressed. I promised to tell you. He says he must see you, and such a nice gentleman he is."

Faith turned her face away.

"I can't! I don't want anyone! Leave me alone!"

The woman sighed and went away, and presently another step ascended the narrow stairs--a man's heavier step.

Faith was crouched against the bed, facing the door, her eyes closed, her cheek pressed to the sleeping hands to which she clung. Someone spoke her name through the silent room: "Faith!" and then again, with deepest pity: "Faith!"

The girl did not move. For a moment she thought she was dreaming, and that the voice had spoken in her dream. Then as she looked up with a wild hope that it was so--that all the past hour would prove to be nothing but a terrible nightmare--her dazed, piteous eyes met those of the Beggar Man.

All his life Nicholas Forrester remembered that room with its sloping roof and poor furniture, and the sleeping twins lying on the bed, with Faith, little more than a child herself, crouched on the floor beside them.

Hot evening sunshine shone through the narrow window and fell right upon the motherless little group, as with a stifled exclamation he went forward and, stooping, lifted Faith to her feet.

"My poor little girl," he said, keeping his arms round her, and though she made no effort to resist him, she stood apathetically enough, only turning her head away when he would have kissed her.

He broke out into incoherent explanations.

"I only got to Liverpool last night. We ran into a fog-bank and had to reduce speed. I tried to let you know but it seemed hopeless. I came as quickly as I could."

She heard what he said disinterestedly, wondering why he chose to make explanations at all, and when he had finished she looked at him with dazed brown eyes.

"Mother is dead; did they tell you?"

"The woman downstairs told me. I can't tell you how grieved I am. If I had only been here. If I had only been able to help."

The girl looked at him blankly; he had a kind face she thought, even as she had thought that time of their first meeting,

but now she knew that he was not really kind or anything that he looked. He was Scammel who had ruined her father, Scammel for whose sake all those girls at Heeler's factory worked and sweated, and made money whereby to enrich him.

"I don't know why you came here, anyway," she said helplessly.

He flushed and bit a lip, but he answered gently enough: "I came straight to you, of course! Who had a better right! Have you forgotten so soon that you are my wife?"

She held out her bare left hand.

"I sent your ring back. I am sorry I ever married you. It's all over and done with."

He took but little notice of her words. He knew that she was overwrought and broken-hearted, and that it was no time now to press his claim.

The twins began to rouse, and sat up, two rosy-cheeked youngsters with eyes still drowsy with sleep, but which opened widely enough at sight of the stranger.

"Is it teatime?" was their first demand, regardless of the fact that they had had their tea hours ago, and Forrester answered that supper was ready downstairs. Would they like to be carried?

They made a wild rush at him immediately, but Faith was too quick for him. She put her arms round both the children, and looked at him across their tousled heads with defensive eyes.

"They're all I've got in the world," she said hoarsely. "You can't have them, too."

The Beggar Man did not answer. He followed them down the stairs to the sitting-room, where the kindly neighbour had made more tea, more for something to do than for any other reason, but the twins consumed slice after slice of bread and jam uncomplainingly, and regarded the Beggar Man with eyes of smiling interest.

"Do you like chocolates?" he inquired when the meal was ended. "Well, run along to a shop and buy some." He gave them half a crown, and bundled them out of the room amid shrieks of delight, then he shut the door and went back to where Faith sat by the window, her listless eyes on the sunbaked street.

He stood beside her silently for a moment. Then he asked gently:

"How soon can you be ready to leave this house--to-morrow?"

She looked up.

"I don't know what you mean. I am never going to leave it. I shall stay here and work for the twins, as mother did."

Her voice faltered a little as she spoke that beloved name, but no tears came, and Forrester said patiently:

"You cannot stay here. It's impossible. You must let me see to things for you. I promise you that everything shall be done exactly as you wish." He waited, but she did not speak, and he said again with a touch of impatience in his voice:

"Faith, you are angry with me. What have I done?"

She temporized, with the feeling that as yet she could not bring herself to say all that she knew she meant to say sooner or later.

"You never wrote to me." The words were apathetic. She had not cared whether he wrote to her or not.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I had no chance, and what sense was there in writing? I have got here almost as soon as a letter would have done." He walked a pace from her and came back. "I'm a bad hand at writing, anyway," he said, sombrely.

She was looking again into the street, and the weary outline of her face touched his heart.

"I thought of you all the time," he said, impulsively. "I cursed every minute that we were delayed."

She asked another question.

"Have you been to your flat?"

"I came straight here, of course. I was anxious about you. I thought you might be wondering what had become of me."

She drew a long sigh.

"Then you haven't got it?"

"Haven't got what?" he asked gently.

She rose to her feet.

"My ring and the money. It was all a mistake. I don't want to be married to you any more." She regarded him with wide, frightened eyes. For the first time it was slowly dawning upon her that perhaps it was not such an easy thing to get unmarried as it had been to get married.

"Please!" she added with faint appeal.

The Beggar Man's face hardened.

"My dear child," he said as patiently as he could, "it's not possible to stop being married like that, for no reason! Come, Faith, be reasonable! I make every allowance for you. I--I'm grieved at your mother's death, but...."

The burning colour rushed suddenly to the girl's face. Her blank eyes woke into life and passion.

"Grieved! When you helped to kill her!" she cried. She broke into wild laughter. "When you helped to kill her!" she said again helplessly.

The Beggar Man caught her by both arms.

"Faith! For God's sake," he said hoarsely. He thought that the shock of her mother's death had turned her brain. He tried to draw her to him, but she resisted him fiercely.

"You killed my father and ruined his life," she went on, raving. "You killed my father, and now you've killed my mother. Oh, I wish I could die, too! I wish I had never seen you." And quite suddenly she seemed to collapse, and would have fallen but for Forrester's upholding arms.

He laid her down on the couch by the window, and called to the kindly neighbour. The doctor had just arrived for Mrs. Ledley, and he came at once to Faith.

Forrester stood by, pale and anxious.

"The mother is dead, of course?" he asked once hopelessly, and the doctor looked up for a moment to answer.

"She must have died instantly. It was heart failure!" His eyes searched the young man's agitated face.

"May I ask who you are?" he inquired, faintly amazed.

"Yes." The Beggar Man glanced down at Faith.

"She is my wife," he said, briefly.

"Your wife! That child!" The amazed words were out before the doctor could check them, and he hastened to apologize. "I beg your pardon, but she looks so young."

"She is young," said the Beggar Man, flintily. "I am nearly twenty years older than she is."

Faith was coming back to consciousness, and the doctor said hurriedly: "I think it will be better for you to go away for the present, if you will--I want her to be kept quite quiet."

Nicholas went out into the narrow passage. The twins had returned and were squabbling over an enormous bag of sticky sweets. They hailed Nicholas with delight.

"I thought I said you were to buy chocolates?" he said, with pretended severity.

He sat down on the stairs and took the bag from them, dividing it into equal parts and sharing out its contents. "Ough! How sticky," he complained, with a little grimace.

"Nice!" said the twins, unanimously. They were quite happy; nobody had told them, poor mites, of their irreparable loss.

Nicholas did his best to amuse them. He was worried and unhappy, but he racked the recesses of his brain for forgotten fairy tales, and told them of the wolves that used to howl over the prairie at night when he was a boy and of a tiger which his father had once shot in India.

They listened, wide-eyed and wondering, and when at last he paused they both scrambled to their feet.

"Tell Mums! Go and tell Mums!"

That was the beginning of the trouble. In vain he tried to put them off with stories that their mother was not well, that her head ached, that she was lying down and must not be disturbed. The twins were disbelieving, grew angry, and finally broke into tears and sobs.

Nicholas took them up, one on each arm, and carried them into the kitchen. He was afraid they would disturb Faith. He sat down in a big old armchair, a child on each knee, and soothed and petted, and made vague promises for the morrow if they were good, until finally they both fell asleep with his arms round them.

It was getting late then. A clock on the kitchen shelf struck eight, but Nicholas was afraid to move. His arms were cramped, and he was racked with anxiety for Faith, but he sat doggedly on until the kindly neighbour and the doctor came to him.

The doctor smiled as he saw Forrester's burdens, and the kindly neighbour came forward with little murmurs of sympathy, and carried the twins away one at a time, still sleeping, to bed.

The Beggar Man stood up and stretched his arms.

"Well! This is a bad business," he said despondently.

"Yes." The doctor was looking at him with puzzled eyes. "You must forgive me," he said at last, "but I have known Mrs. Ledley and her family for several years now, and I had no idea that the child in the next room was married!"

Forrester coloured a little.

"We were married three weeks ago," he explained grudgingly. "And I had to leave her at once, on business, for America! I only got back last night and came here to find--this!" He looked round the room helplessly. "Of course everything will be all right," he added hurriedly. "I shall look after the children. There are only the two, aren't there?" he asked with a shade of anxiety.

The doctor smiled. "Yes, only the twins."

"And my wife? How is she?" the Beggar Man asked.

"She is suffering from shock, severe shock, of course, and must be kept perfectly quiet. I asked her if she wished to see you, and--I am sorry--but she said No! You must humour her, and not take it seriously," he explained kindly. "I asked if there was anyone she would like to see, and she said, 'Yes, Peg.' Do you know who Peg is?"

The Beggar Man frowned.

"Yes--a friend of hers."

The doctor turned away to the door. He was a kind man, but overworked and underpaid, and could not afford to waste a moment more than he was obliged.

"Well, I should send for her," he said briskly. "The woman here tells me she cannot stay all night. She has her own home and children to attend to. If you know where this 'Peg' is--send for her."

Forrester saw the doctor out, and went in search of the kindly neighbour who had tucked the twins up in bed, and was tidying the house.

He had no more idea than the dead how he was going to find Peg, but he asked the neighbour hopefully for information.

"Yes, I know her," she said. "I know her well--she lives about ten minutes away from here. Yes, I can give you her address."

Forrester wrote it down on his shirt cuff, promised to be back quickly, and went out.

The door of the room where Faith lay was open as he passed it, but some queer impulse prevented him from entering. She had said that she did not want him--well, he could wait.

But his heart was sore as he went up and down the narrow streets in search of Peg.

She was at the door of the house when he reached it, laughing and talking with a youth in a loud check suit and a

highly-coloured tie, and her handsome face hardened as Forrester approached and raised his hat. She vouchsafed no answer to his "Good evening," only stared as he explained his errand.

"I think you are a friend of my wife's. She is ill, and has asked for you." He paused, and the youth in the check suit lounged off and down the street.

"My name is Forrester," the Beggar Man went on after a moment. "I don't know whether you have heard of me, but I have heard of you, and I know you are Faith's friend. Will you come? She is in great trouble. Her mother died suddenly this evening."

"Died!" Peg's eyes opened in horror. "Oh, poor kid!" she ejaculated. "Here, wait a minute." She turned into the house, and he heard her shouting to someone that she was going out and might not be home all night. Then she came back to him, banged the door behind her, and they set off down the road together.

People stared at them curiously as they passed, but Forrester was unconscious of it. He was not greatly prepossessed with Peg, but then few people were at first sight, although she was a handsome girl and magnificently built.

She was gaudily dressed for one thing, and Forrester hated gaudy clothes, and she wore long silver gipsy earrings and a string of bright green beads dangling from her neck.

She did not speak to him till they were nearly at their destination. Then she said bluntly:

"You've come back then?"

Forrester looked at her.

"Yes. I came back last night."

She gave a short laugh.

"I told Faith I didn't believe you would," she said.

He coloured angrily.

"I am much obliged to you, I am sure," he said, curtly.

Peg laughed again.

"Oh, don't mention it!" she said, airily. "I'm glad to be wrong for once in my life." She paused. "Faith's mighty fond of you," she added, almost threateningly.

Forrester frowned: he resented this girl's blunt, downright manner of speech, but Peg went on, quite indifferent to his obvious annoyance.

"She went for me hot and strong when I told her you were Ralph Scammel. Up like a spitfire she was!"

"When you told her--what?"

Her blue eyes met his defiantly.

"When I told her that you were Scammel and owned Heeler's," she repeated. "I knew, and I didn't see why she shouldn't know, too! Not that she believed it, though," she added, with a touch of chagrin. The Beggar Man made no answer, but he quickened his steps a little. He thought of Faith's strange manner towards him and Peg's words seemed all at once to have explained a great deal.



CHAPTER VII

Peg took control of the house as absolutely as if she had always been its mistress, and, in spite of his dislike of her, Nicholas Forrester felt a great sense of relief. She was capable, whatever else she might not be, and he knew she was fond of Faith.

Before he left the house that night he had a little conversation with her.

"Can you stay with my wife?" he asked.

Peg looked him up and down coolly.

"I suppose you've got so much money that you've forgotten that some people have to earn their living," she said bluntly, but without intentional insolence. "How do you suppose I'm going on if I stay here for nothing?"

"I can make it worth your while," he said, speaking as bluntly as she had spoken.

Peg laughed.

"Oh, well, if it's to be a business deal."

She told him what she earned at Heeler's, and asked double the amount if she consented to stay with Faith.

"You won't be wanting me for long, anyway," she said, "so I'm for making hay while the sun shines."

The Beggar Man gave her notes for the amount she asked without a word, and a faint admiration crept into her blue eyes.

"Look here," she said, "are you acting on the square with Faith? That's what I want to know."

The Beggar Man met her gaze steadily.

"Well, I married her, didn't I?" he asked.

"I know, but you've let her down in other ways; you never told her that Heeler's belonged to you."

"That is no business of yours."

"Perhaps not," she agreed, "but you'll find it is of hers. She is only a kid, and soft in some ways, but she can be hard as nails when she chooses, beneath all that softness, and you'll find it out."

"Very well. I don't need you to tell me about it, anyway. Take care of her--and the twins--that's all I ask of you."

"I shall take care of them right enough," she answered laconically. "But not because you've paid me, but because I'm fond of them--see?"

She challenged him defiantly.

The Beggar Man smiled grimly.

"Oh, yes, I see," he said. "Well, good-night. I'll be round early to-morrow to make arrangements."

Peg shut the door after him, and went back to Faith. The girl was awake, and sitting up in bed with feverish eyes.

"Has he gone?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes." Peg sat down beside the bed. "Here, have you two been and had a real row?" she demanded.

"Yes," Faith whispered.

Peg said "Humph! You mean a proper old glory-row like they have in novelettes, eh? Don't mean to make it up till the last chapter, if ever, eh?"

"I never mean to make it up."

There was a little silence; then Peg said:

"With all his money, it might be worth while."

Faith hid her face.

"I don't want his money. I only want my mother," she sobbed.

"You poor chicken!" Peg took her into motherly arms.

"You shan't ever see him again if you don't want," she promised rashly. "He shan't come in here except over my dead body," she added, with tragic emphasis, and a sudden memory of a pink-backed novelette still lying at home unfinished....

But she found the Beggar Man more difficult to manage than she had imagined. He demanded to see Faith, and being determinedly repulsed, asked reasons.

Peg hesitated; then she said with evident enjoyment:

"Well, you'll have to know in the end, so I may as well tell you now! She's found out something about you."

Forrester changed colour a little.

"What the deuce do you mean?" he demanded.

Peg shrugged her shoulders.

"I only mean that she told me so last night. Of course, she's sick and ill, and everything looks its blackest, and I told her she was making too much of it, but she wouldn't listen! I'm not sensitive myself, but she seems to think you're responsible for her father's death. Her father was a gentleman, you know," she added in emphatic parenthesis.

The Beggar Man laughed.

"I never knew her father. I never saw him in my life to the best of my knowledge."

Peg regarded him with her handsome head on one side, and her arms akimbo.

"Have you ever read a book called 'Revenge is Sweet'?" she asked.

The Beggar Man moved impatiently.

"No, I haven't, and even if I had----"

She interrupted mercilessly.

"Well, you should! It's on at the pictures, too, this week, and it reminds me of what Faith told me about her father and you! It's all about a man who ruined another man in business and broke his heart, so that he died! Well, that's what happened to Faith's father--through you!"

The Beggar Man walked over to the window and stood looking out into the ugly street.

A dull flush had risen to his face. He was not proud of everything that had happened in his life, and he was perfectly well aware that his great wealth could not always have been accumulated without distress to others.

Until now those "others" had been vague, unreal figures, but it gave him a sick feeling of shame to think that perhaps Peg was speaking the truth when she said that one of them had been Faith's father.

"Business is business," he began angrily in self-defence.

Peg nodded.

"That's what I say! I said so to Faith, and told her that it would very likely be worth while to overlook things for the sake of your money, but...."

The Beggar Man turned with a roar like a wounded lion.

"You told her that!"

"I did." Her hard blue eyes met his unflinchingly. "Money's the only thing in the world worth having when you've never had any, and I know! I believe I'd marry Old Nick himself if he offered me ten thousand a year and a car of my own."

Forrester swore under his breath.

"Women are all the same," he said bitterly. "Ready to sell their souls for jewels and luxury."

"Well," said Peg, "I don't know that *you* can talk! Anyway, it's no business of mine, only that's why Faith won't see you."

The Beggar Man's face hardened in a way that made him almost ugly; he was not used to being thwarted.

He went close to Peg as she stood guarding the doorway.

"Are you going to move?" he asked quietly, "or have I got to make you?"

Peg grew very red. She began to say, "Make me?" but changed her mind and stood on one side with a sudden meekness that would have amazed anyone who knew her. And the Beggar Man opened the door and went out into the passage.

She followed him then and spoke in a subdued way. "Look here, I'm not taking sides any longer, so don't you think it. But Faith's a little bit of a thing, and she's sad, and she's sick. I can't stop you going in to her if you mean to, but----" She paused. "If you're the sport I almost think you are, you won't, at any rate not to-day," she added earnestly.

It was very clever of her, and the Beggar Man stopped and wavered.

For an instant they looked at one another silently, eye to eye; then he turned back.

"Very well; but as soon as she's well enough you understand that nothing you can say or do will prevent me." Peg laughed grimly.

"Oh, yes, I understand that," she said.

And so it was left, and for the following sad days Forrester kept his word and Faith was left in peace. There was nothing seriously the matter with her, the doctor said, but she was suffering from shock and nervous prostration, and must be kept quiet.

Peg and Forrester got to be almost friendly during that week. There was so much to see to, so much to arrange.

Forrester had given notice to the two school teachers who had lodged with Mrs. Ledley, and had told the landlord that he was giving up the house. Then he went to Shawyer and asked how a man set about finding a school for two little girls.

"A boarding school?" Mr. Shawyer asked, and the Beggar Man said "Yes, and a top-hole one too! I don't mind the expense, but it's got to be a first-class place, and with a woman at its head who'll be kind to a couple of poor little motherless kids."

Mr. Shawyer brought his wife along. She had no children of her own, but she adored children, and had endless understanding and sympathy for them.

She was only too eager to hunt for a school for the twins. She was like a delighted child with a new doll, or, rather, two new dolls, when one afternoon she was introduced to the twins--rather sad-faced little mites now, in their black and white frocks.

"She's the right one, thank heaven," the Beggar Man thought, as he saw the way in which she took them both to her heart, and he heaved a deep sigh of relief, for he had been greatly worried with so much responsibility all at once.

But Mrs. Shawyer took it from him willingly; she shopped for the twins, and found them a school in the country within driving distance of her own home.

"I'll look after them, don't you worry, Mr. Forrester," she told him. "They'll be as happy as the day is long."

She wanted to carry them off then and there, but Forrester knew he could not take them without first telling Faith, and that was a duty which he dreaded.

He consulted Peg about it. What ought he to do? Was Faith well enough to see him yet? Peg looked away guiltily.

"She's been well enough for some time," she said honestly. "But every time I mention it to her she seems to shrivel up, so you'd best go in of your own accord, and I'll know nothing about it."

There was a little smile in her eyes as she watched him turn towards Faith's room. He was so big and burly and strong-looking, but she was not one whit deceived, and she knew that he was as nervous as a girl as he knocked at his wife's door.

Faith said "Come in" in a small, tired voice, and the Beggar Man turned the handle and walked in.

He had not seen her for a week, and his first emotion was one of unutterable thankfulness that she did not look as ill and frail as he had dreaded. She was sitting by the window, and the room was full of flowers, which Peg had bought with his money, and Faith wore a black frock, bought with his money also!

She started up when she saw him, the colour rushing to her face. She looked past him furtively to the door, but evidently realized how hopeless were her chances of escape, for she sat down again resignedly, though her soft, childish face took a curiously hard expression.

"I am glad you are better," said the Beggar Man. He was very nervous; he stood against the door, the width of the room between them, his hands deep-thrust into his pockets so that he should not yield to his impulse to go across to her and take her into his arms. A deep pity for her surged into his heart. She was his wife, but she was only a child, and they were almost strangers.

"Peg has been very good to you--to all of us," he said, hoping to soften her. "I like your friend Peg," he added kindly.

Faith did not move or answer.

"I wanted to speak to you about the future," he went on desperately.

She raised her eyes then; such frightened eyes they were.

"My future has nothing to do with you," she said. "I can go my own way--I don't want any help."

He moved away from the door, dragged a chair up and sat down beside her.

"You're talking nonsense, and you know you are," he said very quietly. "You are my wife, and the law is on my side. I don't want to be harsh or unjust, but I can force you to come away with me this moment if I choose--not that I intend to," he added, meeting her terrified eyes, "because you are going to be a sensible little girl, and we are going to be very happy together. I want to do all I can for you. I want to give you everything in my power. I have found a school for the twins--a school where they will be well looked after and cared for, and ... Faith!"

She had started to her feet. She was shaking in every limb, her face white.

"You dare to try and take them away," she panted, fear of him swallowed up in her greater fear of losing the twins. "They belong to me! They are mine! They're all I've got in the world. I'll never let them go, never, never!" She broke down into violent sobbing. "Peg promised me she would help me keep them away from you. I suppose she's broken her word," she panted.

"Peg is a sensible woman," said Forrester shortly. With all his pity and affection for her, he was losing patience fast. He believed firmness was the best method of managing her, after all. He rose to his feet.

"I don't want to upset you, Faith, but we have had enough nonsense. The twins are going to school next week, and you are leaving this house and coming to live with me. I have arranged everything."

She wrung her hands.

"I will never live with you. I hate you. Mother hated you! You killed my father--you ruined his life."

She was only repeating parrot-like what she had always been told of the "bad man"; of the true facts of the story she knew nothing.

The Beggar Man turned very pale.

"I have heard something of this from your friend Peg," he said grimly. "Possibly it *is* true that through some business transaction I got the better of your father. But anyway it must have been years ago, and I never knew him personally. If they say all is fair in love and war, it's fair in business, too. He would have got the better of me if he had been able to do so, no doubt. Anyway, I mean to thrash the matter to the bottom, and let you know the exact truth, even if it goes against me to tell you. I may not be proud of everything that has happened in my life, but I'm not going to lie about it anyway.... Faith, stop crying!" His voice was harsh now, and Faith's tears dried as if by magic.

She looked so forlorn, so very young, and a sudden revulsion of feeling swept through the man's heart. He was already bitterly disappointed with his marriage. He had had such wonderful schemes for moulding his wife to his own ideas, and now he knew that he had been a fool to ever hope anything from such a gamble! But he was a fighter, and he had no intention of acknowledging defeat. He held out his hand to her.

"Come, Faith, be friends with me! You used to like me, you know," he added, with a faint smile. "And it's less than a month ago. A short time, surely."

She clasped her hands tightly in her lap, and her pretty voice sounded like steel when she spoke.

"I didn't know then that you were Ralph Scammell!--I didn't know then--that you killed my father."

It was a piteous exaggeration of the truth, and Forrester flushed to the roots of his hair, but he kept his temper admirably. He even managed a laugh as he turned to the door.

"Well, I'm not arguing with you now about it," he said hardily. "I'll say good-night."

When he had gone, Peg came in to Faith, and the younger girl broke down once more into pitiable weeping.

"He says he is sending the twins away; he says that I must go and live with him. You wouldn't, would you, Peg? You hate him, don't you?"

Peg did not answer. She stood looking out of the window with moody eyes, and then she said abruptly:

"I hate Scammell as Scammell, but--there's something about Nicholas Forrester, as Nicholas Forrester----" she paused. "Faith, do you know what I think?"

Faith shook her head. She was always tremendously influenced by Peg; she waited with breathless eagerness now for her words.

Peg fell into her favourite pose; hands on hips, head a little awry. "Well, I think that unless you're a little fool you'll do as he tells you," she said.

Faith stared at her friend with incredulous eyes. She had counted on her to the uttermost; she could not believe that at the eleventh hour Peg would fail her like this.

"Do as he tells me!" she gasped, helplessly. "After all you have said! Oh, what has happened to change you so! I thought you were my friend."

"You know I am," Peg said calmly. "Perhaps never more than I am now when I tell you to go back to him. What's the good of holding out? He's stronger than you, and the law's on his side."

The last was a phrase culled from one of her favourite novelettes, and she thought it applied admirably. If the truth must be told she was thoroughly enjoying herself. She considered this story of Faith's as good as anything that had been written and printed and sold by the thousand. Forrester was a very good type of hero, and Faith quite the timid, shrinking heroine beloved of the novelist. As yet she had not quite assigned a part to herself, but Peg had her head screwed on the right way, and she had no intention of breaking her friendship with Faith no matter what happened, or of letting her drift out of her life.

She went on in her clear, emphatic way.

"He's rich! He'll give you everything you want! He's fond of you, and the twins love him! What more do you want? Let the past be wiped out; that's what I say."

She went over to Faith and patted her shrinking shoulder.

"Cheer up, little 'un," she said, resorting to her usual slangy manner of speech, which she had dropped somewhat since she had seen so much of the Beggar Man. "It's a long lane that has no turning, you know. And it's lucky for you all that you've got a husband. If you think you could earn enough to keep yourself and those twins, bless 'em, you're mistaken. Why, they'd eat your week's wages in a couple of days and think nothing of it."

"I thought you were my friend," said Faith again helplessly. "And here you are driving me back to him. I should never have married him if I'd known what I know now. I'd rather have starved...."

"You've never tried starving," was Peg's unsympathetic response. "And you're talking silly. He's all right, as far as you know him, anyway, and what he does in business is neither here nor there, as you might say."

She considered Faith with meditative eyes; then suddenly she broke out: "Here! Will you go and live with him if he lets me come, too?"

Faith looked up with a faintly dawning hope, which faded quickly.

"He'd never let you," she said. "He wouldn't even have the twins."

"He was quite right there," Peg declared. "They'd be a nuisance. But I'm different. I could see to things for you and lend a hand in the house, too, if you like. I've a great mind to ask him--what do you say?"

"It wouldn't be so bad if you came."

"We could have a fine time," said Peg, her eyes glowing. Already she saw Forrester handing out money for her wardrobe as well as for his wife's. Already she saw herself driving in his car and turning into a lady. She was sure she could live up to the part; she had brains, even if her education had been poor; but she had not got that inherent something which had come to Faith from her father and which made all the difference between the two girls.

"Well," she insisted, "shall I ask him?"

"If you like; but he won't let you, I know."

Peg did not believe that; she believed that Forrester would be glad to have his wife on any terms. When next she saw him she approached the subject with easy confidence.

The Beggar Man listened to her quietly and courteously, and when she had finished he smiled a little--a smile that somehow made her uncomfortable.

"It's a kind suggestion," he said, "but not possible. We shall have to live in my flat for the present, Miss Fraser"--he was always most punctilious about addressing Peg as Miss Fraser--"and I am afraid there would not be room for you." He hesitated. It was in his mind to say that in the future the friendship between the two girls would have to cease, but in the face of all that Peg had done for him he could not utter the words.

"I hope Faith will see you often," he added helplessly, man-like, saying the very opposite to the thing he wished to say.

"Oh, I dare say she will," Peg said laconically. She was not in the least offended by his refusal. If this scheme failed, she had others to fall back upon. "I'm fond of Faith, you know," she added.

"I know," said the Beggar Man. "And you have been most kind. I shall never be able to thank you for what you have done for us both."

Peg said, "Oh, chuck it!" but she looked pleased.

She went back to Faith and told her that she had failed.

"Never mind, honey," she said, when she saw the girl's disappointment. "If at first you don't succeed, you know, try, try, try again, as they used to tell us in the copybooks; and I'm not done yet. You'll have to go off with him alone, and I'll come along later."

"I shall never go," said Faith.

It was curious how determinedly she stuck to that. Even Peg marvelled at her unexpected display of will-power. She did not understand how deeply ingrained in the girl's soul the failure and death of her father had been, or how the loss of her mother had reawakened and added to its power.

"You'll have to let the twins go, anyway," Peg said bluntly. "Why, it would be a crime to try and keep them, bless their hearts! After all the new frocks he's bought them, you ought to see!"

"I don't want to see them," said Faith passionately, the tears rushing to her eyes. "Nobody will ever love them as I do."

But she knew she was powerless to keep the twins with her. Mr. Shawyer came and talked to her about it. He pointed out kindly but firmly that her husband was their natural guardian now, as she herself was under age.

"He is doing and will do everything in his power for their happiness," he said. "He has been most kind and generous. It's all for the good of the little girls, too, and they are quite happy to go. Don't you think it's rather selfish of you to try and stand in their way?"

She gave in at last, but it almost broke her heart. She had got it into her head that if her mother could know, she would be angry with her for parting with them; all the more angry because it was Forrester who was paying for it all. Her mother had hated him, and Faith believed that therefore it was her duty to hate him also.

She broke down when it came to saying good-bye. There was a cab at the door, piled with the twins' new luggage, and Mrs. Shawyer was waiting to take them to school.

Up to the last moment they had been wildly excited and full of delight, but the sight of Faith's pale face and tears was a signal for them to give way also.

They clung to her sobbing and crying. They did not want to go, they yelled; they even kicked at Forrester when he

picked them up one under each arm and carried them down to the waiting taxi.

He was annoyed with Faith for being the cause of such a scene. He went back to her when they had driven off, frowning heavily.

Faith was sobbing and looking out of the window in the direction in which the twins had disappeared--carried off by main force, so it seemed to her. She turned round and looked at her husband with flaming eyes.

"I'll never forgive you for this," she said. "It will break their hearts, poor darlings!"

"Nonsense!" he answered calmly. "Before they get into the next street they'll be perfectly happy. Mrs. Shawyer has a box of chocolates for them, and I never knew chocolates fail to dry their tears yet."

He smoothed his hair, which had got rather ruffled by the twins' struggles to escape him.

"Thank goodness that's over," he said with a short laugh. "Now I can look after you; I've arranged that we shall go to the flat this evening and dine there. There will be no need to come back to this house again."

The tone of his voice added, "Thank God," and Faith flushed sensitively.

"This house is good enough for me," she said quickly. "And I am not going to your flat."

He laughed.

"Silly child. I thought you liked it so much."

"I thought I did--then. I've changed my mind." She tried to pass him. "Please let me go; I want to speak to Peg."

The Beggar Man stood immovable.

"Peg is not in the house," he said quietly. "She is not coming back any more."

The colour drained from the girl's face; even her lips looked white, and the Beggar Man went on hurriedly and rather pathetically:

"It makes me terribly unhappy to see you like this. I had hoped such great things ... I was a fool, I suppose. Faith, have you forgotten those first days when we knew each other? You were happy enough then...."

She turned her face away obstinately.

"I did not know who you were then."

The Beggar Man shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, we won't argue about it. How soon can you be ready? Miss Fraser has packed all the things it will be necessary for you to take. I will send for a taxi if you will put on your hat and coat."

"I am not going; I am going to stay here."

He walked out of the room without a word, returning almost at once with her hat and coat. He laid them down beside her on the table.

"Put them on," he said quietly.

She looked up with scared eyes.

"No."

"Put them on," said the Beggar Man once again.

"No." Only a whisper this time.

He stooped and raised her to her feet. He held her arms firmly, so that it was impossible for her to escape him.

"I've tried all ways with you," he said, and his voice sounded a little laboured and difficult. "At least, I hope I have. I've made every allowance for you and tried to be patient. That was my mistake; I should have shown you first of all that I was your master. Faith--look at me!"

She had been standing with her head down-drooping, and he could feel how she trembled, but he did not soften.

"Look at me," he said again, and she looked up.

Her brown eyes met his--kind no longer, only stern and determined--and for a moment neither spoke. But in that silence something seemed to tell Faith how useless was her resistance, how truly he had spoken when he said that he was her master.

Then he let her go and stood back a pace.

"Now are you coming with me?" he asked.

She put on her hat and coat without a word, and she heard him go out into the hall and into the street and send a boy for a taxi.

When he came back she was standing apathetically by the table, looking round the room which she was never to see again.

She hated him because he was tearing her away from the only home she knew--hated him because her mother had hated him; the knowledge had quite killed the first immature affection she had felt for him, quite wiped out all the romance.

The Beggar Man stood for a moment in the doorway, looking at her, and there was a great longing in his heart to try and comfort her, to try and drive that look of desolation from her childish face, but he knew it was no moment for wavering.

"Are you ready?" he asked, and his pity made his voice harsh.

"Yes."

She followed him out of the house without another word or backward glance, but her heart felt as if it were breaking. She kept telling herself that this was her punishment for having deceived her mother. She wished she could fall down dead, as her mother had done.

Forrester only spoke to her once during the drive to his rooms, and that was when he leaned forward and forced her wedding ring back to her third finger.

"Don't you ever dare to take it off again," he said.

There was a little smile in his eyes as he spoke, but she only heard the masterfulness of his voice, and she shrank back as if he had struck her.

Dinner was waiting for them at the flat, as he had said, and there was a maid in attendance who looked with kindly interest at Faith as she took her to her room.

"May I take off your boots for you?" she asked, as Faith stood helplessly by the dressing-table. "You must be tired. I will bring some hot water, and when you have had dinner you will feel better."

Forrester had felt bound to tell her something of the circumstances of his unusual marriage, and she was deeply interested. She felt sorry for Faith, too. Possibly she could afford to be, seeing the generous salary which Forrester had offered her if she would stay with his wife and do everything in her power to help her and make her happy.

Faith looked at her with troubled eyes.

"Must I go down to dinner?"

The girl smiled kindly.

"I think you had better. Mr. Forrester will be disappointed if you do not."

"I don't care," said Faith.

But she went all the same, and managed to eat something.

The Beggar Man made her drink some wine, which brought a faint colour to her white cheeks.

She no longer looked round the room with interest or admiration; she felt like a creature at bay, captured against her will by this man.

When dinner was ended and cleared away Forrester drew up an armchair for her. "Sit down; I want to talk to you," he said.

"Well?"

But she stood where she was, with the chair between them.

He had meant to be kind and affectionate, but the antagonism in that one monosyllable dispersed all his good resolutions. He was sick of scenes, tired of being held at arms' length; reluctantly he had grown to see that this marriage had been the greatest mistake of his life, that he had been a fool to imagine he could mould this girl to his own wishes and desires, child as she seemed. There was a strong will in the slim, soft body which defied him.

With a swift movement he caught her in his arms. She gave a quick, frightened breath, but before she could speak he had kissed her lips--kissed the eyes that closed in terror before his, and the soft face that turned from him with such desperation.

She was a child in his arms, but though she could not escape from him, her lips felt like steel beneath his. He might break her body, but he could never bend her will. Through every nerve in his body he could feel that she hated and feared him, and at last with sullen anger and bitterness he let her go, so violently that she staggered and almost fell, catching at the table to save herself.

He waited, pale to the lips and breathless, for the storm of sobbing which he thought would come, but though she put up her shaking hands to hide her face and the crimson patches left by the roughness of his kisses, she did not shed a tear. She only said over and over again in a broken-hearted little whisper, "Oh, mother--mother ... mother...."

"Faith!" The Beggar Man took a quick step towards her. "Faith! Oh, for God's sake...." But he did not touch her, and for a long moment there was silence. Then she looked up at him, haggard-eyed and piteous.

"Oh, please--please go away."

"Faith----" But she only shook her head, and he turned and went out of the room, shutting the door behind him...

There followed a terrible week of scenes and tears and defiance and pleading; Forrester suffered every emotion by turn at her hands. He tried indifference, firmness, kindness,--they all failed him, and the only way left to him--brute force--he would not try.

And then one evening as Peg was walking home from the factory, deeply engrossed in the last chapter of a new novelette, someone spoke her name.

"Miss Fraser!" She looked up, startled, dragging herself from the ardent words of the Honourable Fitzmaurice Arlington, to find the Beggar Man beside her.

"You!" she said blankly. Then with quick suspicion, "Is Faith ill?"

"Yes--no! At least ... Oh, God only knows." He laughed mirthlessly. "I've come to ask if your offer is still open," he went on bitterly. "I mean--will you come and stay with us in my flat? Live with us if you like. Anything, if you'll only come. Will you?"

Peg stuffed the novelette into a pocket; the story of the Honourable Fitzmaurice Arlington suddenly paled beside this real-life romance.

A beatific smile overspread her handsome face.

"Will I come?" she echoed. "Well, I should say so!"



CHAPTER VIII

By bringing Peg Fraser to the flat the Beggar Man acknowledged his defeat.

If he had not been so sure of Faith's hatred he might have tried harder to overcome her prejudices, but he felt that hatred was an active force through which success was impossible.

He said as much to Mr. Sawyer.

"I've been a fool, I know! I suppose the whole thing was bound to be a failure from the start, but she seemed to like me...." He shrugged his shoulders. "What's the best thing to do?" he asked.

Mr. Sawyer hesitated. He was disappointed over this marriage himself. He admired Forrester intensely, and had looked to him to carry through successfully a thing which he was sure must have failed dismally in the hands of a weaker man.

"She'll change her mind," he said after a moment. "Women always do if you give them time. Her mother's death was a great shock to her, of course."

"I've made every allowance for that."

"Then taking her sisters away so soon...." said Mr. Sawyer tentatively.

Forrester made an angry gesture.

"I did it for the best. She knows that, and it will prove for the best. How in God's name was she going to look after them and provide for them?"

"I know all that, but perhaps if you had left them with her for a little longer...."

Forrester frowned.

"The longer they had been together the harder the parting would have seemed. However, it's done, and I'm not going to undo it. Have you found out anything yet about this story of her father?"

Mr. Sawyer looked away from his client's anxious eyes as he answered.

"I have. Unfortunately, it's true! You remember that deal, five years ago it was, when a syndicate was formed to knock out the smaller manufacturers who would not sell to Heeler's?"

"Yes."

"Your wife's father was one of the small men who held out against you and was ruined."

Forrester laughed mirthlessly.

"It's the devil's luck; but how was I to know? Women are all unreasonable."

Mr. Sawyer did not answer, and Forrester went on:

"My wife has that Miss Fraser with her now, and mighty uncomfortable it is, too. She's as good as gold, but a rough diamond, and I wanted to get Faith away from the class she's been forced to mix with for the past five years. It looks as if she's going to beat me in that, too," he added, grimly.

"And are you all living at the flat?"

"Yes, for the present. I've taken a house at Hampstead, and we shall move there as soon as it's ready--in a week or two, I hope." He paced the length of the office and back again. "If it didn't look so much like running away, I'd make a settlement on my wife and clear off abroad," he said, shortly.

"I shouldn't do that," said Mr. Sawyer. "She's young. Give her another chance; be patient for a little while."

"Patience was never a virtue of mine," said the Beggar Man, grimly. "And, dash it all! What sort of a life is it for me, do you think? I'm not married at all, except that I'm paying; not that I mind the money."

"Well, wait a little longer," the elder man urged again. "It's early days yet, and you never know what will happen."

"I know what won't happen, though," said Forrester grimly.

He went back to the flat disconsolately. He heard Peg laughing as he let himself in, and the silence that fell as soon as his steps sounded in the passage.

The two girls were together in the sitting-room with which Faith had been so delighted when she first visited it, but it was Peg who greeted him as he entered.

She had made herself quite at home, and, in spite of a certain bluntness and vulgarity of which she would never rid herself as long as she lived, she seemed to have improved.

She was dressed more quietly and her hair was neater, but she still wore the gipsy earrings which Forrester hated so much.

She had been living in the flat a fortnight then--a year it seemed to Forrester. And he wondered, as he looked at his wife, why it was that, with each day, the gulf between them seemed to widen.

He smiled rather pathetically as her eyes met his.

"I've been thinking," he said. "What about a run down to see the twins? I'll take you in the car."

Twenty times a day he made up his mind that he would start all over again to win Faith back to him, but though she was friendly up to a certain point, he could never get beyond that point, or even back to the footing which had promised so happily for the future during the first days of their acquaintance.

Her face brightened wonderfully now at the suggestion and she clasped her hands eagerly.

"Oh, will you? How lovely!"

"We'll go directly after lunch," Forrester said, and looked at Peg. "Will you come, Miss Fraser?"

Peg shrugged her shoulders.

"You don't want me," she said. "Two's company, and three's a crowd. I've got a story to finish, too."

"Another novelette?" Forrester asked, cynically. Most of the rooms in the flat were littered with Peg's paper-backed library, and he hated the sight of them. He had made such different plans for his future. He had meant to introduce Faith to his own friends and gradually initiate her into their mode of living, but so far there had been no opportunity. Peg ruled the flat serenely, and, though she certainly never suggested bringing her own relations or acquaintances there, her mere presence prevented Forrester from doing as he wished.

"I'd much rather you came," Faith said quickly, but Peg only laughed.

"Then I'm not coming, so there's an end of it!"

She stuck to that, and early in the afternoon Faith and her husband drove away together. It was almost the first time they had been out without Peg since they came to live at the flat, and Forrester knew quite well that it was only the desire to see her sisters that had persuaded Faith to accompany him now.

He glanced down at her with a grim smile. She was looking better than he had seen her since her mother's death. There was a flush in her cheeks and her eyes were bright, but her thoughts were far away from him, it seemed, for she started when he spoke to her.

"I've found out about your father," he began curtly. It was not in his nature to be a tactician, and he knew that his blunt reference to the trouble between them hurt her; but he went on doggedly:

"It's true enough. He failed owing to a syndicate formed by me, but, as far as I can remember, I personally never heard his name or saw him." He waited, surprised at himself because he was hoping so desperately for a kind word or a little smile, but Faith only said "Yes," and kept her eyes steadily ahead.

"If you understood business," he went on, "you'd see that I am not to blame at all. Don't think I'm trying to shield myself, but I like fair play."

"Yes," said Faith again. Then she added, with a little nervous tremble in her voice, "I loved my father."

The Beggar Man laughed.

"And you don't love me, you mean! I'm quite aware of that."

She did not say any more, and they drove the rest of the way in silence.

The twins were playing in the school grounds when they reached the house, and Faith paced up and down the drawing-room in a fever of impatience while they were fetched. The head mistress was talking to Forrester. She was sure the children were quite happy, she said. They were certainly very good. "They were always good at home," Faith said, passionately, forgetting how many times a day they had quarrelled and slapped one another, and screamed and cried and nearly worried poor Mrs. Ledley to death. But time had lent a glamour of glory to most things now, and Faith could never think of her life at home without a dreary feeling of heart-sickness.

And then the twins came, and she caught her breath with a cry of wonderment, for she hardly recognized them in the healthy, well-dressed children who came demurely forward, hand in hand.

"Darlings--oh, darlings!" said Faith.

She went down on her knees and put her arms round them, kissing them rapturously.

"You haven't forgotten me? Of course, you haven't forgotten me?"

The twins returned her kisses warmly enough, and then held away a little to ask: "Have you brought us any chocolates?"

Faith's face fell. She had forgotten the chocolates! Oh, how could she have been so selfish?

"I've got some," said Forrester cheerfully, and the twins deserted their sister to fall upon him with rapture.

Afterwards they went round the garden and were introduced to the other children and shown the schoolroom. Then they all had tea together in the drawing-room and then ... Forrester looked at his watch.

"We ought to be getting back, Faith," he said.

Faith looked hurriedly at the twins. She was so sure they would cry and make a scene, and cling to her and beg to be taken away. If the truth must be told, she was hoping that they would. But neither of them seemed to mind in the least.

"When will you come again?" was all they asked, and Faith, nearly choking with disappointment, answered that she would come soon, quite soon.

"And are you happy here, really happy?" she asked them each in turn when for a moment they were alone, and each twin answered like an echo of the other, "It's lovely!"

"They've forgotten me, you see," Faith said bitterly to Forrester as they drove away and a bend in the road hid the last glimpse of the two small figures at the gate. "They don't want me any more. Nobody wants me."

The Beggar Man's hand tightened on the steering-wheel.

"I'm not so small that there's any excuse for you to forget me so completely," he said dryly. "I'm here--waiting to be wanted."

Faith did not answer, but that night when she and Peg were brushing their hair together in Faith's room she repeated his words.

"As if I shall ever want him?" she said scornfully.

Peg dragged a tangle from her thick hair with a little vicious gesture.

"There's plenty worse," she said mechanically.

Faith tried hard to see her friend's face, but it was hidden by the mop of hair hanging about it.

"You've altered your opinion of him then," she said offendedly. "Sometimes I believe you really like him."

"He's been very decent to me, anyway," Peg answered brusquely. "And it's a pretty rotten game for him, paying out for us all the time, and not a ha'porth of thanks, or anything! How'd you like it?"

"I never thought you were a turn-coat," Faith said shortly.

She cried herself to sleep. Everyone was against her. The twins had forgotten her, and now Peg was condemning her ... life was a hateful thing.

Forrester came into the flat a day or two later and found Peg there alone. He was tired and depressed, and answered her cheery greeting shortly.

She knew that his eyes wandered round the room in search of his wife, though he asked no questions, and Peg said:

"Faith's gone out. She'll be in directly." She paused, then added: "I didn't go with her, because I wanted to speak to you--alone!"

The last word was given with dramatic effect, and Forrester smiled faintly.

"Well--what is it?"

Peg was standing over by the window, and she turned round with a swift movement as she said:

"Look here! Do you want me to go?"

"Go?" He was too surprised to do anything but echo her words.

"Yes." The colour deepened in her cheeks, but her eyes met his without flinching. "I know it's been unpleasant for you, all these weeks," she went on deliberately. "I know you'd much rather be alone with Faith, so if you'll say the word I'll go, and no complaints."

There was a little silence, then Forrester said slowly:

"I suppose it hasn't occurred to you that if you go, Miss Fraser, Faith will probably go too."

"Is that what she says?"

"Yes."

Peg laughed.

"Well, don't take any notice of her. She's a silly kid; she says lots of things she doesn't really mean." She came across the room and stood beside him. "Look here; it's partly me who's to blame for her being so unkind to you," she went on bluntly. "I told her you were Ralph Scammel. I told her that you were a selfish brute, and that you made us work as we did to get money for you." For the first time her eyes fell, as she added: "You needn't believe me, but I've often been sick about that--since!"

Forrester laughed.

"You need not be. It's more or less true. I am selfish, and I am Ralph Scammel, and I did work you and hundreds of other girls like you, to make money for me."

"You're not a bit selfish," Peg said almost violently. "Look how good you've been to us! Took us from nothing, as you might say----"

"Oh--please!" Forrester stopped her in embarrassment. "I shall think you're going to ask me a favour if you say such kind things," he protested, half in fun.

"Well, then, I'm not," Peg declared. "But I'm going to ask you a question, all the same."

"What is it?"

"If I wasn't here, would you have your own friends to the flat? Oh, you needn't make excuses! I know I'm not so good as Faith! I knew it the first time I ever saw her! I used to tell her that she'd got no right to be at Heeler's. I know she's got something in her that I can't ever have, because her father was a gentleman, I suppose, and mine wasn't. So if you say the word, I'll pack up right away and be off! I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

There was a little silence. Then suddenly Forrester held out his hand.

"You're a brick--a real brick!" he said. "And--and--I shall be grateful to you if you will stay, Miss Fraser."

Peg gripped his hand hard.

"Oh, I'll stay, if you mean it," she said. She spoke rather loudly in order to hide her real emotion, and turning quickly away began to talk hurriedly on some other subject. But later, when Forrester had gone from the room, she darted across to where he had thrown his coat down on a chair, and snatching it up, pressed her lips to it.

"If you cared for me, as you do for her," she said, in a fierce little whisper, and then bitterly: "Oh, she's a fool--a blind little fool!"



CHAPTER IX

The house at Hampstead was ready at the end of August, and Peg moved to it from the flat with Forrester and his wife. She and Faith were like a couple of children getting the house in order; Peg had not much taste, and she adored bright colours. She would have had a rainbow drawing-room if it had been left for her to decide, but Faith was determined to be mistress in her own house as far as its arrangement went, and on that subject she and her husband were for once agreed.

It was rather a charming house, with a long garden, shut in by a high wall, and the first night they were established there Faith found Peg leaning out of her bedroom window, which overlooked it, her elbows resting on the stone sill, and a look of gloomy despondency in her handsome eyes.

Faith slipped an arm round her.

"What's the matter, Peg?" she asked. She was very fond of Peg and quick to recognize her varying moods. Peg answered gruffly, without her usual cheeriness.

"I'm fed up! I don't belong here! What right have I got to be in a house like this, and sleeping in a room like this?"

She turned round sharply, her blue eyes taking in every detail of the expensively furnished room behind them.

She had chosen its wallpaper herself, which was too bright, and a mass of extraordinary looking birds. She had chosen the carpet, too, which was a curious mixture of greens and yellows, with a satin quilt on the bed to match.

The furniture was white enamel, and both the big chairs in the room had a brilliant cushion of peacock green.

"It looks--uncommon," so Faith had said slowly, when she was first introduced to the finished result, but neither she nor the Beggar Man really liked it, as Peg had been quick to perceive.

"At any rate, I've got to sleep in it, and nobody else," she said in defiance.

"And she ought to have nightmare every night," so Forrester remarked afterwards rather grimly to his wife. "Good gracious, what taste! It shouts at one!"

Faith had defended Peg then, but she knew he was right, and she understood quite well now what Peg meant when she said she knew that she did not belong to the house.

"But it's all nonsense," she declared warmly. "I love you. I should hate the house without you."

Peg stooped and kissed her gratefully.

"You're a nice little kid," she said with a sigh. "But--it's true all the same what I say. I don't belong. If I wasn't here you'd be living quite a different life, you and Mr. Forrester. He'd be asking his friends to the house, and you'd be giving dinner-parties. But you don't because I'm here, and he's afraid I shall shock them."

"As if it matters what he's afraid of," Faith said sharply, but in her heart she knew that Peg was right; knew that, no matter how good and warm-hearted she might be, Peg grated on the Beggar Man forty times a day.

Over and over again Faith had seen him frown and turn away at one of Peg's slangy terms, just as she had seen him frown that day when she had told him that the facts of her marriage were like a novelette, and she had substituted "fairy story" instead.

Odd that then she had been so willing and anxious to please him, and that now she never considered him at all.

Peg seemed to guess something of her thoughts, for she caught her by the arm, twisting her round so that they were face to face.

"Look here," she said. "How long's it going on like this?"

The bright colour rushed to Faith's cheeks.

"What do you mean?"

"You know quite well what I mean," Peg said bluntly. "I mean how long is that husband of yours going to go on calmly paying out for you and me to live here, and have everything we want in the world, and get nothing in return? He's soft to do it, that's what I think. Either soft or an angel," she added. "And, after all, that's pretty much the same thing, isn't it?"

it?"

Faith laughed nervously.

"You do say such queer things," she objected.

"So I may do," Peg agreed, "but I'm not a fool, and neither is he; and as he's Ralph Scammel, and a good business man as well, he's not doing all this just to please us, and don't you forget it. There's some reason for it all."

"What do you mean?" But Faith spoke uneasily and looked away.

"I mean," said Peg bluntly, "that he's in love with one of us." She looked at Faith with sharp eyes. "A man never spends heaps of money on a woman for nothing. And as there's nothing to be got out of us, he's in love with one of us, and I don't flatter myself that it's me."

She waited, but Faith made no reply. She did not like Peg when she was in such serious moods, and lately Peg was often serious.

"Of course, I know you don't care two hoots about him," she went on. "Anyone with half an eye could see that! Not two hoots you don't care for him, but all the same I like to see fair play, and it's up to you to make things more comfortable for him after all he's done for you and me."

"What can I do? He's never here. He's just like a stranger," Faith objected.

"Which is what you wanted him to be, isn't it?" Peg asked innocently. "You're not complaining about that, are you? No! Well, then, what about it?"

Faith laughed, not very convincingly.

"He's master in his own house," she said. "It's his money; he need not spend any money on me if he does not want to. I am quite willing to go back to the factory and work. I told him so. I'd go back to-morrow."

Peg grinned. "Would you?" she said. "I know you wouldn't, after living here all these weeks and having servants to wait on you and pretty frocks to wear and scrumptious food to eat. I'll bet you wouldn't, so own up and be honest."

Faith frowned.

"Well, what do you expect me to do?" she asked rather crossly. "I suppose this is all leading up to something, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. You've got to play fair. You've got to let him bring his friends here and entertain them for him like other men's wives do. Where do you suppose he goes every evening when he has dinner out, and in the daytime when he has his lunch out? Well, he's being entertained by his friends and their wives, of course."

Faith looked up quickly. It had never occurred to her to wonder where Forrester spent his time when he was not at home.

"Well, I suppose he likes it," she said defensively.

"Likes it!" There was a world of scorn in Peg's voice. She turned again to her moody contemplation of the garden.

"Do you know what I'd do if I was his wife?" she asked. "Well, I'd make it so jolly nice for him here at home that he'd never want to go out to his other friends and their wives. I'd let him see that I could entertain every bit as properly as they can. I'd...."

"You've changed, haven't you?" Faith said bitterly. "It's only two months ago that you were calling him every name you could think of, and telling me that I was a fool to have married him."

"I know I was," Peg admitted calmly, though she flushed. "And I think p'raps I was the fool, after all."

She turned again suddenly.

"Faith, why do you call him the 'Beggar Man'? You've done it once or twice lately."

"Have I?" Faith did not raise her eyes. "Well, he really gave himself the name," she explained reluctantly. "It was--was the first time I met him--he asked if I'd got any people, and I said yes--I told him about--about mother and the twins...." She caught her breath with a long sigh. What years and years ago now it all seemed! "And he said that--that I was richer than he, because I'd got people to love me, and that he'd got only money. He said that I was Queen ... Queen somebody or other, and he was the Beggar Man. It was a fairy story or something, I think--he said he'd tell me about it

some day ... but he hasn't."

She looked past Peg to the silent garden. It hurt somehow to speak of that day so long ago now, and remember how different Forrester had seemed then to what he did now. Did she seem different to him, too? she wondered.

"I've read the story," Peg said triumphantly. "It was King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid. He married her and made her his queen, and took her to share his golden throne with him, and all the courtiers came and knelt before her and kissed her hand." She was off again, lost in the realms of her romantic, novel-fed soul.

Faith gave a curt little laugh.

"Well, nobody has knelt before me and kissed my hand, if that's what you mean," she said.

Peg stared at her.

"I know somebody who'd like to kiss you--if you'd let him," she said shrewdly. "And----" She broke off as the maid knocked at the door.

"There's a gentleman for the master, please, ma'am--a Mr. Digby," she said to Faith. "He's come a long way to see him he says, and that if he might wait he'd be glad, as it's very important." She hesitated. She knew how shy Faith was, and how as a rule she avoided seeing anybody. "He asked if I thought you would see him," she added.

Peg gave Faith a nudge.

"See him? Of course you will," she said in a stage whisper.

Faith coloured. "I can't--I..."

Peg came forward.

"Well, shall I see him for you?" But Faith was not going to allow this. After all, she was Forrester's wife and mistress of the house.

"I'll see him myself," she said.

Peg smiled, well pleased, and presently Faith went slowly down the stairs, with a nervously beating heart, and pushed open the closed drawing-room door.

A man was standing by the window looking into the garden; he was a rather short, thick-set man, and he turned eagerly as Faith entered.

"Mrs. Forrester?" he asked. "Well, I am glad to meet you. I've known Nicholas all my life, or for a good part of it," he explained in a rather young and charming voice. "We were abroad together for some years, so, of course, he was the first person I looked up when I got over here." He wrung her hand in a bear-like grip. "So the old boy's married," he went on. "Well, I'm delighted, and though I know it's not the right thing to do, I'm going to congratulate you instead of him, Mrs. Forrester. You've got one of the best."

Faith smiled nervously.

"You're very kind," she said. "He--he's out, but--but if you'll wait I'm sure he won't be long."

"I'm sure he won't, too," the man said laughing. "With a home like this to come to, and a wife...." His eyes rested admiringly on her face. "But Nicholas was always one of the lucky ones."

He was very friendly and unaffected, and Faith was surprised because she did not feel less at her ease, but she wished Peg would come down; Peg could always be relied upon to chip in and keep the ball of conversation going. She was wondering whether to fetch her when the door opened and Forrester himself walked in.

"Digby! Jove, I am glad to see you." The two men gripped hands and thumped one another on the back like delighted schoolboys. Faith had never seen her husband look so pleased before. She felt the slightest pang of envy and unwantedness as she stood there, forgotten for the moment, as they laughed and talked and questioned one another as to the happenings of the years since they had last met.

"And you'll stay with me, of course?" Forrester said. "I'd take it as a deadly insult if you went anywhere else. I----" He suddenly remembered Faith and turned to her. "My wife will be delighted to welcome you, I'm sure," he said rather formally.

"Mrs. Forrester has been most kind," Digby said. He slapped his friend on the back again heartily. "Lucky dog! All the

good things of life fall your way."

The Beggar Man laughed.

"That is a compliment for you, Faith," he said.

Afterwards when for a moment they were alone he questioned her rather anxiously.

"You don't mind him staying here? He's my best friend, and we haven't met for years! He won't be any trouble. He's a fine chap!"

"Of course I don't mind." She avoided his eyes. "Peg was giving me a lecture only this evening about you! She said I did nothing for you in return for all you've done for us. She said that I ought to entertain your friends." She laughed rather sadly. "You know I can't do anything like that properly, don't you?"

A little gleam crept into his eyes.

"You could do all that I want in that way," he said. "But it's not Peg's place to lecture you," he added hardily.

Faith rushed to Peg's defence.

"She meant it so awfully well. She's always sticking up for you. She says that she likes fair play...." She paused. "So do I," she added with difficulty. "And--and I'm afraid I haven't played fair since--since--well, you know."

There was a little silence. The Beggar Man's eyes never left her face, and there was a queer, hungry look in their blueness.

"You're not--I suppose you're not trying to tell me that--that you don't hate me so much--after all, eh?" he asked with an effort.

She drew back a step in alarm.

"I am only trying to tell you that--that I know how much you've done for us all, and that if there was anything--any little thing I could do to please you ..." She faltered and stopped.

There was an eloquent silence.

"Well--I should like you to kiss me," Forrester said bluntly. He paused. "Or is that too big a thing to ask?" for Faith had put out protesting hands, and he laughed.

"It's too much, eh? Oh, all right! Don't bother!" He passed her without another word and walked out of the room whistling.

They had quite a merry evening.

"Anyone would think Mr. Digby had known us all for years and years," Peg said afterwards to Faith as the girls went up to bed together. "I like him awfully, don't you?"

Faith nodded, "Yes." She did like him, but all the evening she had felt vaguely uncomfortable, conscious of his eyes upon her.

"I wonder how long he means to stay," she hazarded.

"The longer the better," Peg declared bluntly. "If he's here Mr. Forrester will have to be at home." And then, as if scared by some possible admission in her words, she added, "It makes it so much more lively...."

Downstairs a little silence had followed the girls' departure, which Peter Digby broke with a half-sigh.

"Wish I was married," he said laconically. "I've been looking for a girl like your wife for the last ten years, Nick!"

Forrester laughed.

"There are plenty of girls in the world," he said.

"Yes, but not the right sort," Digby objected. "Where did you meet her?"

Forrester coloured slightly.

"Oh, it's a long story. I'll tell you some other time." And to change the subject he asked, "What do you think of Peg--Miss Fraser?"

Digby hesitated.

"Handsome girl," he said at last. "Very different to Mrs. Forrester. Bit of a rough diamond I should think, if you won't be offended with me for saying so."

The Beggar Man was lighting a cigarette. He blew a big puff of smoke into the air before he answered with deep earnestness: "She's a rough diamond as you say, but I admire and respect her more than any woman I know. She's got a heart of gold."



CHAPTER X

Peter Digby seemed to begin a new chapter of life for the entire household. He took it for granted, whether intentionally or in ignorance, that his friend's marriage was a normal one, and proceeded to organize amusements and means of enjoying his stay with them to the full.

He booked theatre seats and arranged dinners, and refused to listen when Forrester protested.

"My dear chap!" he said, "I've got plenty of money, and I'm going to enjoy myself in my own way. I landed myself on you, and as I don't suppose you'll allow me to pay for my board and lodging I'm going to get my own back by taking the girls about as much as I can. Hang it all, I've never enjoyed anything so much in my life. What's the matter with you, you old bear?"

Forrester laughed and shrugged his shoulders. He had been quick enough to see that both Faith and Peg had unanimously taken his friend to their hearts, and were having every bit as good a time with him as he was with them. Faith had never looked so well or so happy. The colour had come back to her cheeks and her eyes danced. She always seemed happy and light-hearted, and it gave the Beggar Man a stab of pain to know that Peter Digby had succeeded where he himself had so completely failed.

After the first few days he began to excuse himself from accompanying them on their pleasure trips. He was busy. He had a great deal to see to, so he said when Digby called him a slacker. In a sense it was true, for things at Heeler's were not going particularly well, and there had lately been a good deal of unrest amongst his workpeople.

Forrester kept all his worries to himself, and by doing so doubled his burden. There is nothing so hard to carry as a trouble unshared, but there was nobody in whom he could confide.

He had aged years since his marriage, and his hair was plentifully sprinkled with grey.

Peg alone noticed the change in him. There was very little that escaped her sharp eyes.

One day she walked boldly into his study and tackled him in her usual direct way.

"Mr. Forrester, why aren't you coming with us to-day?"

Peter Digby could drive Forrester's car, and had arranged to take the two girls for a long run into the country, and the Beggar Man had excused himself on the score of "work."

He was poring over a pile of papers when Peg opened the door and walked in.

"Why aren't you coming with us to-day?" she demanded.

She stood on the opposite side of his writing table, looking at his tired face with a wonderful softening in her eyes.

She was dressed for the drive, and looked rather like a handsome bird of Paradise in her bright green veil and red motor coat.

She still wore the swinging gipsy earrings, but lately they had somehow ceased to annoy Forrester; or perhaps he was beginning to realize that, after all, trifles count very little in the sum total of things.

He looked up at her with a pucker between his eyes.

"I told you--I'm too busy to come," he answered.

"I know that's what you said, but it's only an excuse, isn't it?" she asked bluntly.

Forrester smiled. "I don't think it's worth arguing about, anyway," he said.

"Don't you? Well, I do," said Peg. She went back and shut the door, which was on the jar only, and came again to stand beside him.

"There's none so blind as those who won't see," she said with seeming irrelevance.

Forrester laid down his pen and half turned in his chair.

"What do you mean?" he asked quietly.

Peg coloured a little, but her eyes met his steadily.

"I mean that you ought to look after your wife yourself," she said. There was no mistaking her meaning, and Forrester made no attempt to do so.

There was a little silence; then he laughed shortly.

"And supposing my wife refuses to allow me to look after her?" he asked.

Peg shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"What's the good of being a big, strong man like you if you can't master one little slip of a girl?" she said.

The Beggar Man coloured.

"I've said all that to myself scores of times," he answered frankly; "but it's not in me to bully any woman. I thought it was; I know better now." He looked up at her deprecatingly. "You've been honest with me," he said, "and I'll be honest with you. My marriage is the biggest mistake of my life, and I've made a few in my time. If--if Faith wishes to be free of me, well----"

Peg pulled at the strings of her gaudy veil as if they were choking her.

"Oh, she's a fool--a silly little fool!" she cried bitterly. "Sometimes I can hardly keep my hands off her when I see----" She broke off, her passion dying away as quickly as it had arisen. "I beg your pardon," she said bluntly.

There was an eloquent silence; then she broke out again with a most strange humility:

"Mr. Forrester, come with us to-day. Please come with us."

Forrester knew Peg well enough to know also that there was some deep reason for her request, and, in spite of what he had just said, his heart contracted with a fierce pain as he thought of the rapidly-growing friendship between his wife and Digby.

"Please," said Peg again, and impulsively she laid her hand on his shoulder.

The Beggar Man looked down at her firm, strong fingers irresolutely. Then suddenly he lifted his hand and covered them with a warm pressure.

"Very well, but it's only because you have asked me," he said.

He rose and began pushing the pile of papers away into a drawer, and Peg walked out of the room, her head drooping, her face quivering.

She met Faith in the hall.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," the younger girl said. "Where have you been? Mr. Digby's been ready to start ever so long."

"I know. I was talking to Mr. Forrester," Peg answered defiantly.

Faith glanced towards the closed study door.

"I suppose I'd better go and say good-bye to him," she said with faint nervousness.

Peg laughed.

"You needn't trouble. He's coming, after all."

Faith's eyes widened.

"Coming with us? He said he couldn't!"

"I know. I made him change his mind."

She walked to the open front door and looked at the waiting car. Digby was standing beside it.

"Are you ready, Miss Fraser?" he asked with a touch of impatience.

"We're waiting for Mr. Forrester," Peg said casually. "He's coming, after all."

She was not slow to see the swift shadow of disappointment that crossed his face, though he said heartily enough:

"Changed his mind, has he? Good!"

"Yes; I persuaded him," Peg said laconically.

She was fully aware that Faith was close beside her, and it gave her a fierce sort of joy to know that the girl's eyes were turned upon her with the faintest shadow of suspicion in them.

When Forrester appeared Peg called to him quickly.

"Come and sit next to me, Mr. Forrester. The back seat's the most comfortable."

Faith's lips moved as if she would have spoken, but she closed them again and took her place beside Digby without comment.

Not one of the four could have said that the day was enjoyable. There was an intangible something in the air which they all could feel but none of them explain.

They drove into the heart of the country and lunched at a wayside inn. Faith was very quiet, and she kept glancing at Peg and her husband with scared eyes.

Afterwards, when they went out into the woods in their wonderful autumn tints, she found herself with Digby, and, looking quickly round, saw that her husband and Peg were some little distance behind, sauntering along leisurely and apparently the best of friends.

She could hear Forrester's deep voice and Peg's rather loud laugh, and a queer sense of unwantedness crept into her heart.

"A penny for your thoughts!" Digby said, touching her arm, and she started and smiled and said they were not worth anything.

"It would be a penny badly invested," she said with an effort at lightness.

Digby looked down at her and swiftly away again. He knew quite well that it was for this girl that he lingered so long in his friend's house, and there was bitterest envy in his heart.

Forrester had always been lucky. The best of this world's goods had always gone his way.

He had envied him for his business capabilities and gift of making money, but he envied him more now because he had this girl for his wife.

"Aren't the woods lovely?" Faith asked, with an effort to break the silence. "I've never seen anything quite so lovely."

"You must get Forrester to take you abroad," Digby said, stifling a sigh. "Have you ever been out of England?"

"No."

"Always lived in London?"

"Yes."

"You haven't really begun to live yet, then," he told her.

Their eyes met, and there was a queer, wistful look in the man's that brought the colour rushing to Faith's cheeks, though she hardly knew why. She stopped dead and looked back through the leafy wood.

"Shall we wait for the others?" she asked nervously.

It was some seconds before Peg and Forrester joined them.

"Mrs. Forrester tells me that she has never been out of England," Digby said. "And I tell her that if that is so she has not yet begun to live! London's all right--finest place in the world, bar none, but to appreciate it properly you ought to go away from it for months."

"I hate London," Faith said impulsively.

He opened his eyes in amazement.

"Really! What part have you lived in?"

Faith coloured and did not answer, but Peg broke in in her usual blunt way:

"Poplar. That's where she lived till she got married. I lived there, too. It's a frightful hole! No wonder she hates London; you would if you'd seen the rotten side of it as we have."

Faith glanced quickly at her husband. She was so sure that he would be angry with Peg for her frankness, but to her surprise he was smiling.

"One would hardly choose the East End for a permanent residence, certainly," Digby said, in some perplexity; "but everyone to their taste."

"It wasn't a question of 'taste,'" Peg said dryly; "it was more like Hobson's choice. I had to be where the bread and cheese was, and it happened to be in Poplar--that's all."

There was a little silence. Digby was beginning to see that he was on delicate ground.

"I think we ought to be turning back," Forrester said.

They retraced their steps silently.

"Shall we change places going home?" Faith asked, as she slipped into her big coat when they reached the car again. She looked at Peg. "Perhaps you would rather sit in the front for a change," she said hesitatingly.

Peg looked at the Beggar Man, and he answered for her readily:

"We were quite comfortable as we were, I think, Miss Fraser?"

"Quite," said Peg.

Faith took a hurried step towards Digby.

"Oh, very well. I would really prefer to sit in the front; I only thought it would look rather selfish."

There was a note of uncertainty in her voice, and Peg's blue eyes gleamed with a vixenish light as she settled herself comfortably beside Forrester.

They were rather silent on the way home, but beneath her gaudy veil Peg's quick brain was hard at work.

She knew that Faith was faintly resentful, if not actively jealous, and a sense of triumph warmed her heart.

She had read in one of her favourite novelettes of a heroine who had never appreciated the goodness and worth of the man to whom she was married until another woman--a "siren" she had been called in the story--had stolen him from her, and with a wild flight of sentimental imagination she already saw herself nicely fitted with the part.

She stole a little glance at Forrester, and a sigh shook her. What happiness to be loved by such a man! Nothing that she had ever come across in fiction could yield half such exquisite bliss.

To be his wife! To be with him always!... She lost herself in a world of dreams.

Never once did she think now of his wealth, nor the advantages to be gained from it. The man himself filled the picture of her thoughts. She could have been equally happy with him in the dreary streets of Poplar as in the luxury of the house at Hampstead.

How she had hated him at first! How she had sneered at Faith and tried to set her against him, and now the scales had tipped the other way and left her kneeling at his feet.

She was humble enough to know herself far below him, shrewd enough to realize that, though she might find it heaven to be with him, his happiness could never lie with her. She knew that she jarred on him in a thousand ways, though lately she had recognized that he had subtly changed towards her, was kinder, more tolerant, and for one wild moment she allowed her thoughts to soar up into the blue skies of impossibility.

King Cophetua had loved the Beggar Maid and been happy with her. Why should the day of such miracles be at an end? She looked again at the man beside her, and saw that his eyes were fixed on his wife with such a look of sadness in them that she felt the tears rising to her own.

He loved Faith. Whatever he might say or pretend, Peg knew that he loved her, and she gripped her hands beneath the cover of the rug. What a fool Faith was! What a blind little fool, that she could laugh and be merry with a man like Digby when this king amongst men was waiting for her to look his way.

And the pendulum of Peg's emotions swung back again. After all, what was her own happiness compared with his?

And her thoughts flew to the latest and as yet unfinished novelette lying on her bed at home in which the Lady Gwendoline Maltravers had just dropped gracefully on to her aristocratic knees to plead for her lover's honour with the brutal squire who had sworn to ruin him.

"Take me! Body and soul I will be yours, if only you will spare him! Spare the man I love, and give him his happiness!"

Peg thought it a noble and lofty sentiment, and a curious feeling of sympathy and kinship with the Lady Gwendoline swept through her heart.

She, too, if the occasion arose could sacrifice everything--body and soul--in order that the man she loved might be happy.



CHAPTER XI

When Peg went to Faith's room that night for their usual gossip, she found the door locked against her.

She rattled the handle impatiently and called:

"Faith!"

There was no answer, and she rapped on the panel, a vague feeling of surprise in her heart.

"Faith! It's only me--let me in."

There was an answer then.

"I've gone to bed--I'm tired."

"Tired!" Peg echoed the word with disdainful incredulity. She did not see how Faith could be tired after a day of such ease. She herself was as fresh and wide awake as a lark.

"You can't be tired," she said emphatically, and rattled the handle once more. "Faith, let me come in. Does your head ache?"

"Of course not, but I want to go to sleep. Good-night."

There was such finality in the voice that the colour rose to Peg's handsome face. It was the first time she had ever been shut out from Faith's confidence, and she searched her mind wildly for some reason that would explain things.

What had she done? How had she offended?

As she stood there, her fingers on the handle of the locked door, the Beggar Man came up the stairs.

He had heard Peg's rather loud, insistent voice from the smoking-room below, and had momentarily left his friend to see if anything was the matter.

Peg blushed fiery red when she saw him. Her black hair was unbound and streaming down over her shoulders. She wore a brilliant cherry-coloured dressing-gown, and her feet were thrust into gaudy Oriental slippers.

"Oh, my gracious!" she said with a gasp.

Forrester's eyes met hers indifferently, though he would have been less than human had he been blind to the picture she made as she stood there in the half-light.

The brilliant gown she wore, her dark hair, and the bright, confused colour in her cheeks accentuated her beauty, for Peg was a beauty, even if it was of a crude, rather vulgar type, and unconsciously Forrester's eyes grew admiring as he asked: "Is anything the matter? I thought you called."

Peg laughed nervously.

"Faith won't open the door, that's all. She says she's tired. There's nothing the matter." Then she giggled, and swung her long hair back from her shoulders. "I didn't think you'd come up," she apologized.

The Beggar Man coloured a little.

"I thought perhaps something might be the matter," he said awkwardly, and turned to go downstairs again, when quite suddenly Faith's door opened and she came out.

There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Then Peg laughed.

"It's like a bit out of a novelette, isn't it?" she said shrilly, driven by her sheer and unaccountable nervousness to say the wrong thing. "Heroine opens her door and finds her best friend talking to her husband--*tete-a-tete*, as it were."

She pronounced the French words quite incorrectly, and she struck a melodramatic pose, one hand flung out towards Forrester and the other pressed hard over her heart.

The Beggar Man looked at his wife.

"I heard Miss Fraser calling to you," he said stiffly, "and I thought perhaps something might be the matter. That is all." He waited a moment, his eyes seeking Faith's wistfully.

The two girls made a strong contrast. One so small and pale and fair and the other so tall, with her dark, gipsy-like beauty.

But Faith did not even glance his way, and with a half-sigh Forrester went on down the stairs, and they heard the shutting of the smoking-room door.

Faith turned to close her own again, but Peg was too quick for her. She was past her and inside the room instantly. She sat down on the side of the bed and looked at the younger girl with challenging eyes.

"Well--out with it," she said defiantly. "What have I done?"

Faith did not answer. There was a look in her blue eyes that Peg had never seen there before--an aloofness in her manner that was almost painfully eloquent--and after a second of utter astonishment Peg sprang to her feet and caught Faith roughly by the arm, peering down to look into her face.

"What are you thinking?" she demanded.

Faith tried to free herself, but she was a child in Peg's muscular grasp, until with a little contemptuous exclamation Peg released her and turned away.

"Jealous! Is that it?" she asked crudely. "Jealous! Because the man you won't look at yourself happened to see me with my hair loose and this gown on."

She walked over to the long glass in Faith's dressing-table and regarded her gaudy reflection with fiery eyes.

"I do look rather a picture, don't I?" she said deliberately. "It only wants a cigarette in my mouth or a red rose in my hair to make me look like one of those dancing girls--the French ones, I mean. What do you call them--apache or something." She pronounced that word wrongly also.

Faith did not answer, and Peg laughed.

"I'd never be such a dog in the manger," she said mockingly.

Her heart was beating fast with a sudden wild hope.

Was there any cause for Faith to be jealous? Had Forrester at last ceased to be indifferent to her? She recalled the slow look of admiration in his eyes, and her pulses leapt.

Well, Faith would have none of him! Could she be surprised if, after all that had happened.... But before the thought was complete in her mind she was ashamed of it. She turned away from the mirror, and looked at Faith with angry eyes.

"You little idiot!" she said, with good-natured irritation. "Do you think he'd look at me if ...?" Then once again she stopped.

Supposing unconsciously she had begun to teach Faith a lesson. Supposing by allowing her to be jealous it might be the means of making her care for Forrester--at last!

She caught her breath with a little exultant sound. She had so longed to make him happy, and if the only way to do so was by giving him his wife at the sacrifice of her own love, well--who was she to complain?

He had done everything for her. He had taken her from the sordid surroundings where she had passed all the days of her life. He had done his best to make a lady of her. He had trusted her, treated her as a friend. Was there any sacrifice too great to make in return?

Peg was not one to hesitate once an idea had taken shape in her mind, and even as Faith looked at her she saw the dark, handsome face harden and grow defiant as she turned with a shrug of her shoulders and opened the closed door.

"Well, I've been in pleasanter company, I must say!" she said in her old nonchalant tone. "So I'll leave you to yourself. Good-night, fair Lady Elaine, and pleasant dreams!"

She swept Faith a low, mocking curtsy, the folds of her cherry-coloured gown sweeping the floor all around her, then she laughed and went off to her own room.

Faith ran to the door and shut and locked it. Her throat was throbbing with suppressed sobs and her lips shook.

She had been so fond of Peg. She had looked up to her and admired her, but to-night she could find it in her heart to hate her for her handsome beauty and insolence.

She, too, had seen the look of admiration in Forrester's eyes, and a little sick suspicion rose above the angry tumult of her heart.

Supposing he really did like Peg? Supposing he more than liked her? She was handsome enough to take any man's fancy, and Faith knew how badly Forrester had suffered over the disappointment of his marriage.

A hundred little incidents came crowding back to her mind, cruelly magnified. The way he invariably chose to talk to Peg in preference to herself. The way he had elected to sit with her at the back of the car that afternoon, though she had offered to change places. The way he had overruled her objections with regard to Peg's gaudy choice of decoration when first they came to the house.

"What does it matter if it pleases her?" he had said, in his careless way. "I like to see her happy."

She had thought nothing of it at the time, but it seemed a great matter now. And at the memory of Peg's crude accusation the blood rushed stinging to Faith's pale cheeks.

"I'm not jealous! How dare she say so? I hate her--I hate her!"

She spoke the words in a whisper through the silent room and the bitter sound of them frightened her.

Hate Peg! Oh, no, she did not mean that. Peg had been a good friend to her--Peg had never failed.

Faith tried hard to recover her composure and look at things more sensibly.

After all, what had happened? Little enough, she knew, but she could not forget the picture Peg had made during those moments on the landing or the look of admiration in the Beggar Man's eyes.

She had felt herself colourless and insignificant beside Peg, and her soul writhed as she recalled the mocking, nervous words that the elder girl had spoken.

"It's like a bit out of a novelette, isn't it?... Heroine opens her door and finds her best friend talking to her husband, *tete-a-tete*, as it were."

Though she knew that Peg had meant no harm, and though she had heard her say similar things scores of times before, to-night somehow the words grated deeply on Faith's sensitiveness.

It was as if someone had held up a scorching light in front of her friend, showing just how rough and unrefined she really was and could be.

Faith remembered how, not so long ago, Forrester had told her that he wished her friendship with Peg to cease. Did he wish it still?

She lay awake for hours, turning things over in her mind, torturing herself with doubts and perplexities.

It was not that she cared for him at all, so she told herself again and again. It was just that it was so horrible to think that perhaps he and Peg ... and then once more her better nature came uppermost. How could she think such base things? How dared she? Peg was her best friend, had proved herself in a thousand ways, and Forrester--when had he ever been anything but kind and considerate?

She was bound to admit that last truth now, though for weeks she had tried to hate him, and had blamed him for the death of both her parents.

She turned the pillow over and tried to sleep.

"I don't care. I wish I could be free. I don't care," she told herself, but when at last she fell asleep it was to dream of her husband as he had been during the first days of their acquaintance; to dream of the kindness of his eyes and the clasp of his hand, and her own feeling of warmth and gratitude towards him.

She woke in the morning unrefreshed, and with a bad headache. She dreaded meeting Peg, but she need not have done, for Peg greeted her as if nothing had happened, with a kiss and her usual cheery, "Hullo, Faith! Had a bad night? You look pale enough."

"I had a very good night," Faith answered emphatically. "And I'm ever so hungry."

But at breakfast she ate nothing, and Digby watched her with concerned eyes.

"We've rushed you about too much lately," he said. "You're not strong like Miss Fraser."

"Me! Oh, I'm as strong as a horse," Peg said cheerfully. "Nothing ever tires me!"

Forrester looked across at her and laughed, and Faith clenched her hands in her lap.

There seemed such a spirit of comradeship between these two, she wondered why she had never noticed it before.

When breakfast was over she followed her husband into the hall. As a rule, she avoided him, and he looked up in surprise as she stood beside him while he brushed his coat and hat.

"Have you got to go to the City to-day?" she asked at last with an effort.

He echoed her words blankly:

"Have I got to go? What do you mean?"

"Only that"--she hesitated nervously--"only--it's so fine, I thought perhaps you might stay at home."

Forrester flushed a little, but he only said dryly, "Oh, I see," and got into his coat.

Faith watched him with timid eyes, that yet held a dawning resolution. Yesterday he had gone motoring with them to please Peg, and because Peg had asked him. Would he stay at home this morning to please her, if she could find the courage to ask him?

"I've a great deal to see to to-day," he went on lightly. "There's been trouble down at Heeler's, you know."

Faith knew, but it had not interested her. She never wished to think of Heeler's any more. It was like another part of her life--a part she only wanted to forget.

The Beggar Man had turned to the door.

"Well, good-bye," he said constrainedly.

Another moment and he would be gone, she knew, and, in desperation, Faith took a quick step towards him...

"Nicholas ... will you ... I want you to stay at home."

She was crimson, and she could not meet his eyes; but she knew his were upon her, and her heart seemed to stop beating while she waited for his answer.

It was a long time coming. Then the Beggar Man said, very gently:

"I am sorry. I am afraid it is quite impossible, Faith."

She drew back at once.

"Oh ... very well!" she said blankly, and the next moment he had gone....

Faith stood for some seconds staring at the closed door. She felt as if someone had struck her across the face.

It was the first time she had ever definitely asked a favour of him, and he had refused!

Peg, coming into the hall, noticed her pallor.

"What's the matter, little 'un?" she asked in concern, but Faith would not answer. She went upstairs to her room, and after a moment Peg followed.

"What's up?" she asked again. "Anything I can do?"

There was a momentary silence, then Faith said, in a queer, cold little voice:

"Yes. Come in; I want to speak to you."

Peg obeyed. There was an amused smile hovering round the corners of her mouth. "I'm all attention," she said. "Fire away."

Faith's hands were trembling and she clasped them together to hide the humiliating fact.

"I've been thinking," she said, with an effort. "I've been thinking that--that though you've been very kind, I...." She could not go on.

Peg looked up, a gleam of fire in her eyes. She knew without further words what it was that Faith was trying to tell her.

"You mean you want me to clear out?" she said bluntly.

Faith wavered for a moment; then she thought of the way in which Forrester had refused her request five minutes ago, though yesterday he had been so easily persuaded by Peg. "You need not put it like that," she said hoarsely, "but ... yes, that is what I mean."

The crimson blood swept Peg's face and died away again, leaving her as white as marble. It was the last thing of which she had ever dreamed that this child--this baby--would ever turn her out of the house!

Her loyal heart felt as if it must burst with shame and pain, but she shrugged her shoulders with a brave display of indifference.

"Well, I'll see what Mr. Forrester says," she answered coolly. "If he wants me to go--well.... He's master of the house, isn't he? I came here because he asked me to, and so I guess I'll take my marching orders from him."



CHAPTER XII

But in spite of her defiance, Peg was desperately unhappy. Her cheeks burned as she walked out of the room, her head high in the air.

She was torn between her love for Forrester and her desire to secure his happiness and her loyalty to her friend. She knew quite well what Faith must be thinking, and while she was rejoiced that at last she had succeeded in rousing her jealousy, she was bitterly ashamed of the part she had set herself to play.

She went up to her gaudy room and shut the door, standing for a moment leaning against it, her hands in her favourite position, on her hips.

What was she to do now? Would Forrester refuse to have her so summarily turned out of his house? She did not see how he could very well go against his wife's wishes.

For the first time the gaudiness of the room irritated her. It seemed a vivid reminder of the vast difference that lay between her life and Faith's. She caught up one of the peacock green cushions from an armchair and flung it at a particularly offensive looking bird in the wall-paper.

The violent action made her feel better. She opened the window wide and cooled her hot cheeks with the September breeze.

It was still quite early in the morning, and she wondered how she could occupy her time till Forrester came home. That Faith would not speak to her she was sure. She was not at all surprised to hear presently from one of the maids that Faith had gone out with Digby and was not returning to lunch.

Peg made a little grimace. This was throwing down the glove with a vengeance, but she only laughed as she turned away.

"I shan't be in either," she said, though she had no more idea than the dead what she meant to do. But she put on her hat and coat and went out.

It was a lovely morning, sunny and with just a touch of crispness in the air, as if during the night winter had passed that way and breathed on the world.

Peg wandered round the West End staring vacantly into shop windows, but her thoughts were far away. It was only when, towards one o'clock, she began to feel hungry the sudden idea came to her that she would go home.

She had only visited her own people twice since she left them at Forrester's request. There was a tingling of excitement in her veins as she climbed on to a city omnibus.

What would they say to her, she wondered. Not that she cared.

Peg had never got on with her mother, who had married again, her second husband being a man named Johnson, employed at Heeler's factory.

There were two small step-brothers, rough, red-haired little boys, too like their father for Peg to care about them. But nevertheless the house in the mean street was the only home she had known, and there was a faintly pleasurable warmth in her heart as she climbed off the bus at the corner of the street and walked the remaining few yards.

The street looked more squalid than usual to-day, she thought, not realizing that the change lay in herself. The door of the house was open, and down the narrow passage she could hear her mother's scolding voice and the sound of a well-administered box on the ears, followed by a prolonged howl from one of the boys.

Peg shivered as she walked down the passage and pushed open the kitchen door. Had she ever really been happy and contented to live in such surroundings? And fear went through her heart as she realized that before long she might have to return to them again.

The kitchen seemed full of people, though at first she could only distinguish her mother through the mist of steam that was rising from a wash-tub.

"Hullo!" Peg said laconically. She looked round for a chair, but they were all occupied, so she leaned against the door, hands on hips.

The red-haired boy who had had his ears boxed stopped howling to stare at her. Mrs. Johnson deserted the wash-tub

and came forward, wiping soapy arms on a not over-clean apron.

"Well, who'd have thought of seeing you?" she said blankly.

Peg nodded carelessly to her stepfather, who had risen awkwardly to offer her a chair.

"Thanks, no--I'll stand; I only looked in for a minute." Then her face changed a little as she recognized a second man who had been lolling in the background against a crowded dresser.

"Hullo, Ben!" she said, and the colour deepened in her cheeks.

She and Ben Travers had once been very good friends. There had been a time when she had seriously contemplated taking him on trial as a sweetheart, but her friendship with Faith had put an end to it all, though Ben had never forgiven her, and Peg knew it well enough.

The last time she had seen him had been the day when Forrester came to admit his defeat and to ask her to live at his flat, and she realized with a faint sense of discomfort that she and he had grown many miles apart since then.

But he only nodded and said, "Hullo, Peg," quite unconcernedly.

There was an awkward silence, broken by Peg's mother.

"Well, you look a fine enough lady now," she said, a shade of envy in her voice. "How long's it going to last?"

"As long as I like," said Peg coolly. She was not going to tell them that already the end of her happiness was in sight.

Mrs. Johnson looked at her daughter uncomfortably.

"You'd best come in the parlour," she said. "You'll get all messed up if you stay here."

But Peg declined to move. She looked at Ben again.

"Why aren't you at Heeler's?" she asked.

He laughed sheepishly, and exchanged glances with her stepfather.

"Because we ain't, that's why," he said, significantly.

Peg's mother broke in fretfully:

"A lazy, ungrateful lot--that's what I say they are! Never satisfied! What's the use of being out of work for a few extra shillings a week and letting us all starve.... No; I shan't shut up!" she added, as her husband tried to check her flow of eloquence. "It's true, what I'm saying. You've always been treated fair at Heeler's, and never no complaints till that new manager came, but now ... nothing right! Something always wrong." She turned to Peg. "They think they've got a grudge against Mr. Heeler," she explained. "Think! They don't know, mind you! None of 'em!"

Peg's eyes dilated a little.

"There is no Mr. Heeler," she said, quickly.

Ben Travers laughed.

"She means Scammel," he explained, "or Forrester, as I dare say you call him now he's spending his money on you!" His face flushed with dull anger as he looked at her. "Fine feathers make fine birds, all right," he said laconically. "But it won't last as long as you think it will, my girl, you mark my words...." He moved away from the dresser and hitched at his collar. "Well, I'm off," he said.

Peg followed him out of the kitchen and caught his arm.

"What are you hinting at?" she asked quietly, though her heart was racing with apprehension.

She knew Ben very well--knew just how reckless and unjust he would be if anybody managed to persuade him that he really had a grievance. He tried to shake her off, but she clung to him.

"You mind your own business," he said roughly. "You threw me over for that...." He bit back an ugly word. "Well, that's your look out!"

"Ben, you're not going to do anything ... foolish!" There was a throb of fear in her voice, and he smiled grimly, "Promise me you're not going to do anything--wicked," she urged.

He turned and looked into her face.

"What's it got to do with you, eh?" he asked brutally. Then suddenly the hot blood surged in a crimson wave to the roots of his hair as he read the passionate anxiety of her eyes.

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" he asked thickly. He dragged himself free of her, his savage eyes wandering over her expensive clothes. "Well, I might have known," he said. "Women are all the same. It's always the chap with the money--no matter if he's a wrong 'un or not."

He went off down the road, deaf to her when she called his name, and Peg went back to her mother with a trembling heart.

There was some plot afoot to injure Forrester, she was sure. She questioned her stepfather, but he would admit nothing, and her mother was evidently too afraid to say anything, even if she had the knowledge.

Peg went back to Hampstead, sick with fear, though she tried hard to conquer it.

Ben would never be so foolish. She knew he was wild, but even he would surely hesitate at violence. It seemed an eternity until she heard Forrester's key in the door that evening.

He was home earlier than he had expected, he said, as she went to meet him. He looked round--"Where is Faith?"

"She went out with Mr. Digby to lunch. They haven't come back yet."

She saw the little frown that crossed Forrester's face, but he made no comment as he turned towards his study.

Peg followed. He did not want her company, she knew, but she had made up her mind to tell him of her suspicions, and nothing in the world would have prevented her.

Forrester looked round, hearing her step behind him. "I'm busy," he said. "I've a lot of writing to do. If you want to speak to me would you mind putting it off until later?"

"I must speak now," said Peg, breathlessly. She rushed at once to her point. "I went home this morning. I saw my stepfather and Ben Travers. You don't know him, but he works at Heeler's." She stopped, breathless. "Is there any trouble round there?" she asked tensely.

Forrester did not answer at once, then he said evasively:

"There has been a little discontent, but nothing serious. Travers was sacked with several others. I know the man quite well. He's an insolent young cub."

Peg flushed darkly.

"He hates you!" she said, falling into her favourite melodrama. "He would like to do you an injury--if he dared!"

Forrester smiled.

"I don't think there is any cause for alarm," he said cynically. "I am certainly not afraid of Travers."

There was an impatient dismissal in his voice, and Peg could see that he thought she was making a fuss about nothing. She wished she could think the same, but her heart was full of apprehension.

She knew the class of men her stepfather and Travers were, even better than Forrester knew, and she was about to renew her pleading when the door opened and Faith came in.

There was a little silence, then Peg laughed.

"You've got back, then," she said.

Faith did not answer, and Peg shrugged her shoulders and walked past her out of the room.

Faith shut the door and looked at her husband.

"I suppose she told you," she said breathlessly.

The Beggar Man raised his brows.

"Told me? What has she told me?"

"That I have asked her to go."

"Asked her to go?" He echoed her words with blank incredulity.

"Yes." Faith looked at him with burning eyes. Was he really surprised, or was this an arranged thing between them, she wondered.

"Yes, I ... I think I would rather live here alone," she said unsteadily.

Forrester's eyes never left her face.

"But, surely, after all Miss Fraser has done for you," he began in perplexity.

Faith flushed hotly.

"I know, but--all the same--I want her to go." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well--tell her so."

"I have told her," said Faith tersely.

"Well?"

"She said that she came here because you asked her. She said that you were master of the house and she would only go if you said you wished it."

She stopped, her breath coming fast. What was he going to say?

Her strained eyes saw the wave of colour that rushed to his face, and her heart contracted with bitter jealousy.

"I am sorry," Forrester said gently. "But it is quite impossible. After all that has happened, I could never ask Miss Fraser to leave the house ... even if I wished it."

"You mean that you don't wish it?" He was amazed at the intensity of her question. He could not understand the situation at all, but something in it vaguely irritated him.

"Certainly I do not wish her to go," he said.

Faith turned to the door. Her childish face was hard and determined.

Forrester rose to his feet vaguely uneasy.

"Faith, come here."

She stopped, but did not turn.

"Come here, I said, Faith."

"Well?" She faced him now.

"Do you want me to understand that you really wish Peg to go?" he asked deliberately.

It was the first time since Peg had lived with them that she had ever heard him speak of her friend by her Christian name, and Faith winced as if he had hurt her, but she answered clearly.

"Yes."

"Why?" His critical eyes searched her face.

She flushed and stammered.

"Why? Oh, well ... you see...."

He made an impatient gesture.

"If you have no real reason it's absurd to expect me to ask her to leave the house. If there is a reason...." He paused. "Faith, tell me the reason."

But she would not. How could she tell him that it was jealousy that was driving her? She would rather have died than admit to him that it hurt her intolerably to know that little by little Peg was taking the place she herself had once held in his heart.

She raised her dainty head with dignity.

"There is no reason," she said proudly. "Let her stay."

He went back to his papers.

"Very well. Then there is nothing more to be said."

Faith left him without another word. She was blind with passion as she went up to her room. She would never have believed it possible for jealousy to get such a grip of her emotions. She had believed that she hated Forrester, and it crushed her to the earth with shame to realize that now he no longer wanted her she loved him with all her heart and soul.

Later, down in the drawing-room, she slipped a note into Digby's hand as they went in to dinner.

He had no chance to read it then, but later when the two girls had left him to smoke with Forrester he found a moment.

There were only two hurriedly scribbled lines.

"I said no this afternoon when you asked me to come away with you. I have changed my mind; if you still want me I will come.--FAITH."

Peter Digby crushed the little note in his hand and looked guiltily across at his friend. But Forrester had noticed nothing; he seemed absorbed in his own thoughts, and Digby rose to his feet with a little sigh of relief.

"Well, shall we join the ladies?" he asked.

Forrester raised his eyes.

"By all means, you go. I must go out again." He looked at his watch.

"Go out?" Digby echoed. "My dear chap, at this time of night?"

But he was unutterably relieved. Forrester's absence would make things so much more simple.

"Yes, I must go down to Heeler's again. I'm afraid there's going to be serious trouble there. I don't like the look of things at all."

Digby frowned.

"Why don't you cut the whole show?" he asked. "With your money you don't want to waste time bothering about a business like that. Sell it and clear out. I should, if I were in your place."

"No, you wouldn't; and I'm not going to, anyway. If they think they can scare me into running away they're mistaken. A handful of loafers!" The Beggar Man looked almost ugly in his obstinacy and contempt, and Digby shrugged his shoulders and turned towards the door.

"Well, you know your own business best, of course," he said. "But if I were you I'd cut the worry and start enjoying myself."

Forrester did not answer; there was a strange look in his eyes as he watched his friend leave the room.

He knew well enough what was going on beneath his very eyes. He had known before that afternoon when Peg tried to warn him, and he was amazed because he cared so little.

In a way, it was almost a relief to know that perhaps before long the strain of the past weeks would be lifted. Even the violence of a final snap would be preferable to the constant nerve racking uncertainty he had been suffering.

Disappointment and bitterness had set a wall about his heart, and he told himself as he looked after Digby's retreating figure that he did not care what happened.

Faith would go if she wanted to. Well, let her! He would not lift a finger to detain her.

He turned back to his papers, and Digby crossed the hall to the drawing-room where the two girls were sitting together in constrained silence.

Peg had been trying to read one of her favourite novelettes, a particularly exciting one of its kind, in which the hero had just been confronted at the altar steps with a previous wife. But she could not keep her thoughts on what she was reading. She was restless and unhappy. Her nerves seemed tightly strung, as if she were waiting for something unknown to happen.

When the door opened to admit Digby she started up with a little exclamation, laughing nervously to hide her agitation.

"Oh, it's you? You made me jump."

Digby looked past her to where Faith sat on a low stool by the fire. He wished there was some way of getting rid of Peg. He had never liked her, and he knew that she disliked him as heartily.

His entrance was followed almost immediately by a knock on the door, and Peg started up again.

"Oh, come in! Gracious! I'm all nerves to-night."

But it was only one of the maids. She looked round the room apologetically. "I thought the master was here," she said.

"He's in the study." It was Digby who answered, and the door closed again, only to re-open almost immediately.

"The master has gone out, ma'am." The girl looked at Faith. "And it's Mr. Farrow, from the factory, to see him; most urgent he says it is." Faith turned her face away.

"I don't know where he has gone," she said, in a cold little voice. "Tell Mr. Farrow."

The maid was leaving the room when Peg sprang up. She brushed past the astonished girl unceremoniously, and went straight to where Farrow, the manager of Heeler's, stood in the hall, nervously twisting his hat.

"What's the matter?" she asked, in her usual direct fashion.

Farrow knew Peg well, and had always had a queer sort of respect for her, in spite of the odd things which he knew had been said of her from time to time.

He answered without hesitating that there was trouble brewing down at the works, and that he had come to warn Mr. Forrester to stay at home that evening.

"I've warned him before," he added, in distress. "But I might as well have spoken to the wall."

Peg caught her breath with a little hard sound.

"Who is it, Ben Travers and his gang?" she asked.

"Yes. Ben had too much drink in the Green Man public-house, close by Heeler's, last night, and he talked, and I know that if Mr. Forrester's wise he will stay at home to-night."

"But he's gone already!" The words burst from Peg's lips in despair.

For a moment she stood staring at him, her handsome face quite colourless. Then she turned suddenly and rushed upstairs.

She caught up the first coat she could find, and, hatless as she was, rushed down again and out through the front door, running to overtake Farrow, who had already left the house.

She caught him up at the end of the street, breathless and panting.

"Get a taxi! Oh, how slow you are!" she broke out passionately.

She dashed out into the road, nearly getting run over in her excitement, and pulled up a slowly passing taxicab.

Farrow had recovered himself and hurriedly followed.

"It may be all bluff," he said, rather shamefacedly, as they drove away; "but I don't like the look of things, and that's a fact. And I thought it my duty to warn the gov'nor." Man-like, he hated to feel that he had made an unnecessary fuss.

Peg did not answer. Her eyes were fixed on the dark night, and her hands hard clasped in her lap. Every second seemed an eternity. The speeding cab seemed to crawl.

Presently she broke out hoarsely:

"You are sure--sure that's where he has gone--to Heeler's?"

"He told me he should go. He told me to meet him there," Farrow answered.

Peg bit her lip till the blood came.

"And you think--do you think ... they are ... waiting for him?"

"That was what it sounded like from the talk."

"Who told you?"

"The landlord of the Green Man overheard and sent for me."

Peg groaned. Her love for Forrester exaggerated the possible danger a thousandfold. She suffered tortures as they drove through the dark streets; and when at last the cab stopped close to the closed gates of Heeler's factory she flung herself from it headlong.

But the whole building was in darkness, and when she shook the padlocked gates with frantic hands they yielded nothing.

The cabman was staring at her curiously, and Peg came back to consciousness of her surroundings with a little gasping laugh.

She looked at Farrow.

"He can't have come, after all," she said faintly. Farrow shrugged his shoulders. He was beginning to feel rather foolish.

Peg spoke to him sharply.

"Pay the man, and tell him to go. What's he think he's staring at?"

She was angry and shaken; she leaned against the closed yard gates, trembling from head to foot. Suddenly she laughed.

"Well--we've had a wild-goose chase," she said dryly. "Come on, we may as well go home. I daresay Mr. Forrester went to his club after all. Come on, I say," she added angrily as Farrow did not move. "What are you waiting for?"

But she knew before he answered, for at that moment Forrester's tall figure suddenly grew out of the darkness beside them.

He was making for the smaller gate, of which Peg knew he kept a duplicate key, and which led to the offices, and with sudden impulse she darted forward and caught his arm.

"Mr. Forrester!"

The Beggar Man turned sharply and peered down at her white face.

"You! Good heavens! is anything the matter... Faith?" His mind flew with swift apprehension to his wife.

Peg laughed bitterly.

"Oh, no, she's safe and sound enough. It's you."

"Me!" His eyes went beyond her to where Farrow stood. "Good heavens! What's the meaning of it all?" he demanded angrily. "Farrow, if you've been down to Hampstead frightening my wife...."

He turned on the man threateningly as a shrill warning scream broke from Peg, and the next instant Forrester felt himself seized violently from behind and flung backwards.

The darkness was filled with voices and shouting, and the street seemed suddenly to have grown alive with men.

It all happened so quickly that afterwards Forrester could remember no details, but, above all the din and tumult, he could hear Peg's voice raised in a wild scream of entreaty.

"Ben--Ben--for God's sake!"

The scuffle was all about him as he stood with his back to the locked gates trying to see what was happening, and to free himself of her encumbering body, but her arms were round his neck, and as by main force he tried to unclasp them and throw her aside a terrific blow fell somewhere from out of the darkness--not on him, but on the girl who clung to him so frantically; and suddenly she sagged against him and would have fallen but for his upholding arms.

There were running steps in the street, and the shrill blast of a police whistle rose above the discord as the crowd of hooligans broke and scattered in all directions, panic-stricken.

Forrester laid Peg on the pavement, still keeping his arms about her. He felt confused and dazed; he could not realize what had happened.

One of the police who had come upon the scene turned the light of his lantern on Peg's face; the blow that had struck her had torn her hair down, and it lay in a tangled mass about her white face, but her eyes were open and fixed on the Beggar Man.

"Peg! Peg!" he said hoarsely.

It was the first time he had ever called her by her Christian name, and a little smile wavered across her face.

"I--I saved your life, anyway----" she whispered weakly, and then more softly still, "It's like a novelette!" said Peg, and closed her eyes.



CHAPTER XIII

It was midnight when Forrester got back home; he let himself into the dark house mechanically. He felt drunk with shock and the horror of all that had happened. He groped blindly along the wall and found the switch, flooding the hall with light, and as he did so he heard a little sound close to him on the stairs and a smothered cry.

He wheeled round sharply, and came face to face with his wife. She was at the foot of the stairs, dressed for travelling, and she clutched a small dressing-case in one shaking hand.

Forrester stared at her stupidly for a moment, and then his eyes turned to the clock. It was on the stroke of midnight! So late--and Faith going out! He tried to think, to understand, but his brain worked slowly, like machinery that wanted oiling through long disuse. Then suddenly he seemed to understand.

The blood rushed to his face in a passionate flood. He took a step forward and gripped her arm.

"Where are you going? Answer me."

She hardly knew his voice, and his eyes were like a stranger's, as she shrank back from him with a low cry of fear.

"Where are you going?" But there was no need for her to answer; he knew without a word being spoken.

He stood back from her, his hand falling from her arm as if it had grown nerveless, and for a moment there was absolute silence. Then the Beggar Man laughed, such a mirthless, heart-broken laugh that Faith cried out. She dropped the little suitcase she carried and ran to him.

"Nicholas ... Nicholas ... Oh, don't look at me like that!" She laid her hand on his sleeve, but he struck it down in blind fury. At that moment he was beside himself with rage and bitterness and sorrow for the tragedy that had come into his life.

And she seemed to realize that his thoughts were not only of her and the irrevocable step she had planned to take, and her frightened face whitened as she instinctively gasped her friend's name.

"Peg!" ... Forrester turned away. He put his hand over his eyes for a moment, trying desperately to control himself, but his voice was thick as he answered mechanically:

"She died--in hospital--half an hour ago."

There was a tragic silence, then Faith stumbled backwards, catching at the balusters to save herself from falling. Her face was frozen with horror. She stared at her husband with fascinated eyes.

Then he seemed to awaken again to the desperate situation still confronting him; he caught her by both shoulders, shaking her savagely in his rage and despair.

"You were going--with Digby.... My God! I'll kill him--I'll----"

He broke off as the silence of the night outside was pierced by the shrill sound of a man's whistle.

For an instant neither of them moved. Then slowly, as if with difficulty, Forrester released her and turned towards the door.

Faith felt as if she were turned to stone. Then suddenly she rushed after him; she fell on her knees, catching at his hand.

"No--no ... I beg you ... no ... no.... Oh, if you ever loved me...."

He looked down at her upturned face, and his own writhed in desperate pain.

"If--I--ever--loved--you!" he echoed. Then he stooped, wrenched himself free of her, flung open the door and was gone out into the night.

* * * * *

Faith never knew how the hours of that dreadful night passed away. When daylight came she found herself in her own room, sitting on the side of the bed, staring down at the floor.

She felt incapable of thought or action; mind and body seemed frozen with a great horror.

Last night seemed like some terrible madness. She was sure she must have been mad.

Forrester had not come home, she knew, for her ears had been strained all night for the sound of his step.

When the maid brought early tea she cried out when she saw Faith.

"Oh, ma'am! What has happened? Miss Fraser's not in her room, nor the master..."

Faith tried to answer, but no words would come, and, touched by the white suffering of her face, the maid tried to persuade her to lie down.

But Faith only said, "Leave me alone ... leave me alone," till at last she was taken at her word, and the girl went downstairs to whisper and tremble with the other maids in the kitchen.

Forrester came in about eleven o'clock. He brought Mr. Shawyer with him, and went straight to his study and shut the door.

Faith's room was immediately above it, and she could hear their voices for some time--talking, talking.

Presently the maid came tapping at her door.

"Can Mr. Shawyer speak to you, please, ma'am?"

Faith rose mechanically and went downstairs and into the study.

Forrester was not there, but the lawyer rose from his seat at the table as she entered. His face was cold and stern, but it softened a little as he looked at her, and he held out his hand.

"Come and sit down." He spoke gently, as if to a child, but Faith shook her head.

"What do you want me for?"

He did not answer at once, and she asked dully:

"Is it true that Peg--Peg is ... dead? Or--or did I dream it?"

"It is quite true," Mr. Shawyer said.

Her brown eyes searched his face.

"She died saving your husband's life, Mrs. Forrester. He was waylaid by a gang of roughs, and..."

Faith made a little silencing gesture. The blood had rushed back to her white face; she did not want to hear any more. Peg had saved the Beggar Man's life. It gave her a stab of bitterest jealousy.

"Well ... well, what do you want me for?" she asked again presently.

Mr. Shawyer hated the task that had been entrusted to him.

"Your husband asked me to see you," he said reluctantly. "He wished me to tell you that he is ... going abroad as soon as he can arrange it--within the next few days possibly. He has settled a very generous income on you and your little sisters for life! A most generous income, which, he asked me to say, he hopes will in some measure make amends for your--your ... unfortunate marriage, for which he blames himself entirely."

Faith listened, but the words sounded like so much foolishness, and after waiting a moment Mr. Shawyer went on again, not looking at her.

"He also asked me to say that as soon as it is possible he will set you free, without annoyance or unpleasantness to yourself."

He stopped again and raised his eyes apologetically.

The girl's face was pathetic in its shocked pallor, and she broke out with wild incoherence, unconsciously using the very same words which the Beggar Man had once spoken to her.

"But ... but it's not possible to stop being married, like that, for no reason!"

Mr. Shawyer smiled cynically.

"No reason," he echoed. "Well..." and he shrugged his shoulders.

There was a long silence; then Faith asked with stiff lips:

"And is that--all?"

"I think so, unless there is anything you would suggest, any request you have to make."

"No." She stood there, twisting her hands together childishly, trying to understand the thing that had fallen upon her; then suddenly she broke out passionately:

"The twins don't want me.... They're quite happy. They don't want me any more. Where can I go?"

Mr. Sawyer did not answer. Against his better judgment he was conscious of a most unwilling pity for this girl. He knew the whole story now, had heard it that morning from Forrester's lips, so perhaps it was not altogether without intention that presently he said quietly:

"My dear child, there is ... Mr. Digby!"

Faith flushed scarlet from her throat to her hair. Such an expression of revolt and fear crossed her face that for a moment she no longer looked a child, but a woman who has lived a lifetime of bitter experience.

"If you knew--how I ... hate him," she said, and quite suddenly she broke down, hiding her face in her hands, her slender body shaken with passionate sobbing.

Mr. Sawyer rose. He made her sit down, and stood beside her, keeping a hand on her shoulder.

"My dear," he said, "I am an old man, and you are only a child! Is it too late for me to try and put things right between you and your husband?"

Faith shook her head.

"He hates me ... he'll never forgive me ... last night ... oh, I shall never forget his eyes!"

Mr. Sawyer walked a step or two away from her, then came back resolutely.

"Perhaps I shall be doing no good by my interference," he said gently. "But at least I can do no harm, when I tell you that my belief is that your husband has never ceased to care for you! No, no--he has said nothing to me----" he hastened to add, as Faith raised a face flushed with eager hope. "But I pride myself that I know him very well, and therefore I believe that he still has a great regard for you. When he came to me this morning he was utterly broken down--he had lost everything at one blow--his wife, his friend, and that brave girl Peg."

"Peg!" said Faith with a little shiver.

"The best friend either of you ever had," Mr. Sawyer insisted gently. "The most loyal friend!"

"Oh, I know, I know!" said Faith weeping; she could not bear to remember in what manner she and Peg had parted.

Mr. Sawyer went on steadily.

"Think what a shock her death has been to your husband, without his friend's treachery, and...." he stopped, feeling her shrink beneath his hand, and for a moment there was silence before he went on sadly:

"I have always looked upon Nicholas as a hard man of the world, perhaps incapable of deep feeling, but this morning he was just a broken-hearted boy when he came to tell me what had happened, and that is why I dare to ask you if you will not go to him, and beg for his forgiveness."

"Oh--I couldn't...."

He took his hand from her shoulder.

"Then I am afraid he will go away, and that you will never see him again."

Faith checked her sobbing. She sat with her hands clasped in her lap, staring before her with haggard eyes.

With every passing moment now it came home to her afresh how much she had lost, how much she had thrown away in her wilfulness and blindness.

She had been jealous of Peg, and now that Peg was dead, it would not help her at all. Forrester had done with her. She had seen it in his eyes last night, heard it in his voice.

Mr. Shawyer came back from the window and looked down at her very kindly.

"Surely it is worth sacrificing a little pride to win a great happiness," he said.

He waited a moment, but she did not speak, and he went away and left her.

A great many people seemed to come to the house. The door-bell was always ringing, and strange men were shut up in the study with Forrester, asking questions and making notes.

It was about Peg, Faith knew--Peg, who had died to save the Beggar Man's life, Peg whom she would never see again.

Later, driven by an irresistible impulse and her own terrible loneliness, she went up to Peg's empty bedroom and stood in the doorway.

Its gaudiness no longer offended her, though the bright sunlight flooded the room and shone glaringly on the brilliant green cushions and horrible wall-paper.

Peg's Oriental slippers stood at the foot of the bed and her gay dressing-gown hung limply across a chair.

It seemed impossible that Peg would never come back any more.

She had always been so alive! Oh, it could not be really true that she was dead.

A half-finished pink-backed novelette lay on the bed where Peg had flung it down unfinished last night when she went out, and Faith took it up with reverent fingers.

She opened it at the page Peg had been reading, and of which she had turned down the corner, and her eyes fell on the words:

"But the beautiful girl had died with a smile on her rosy red lips. She had given her life for love, and for love's dear sake, and was content...."

Faith shivered. Peg had died the death she would have chosen, had the choice been given to her, she knew, and yet....

"If I could only see her again!" The thought rushed through Faith's heart with passionate longing.

Peg had been such a true friend. A thousand little memories came crowding back to her as she stood there in the rainbow room which Peg had so adored.

Just to see her for a moment, just to say she was sorry, to ask her pardon, to thank her for all she had done.

But it was too late. The most passionate prayer in all the world can never put back the hand of time even for one second.

The day dragged away, and the house quieted down. It was like a tomb, Faith thought, as she wandered restlessly about through the empty rooms.

She felt as if she would go mad in her loneliness. She would have given her soul for someone in whom she could confide.

The maids came to try and coax her to eat, but she shook her head.

"I can't. Oh, please leave me alone!"

Later in the evening she crept downstairs and stood outside her husband's closed door. He was alone there she knew! She wondered what he was thinking--if his thoughts were of Peg--and suddenly Mr. Shawyer's words came back to her.

"Surely it is worth sacrificing a little pride to win a great happiness."

Was it still hers to win? She had no real hope, but her feet unconsciously moved a little nearer to that shut door.

Twice, three times, she raised her hand to knock, and let it fall again to her side.

She had no courage. She feared him as she had never feared anyone in her life, and yet ... once he had been all that was good and kind! Her aching mind recalled the first days of their acquaintance, his gentleness and generosity, and with a fresh spurt of courage she lifted her hand and tapped timidly on the door.

"Come in!" It was her husband's voice, but now again her courage failed her, and she stood shaking from head to foot, incapable of action.

She heard his step across the room, and then the door opened and he stood looking at her.

"You! What do you want?" His voice was not unkind, in spite of the bluntness of the words, and in desperation she raised her eyes.

"I want to speak to you."

There was a little silence. She could read refusal in his face, but after a moment he opened the door wide, and stood aside for her to enter, closing it again after her.

"Well?" He went back to the table at which he had been writing, and looked at her across it with hard eyes.

He was so ill, so worn! Faith stood looking at him in dumb pain, and he asked again impatiently:

"What do you want?"

"I want you to forgive me."

She was not conscious of having spoken the words, and was terrified when she heard them echo through the silent room. She felt as if she must fall. She put her hand on a chair back to steady herself, not daring to raise her eyes.

Then the Beggar Man gave a dry little laugh.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why?--why?" She echoed the word stammeringly, and he went on ruthlessly:

"Because you are afraid of being left? Is that it? You need not be. Digby will marry you as soon as I have set you free. I have not hurt him--yet! I have told him that I am waiting to see first how he treats you."

"I don't want him!" The words were a heartbroken cry. "Oh, I never, never did want him."

There were lines of pain in the Beggar Man's face as he looked at her. His lips moved twice before he could frame any words.

"Who or what do you want then?" he asked hoarsely.

"You!" She answered him in passionate desperation. It was her last throw for happiness.

She counted the flying seconds before he spoke, with her thudding heartbeats, and they seemed to stop when he laughed.

"You can hardly expect me to believe that," he said.

She found her voice with a great effort.

"I know ... but it's the truth--all the same."

She was fighting for something greater than life--happiness! And though with each moment since she came into the room it seemed to be more surely eluding her, she went on, hardly knowing what she said:

"I know you don't believe me--but it's true.... I never cared for--for Mr. Digby ... but ... but I was jealous ... of Peg!" Her voice faltered over the little name, and it was with an effort that she forced herself to continue. "You seemed to like her ... better than me ... and--and ... I was jealous...." She spoke the words again passionately, conscious of their unconvincing sound, their parrot-like repetition.

Forrester came towards her till but a step divided them.

"You expect me to believe that?" he asked hoarsely. "When I've been waiting all these weeks, all these months for you to give me one look ... one smallest hope ... when I've been a beggar at your feet, hoping against hope that some day you'd throw me a smile...." He swung round from her with a passionate gesture of disbelief.

She had pleaded to him in vain, and she knew it. She had humbled herself unavailingly. The room swam giddily before her eyes as she looked at Forrester. Such a man for a woman to love, and yet she, blind as she had been, had not seen until too late, all that she was throwing away.

She made a little inarticulate sound of despair and Forrester turned.

He stepped past her and opened the door.

"I am leaving here early in the morning," he said. "I shall not trouble you again. Good-bye."

Something seemed to snap in Faith's heart. She stumbled towards him and would have fallen at his feet but for his upholding hand. She broke into wild, incoherent words, clinging to him desperately.

"Don't leave me ... I can't bear it... I love you. Forgive me. I've nobody in all the world ... oh, forgive me ... forgive me...."

"Faith!" The Beggar Man spoke her name with a great cry. For a moment he held her from him, looking into her face with eyes of passionate hope and disbelief. Then he caught her to his heart.

She clung to him like a lost child that has suddenly found its home again; the dread of the future without him found its reaction in a storm of tearless sobbing.

"Don't leave me--oh, don't leave me," was all she could say again and again.

He took her up in his arms and carried her over to the big chair by the fire, as if she had been a child; he spoke to her gently, soothing her, comforting her, forgetting his own troubles in his infinite pity for her, till she lay quiet at last, her face hidden against him, her hands clinging to his coat as if even now she feared that he might leave her.

Above her head the Beggar Man looked out into the silent room with sad eyes; he had got his happiness at last, but at what a cost!

He knew that he owed everything to Peg, and for a moment he lost himself in the past, with a vivid memory of her, her bold, defiant beauty, and swinging gipsy earrings.

That she had cared for him, he knew well enough; the light in her eyes had told him that at the last, if never before.

But Peg was dead, and the past gone forever...

He looked down at Faith, and found her eyes upon him with a new wistfulness and humility in their brown depths that awoke all the old love and protective tenderness he had once known for her; and the vivid memory of Peg paled and faded away as he bent to kiss his wife with passionate thankfulness--a Beggar Man at her feet no longer, but a King, come proudly to his Throne.